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## **A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' WECHAT NICKNAMES**

*With the advancement of technology, people can now communicate rapidly via the Internet. Online nicknames, such as those used on platforms like WeChat, serve as the first impression in virtual communication. These nicknames reflect not only individual preferences but also deeper value orientations, making their study particularly meaningful. This research collected WeChat nicknames from 85 undergraduate students from 3 universities through questionnaires and conducted a pragmatic analysis focusing on their origins, naming intentions, and the cultural and psychological meanings behind them. The results reveal that students show high levels of autonomy and creativity in nickname selection. Different nicknames also reflect varied personality traits and value systems among university students. A deeper analysis of WeChat nicknames can enhance our understanding of language use in social media and provide new insights into contemporary youth culture and social behaviour.*

**Keywords:** *online nicknames, classification, underlying causes, university students.*

### **1. Introduction**

With the development and popularization of the Internet, online communication has become an important means of communication and entertainment in modern life. The WeChat nickname, as a necessary step in registering for the platform, is the first impression one creates when establishing social connections (陈梅松, 2016).

Through WeChat nicknames, we can observe the linguistic features of different user groups on this vast communication platform. These nicknames also reflect users' knowledge, morality, aesthetics, psychological traits, and other aspects of cultural literacy, making them a new window into linguistic and cultural studies. As individuals grow older and real-life social needs evolve, university students gradually shift from using platforms like QQ to WeChat for social interaction. Accordingly, WeChat nicknames can to some extent reflect young people's values and psychology, which makes them worthy of academic exploration.

This study investigates the construction forms and intentions behind nickname choices among undergraduate students through a questionnaire-based survey. The goal is to analyze the linguistic patterns and structural features of these nicknames, interpret their reflections of individual personalities and values, and further explore the cultural and psychological concepts embedded within. Studying online nicknames helps us better understand language use on social media and gain deeper insight into the psychology of today's youth, thus promoting more effective communication.

## **2. Literature Review**

With the growing prevalence of social media in contemporary life, its role in identity expression and social interaction has become increasingly significant. As one of the most widely used platforms in China, WeChat is an indispensable communication tool among university students. Within this virtual space, a nickname is not just a label – it carries rich sociolinguistic and pragmatic meanings, reflecting the user's personality, identity, and social intentions (黄广芳, 2007). Zheng Meiping (2007) collected a large number of nicknames from platforms such as Tencent QQ, chatrooms, and BBS forums, categorizing them and identifying four key cultural-psychological characteristics: romantic sentiments, idol worship, emotional loneliness, and a tendency to express individuality and nonconformity. Liao Yingying et al. (2008), drawing from linguistics and psychology and

incorporating Freudian theories, explored how different nickname choices reflect various personality traits and life value orientations, unveiling the psychological phenomena behind the names. Liu Hui (2021) used questionnaires and interviews to investigate the choice and use of online names among university students. The results revealed that these names carry special meanings, often expressing students' ambitions or romantic ideals, and reflect motivations such as quoting maxims, expressing individuality, seeking uniqueness, and conveying emotional messages. So, it is evident that as a form of online naming, WeChat nicknames – whether consciously or unconsciously chosen – tend to exhibit certain linguistic patterns and cultural-psychological features.

Although research on social media nicknames has been increasing in China, systematic pragmatic studies on WeChat nicknames remain relatively limited. This is especially true for the specific demographic of university students, where such analysis is lacking. This study seeks to fill that gap by collecting and analyzing nickname data from students of various backgrounds. It employs a deixis-based perspective to explore the formation and structure of online nicknames and, by integrating sociolinguistics and pragmatics, aims to uncover the sociocultural factors behind nickname choices and motivations among university students.

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Questions**

This research aims to explore the following key issues:

- (1) What are the sources of their nicknames?
- (2) What is the intension behind their nickname choices;
- (3) The psychological factors and value orientations reflected in their nickname selection and use.

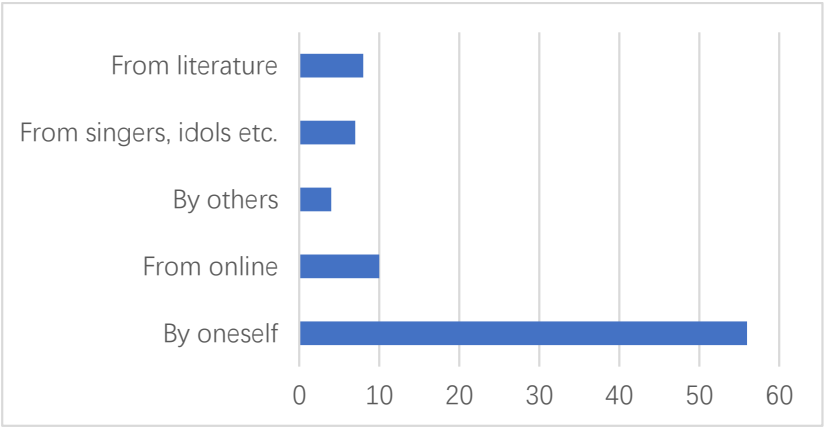
#### **3.2 Data Collection**

This study collected WeChat nicknames from 85 university students as the primary data source with the help of handing out the questionnaire consisted of six open-ended questions. The participants were full-time undergraduate students from Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Harbin Normal University and Harbin Engineering University, aged between 18 and 23.

**3.2.1 The sources of WeChat nickname selection by university students**

University students draw their WeChat nicknames from a variety of sources. According to the survey, the most common source is self-created nicknames, accounting for approximately 66% of the total. The second most common source is online searches, making up around 12%, with platforms such as Xiaohongshu, Zhihu, Baidu, and official WeChat accounts frequently mentioned. Nicknames inspired by favourite quotes or phrases and those derived from idols or singers account for 9% and 8% respectively. The least common source is nicknames created by others, which represent only 5% of the total.

*Fig 1*



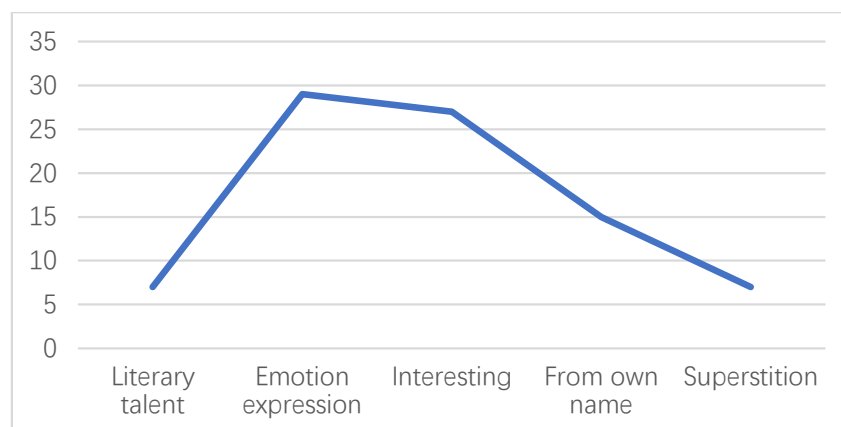
Survey on the source of Online nicknames selected by university students (N=85)

**3.2.2 The intentions of WeChat nickname selection of university students**

When choosing a nickname, people not only consider its form but also pay attention to its meaning. As a meaningful carrier and medium, a nickname can reflect various personal attributes. According to the data, the most common intention behind nickname selection is to “express emotions,” with approximately 34% of

students choosing nicknames for this reason. Following closely, around 32% of students selected nicknames because they found them “funny” or “amusing.” The third most common reason is that the nickname is derived from the student’s real name, accounting for about 18%. Meanwhile, 8% of students use their nicknames to reflect an appreciation for literary expression, and another 8% choose nicknames due to superstitious beliefs.

*Fig 2*



Investigation on intention of WeChat nickname selection of university students (N=85)

### **3.2.3 Corpus Analysis**

This study focuses on university students as the primary research subjects to explore the usage of online nicknames and to analyze the intentions behind their selection. From the perspective of deixis in applied linguistics, this paper conducts a detailed analysis of the structural composition of online nicknames, thereby deepening the discussion on their linguistic forms. In addition, through pragmatic analysis, the study uncovers various personality traits, life values, and underlying psychological factors reflected in different types of nicknames.

## **4. Research Findings**

The following section presents a detailed analysis of the sources, structural forms, and pragmatic aspects of online nicknames based on the questionnaire results and statistical data.

## 4.1 Sources of Nicknames

As shown in table 1, among the 85 respondents, the majority preferred to create their WeChat nicknames independently, while a notable proportion drew inspiration from favourite poems, literary works, or songs. This result suggests that contemporary university students possess a strong sense of autonomy, with most nickname choices being self-determined. It also indicates a certain level of creativity and originality, as many students are capable of generating distinctive nicknames based on their personal ideas.

## 4.2 Constitution forms

The complexity of online nickname structures varies from simple to intricate. By categorizing and analyzing the collected WeChat nicknames, their constitution forms can be roughly divided into the following three types (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Structural Forms of Online Nicknames*

Types	Explanations	Examples
Word	This kind of nickname is simple, easy to understand. It contains Chinese, Western in single or double word and so on	“月亮”、“D.”、“J”、“清”、“柿子”
Sentence	This kind of nickname refers to short Chinese sentences	“吃菠萝包不掉屑”、“苹果汁有两毛钱”、“奶糖别过期”
pell-mell structure	This kind of nickname includes English and Chinese mixed with letters, numbers, symbols, pinyin mixed form, as well as simple symbols, numbers and pinyin	“1441（备考勿扰）”、“爻丿”、“粥粥 minus”

WeChat nicknames share the common features of online usernames. Users are free to choose nicknames without being constrained by the conventions of traditional naming practices. They can creatively combine various symbolic elements to



### 4.3 Pragmatic Analysis of Online Nicknames

As a tool for self-presentation, WeChat nicknames provide university students with a platform to express their individuality. These nicknames often reflect rich cultural, emotional, and personal values, serving as an important lens through which to understand the social behaviors of contemporary university students (吴全会 and 赵英芳, 2013). By analyzing the unique characteristics revealed in nickname choices, we can explore the current value orientations and psychological states of university students, offering insights into emerging trends in youth culture.

#### 4.3.1 Simplicity and Clarity

According to statistics, about 17.6% of students chose to use nicknames derived directly from their real names. Most of them stated that this choice was driven by the desire for convenience, simplicity, and easy recognition. Even so, students would often make slight modifications to their real names. For instance, “sxj” is the abbreviation of a student’s full name; “Nancy 韬韬” combines an English name with a Chinese given name; “肖” is simply the student’s family name.

#### 4.3.2 Self-Presentation

During their university years, students tend to emphasize individuality and seek distinctiveness in the complex online world. They express their personalities through their WeChat nicknames. Scholars have pointed out that there are two main motivations behind self-presentation: the self-oriented goal of realizing one’s identity and enhancing self-worth, and the other-oriented goal of meeting social needs (李耘耕 and 朱焕雅, 2019). The following analysis will be elaborated on these two aspects (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Three categories of self-presentation*

Types	Explanations	Examples
Self-confirmation	According to the “self-confirmation” theory, people have a strong desire to confirm and consolidate their true	A student nicknamed “洋葱头” said: “I hope the name reminds me that I need to be myself, that I prefer to be



	views on themselves, and expressing their opinions and true feelings are self-confirmation behaviors (Erica et al., 2013). In the self-presentation of nicknames, nicknames also strongly reflect the motivation of the actor's self-confirmation.	seen as an onion buried in the ground, rather than a pampered daffodil, and be my truest self.”
Self-reinforcement	“Self-reinforcement” theory refers to the positive motivation to strengthen self-view and self-public image, including shaping ideal self-image and actively managing impression (Leary, 2007). Many respondents said that their nicknames convey some self-suggestion about themselves, which contains their expectations for the future, showing an ideal self-image and personality characteristics.	A first-year student with the nickname “掉屑的菠萝包” said: “This is a metaphor for my messy life, and it shows my beautiful vision of living hard.” A student named “焰心” said: “The inner temperature of the flame is the lowest, so this name expresses my thoughts and feelings that the outside is warm like fire and the inside is easy to cold.”
Interpersonal reinforcement	The theory of “interpersonal reinforcement” refers to the fact that online nicknames are designed mainly to enhance the relationship between others and themselves, and they hope to construct their first impression online through nicknames (付润典 and 刘英杰, 2023).	The student nicknamed “甜心羊羊” said: “I think nicknames are related to people in real life. My nickname is cute, which gives people a feeling that this person is easy to get along with and very cute.”

### ***4.3.3 The Pursuit of Humor and Joy***

For many university students, life does not become less stressful compared to high school. They continue to face intense academic demands, fierce job market competition, and mounting pressure. Humor, therefore, serves as an emotional outlet, injecting joy into daily life. By giving their online nicknames a humorous touch, students can relieve stress, vent frustration, and either laugh at themselves or

entertain others. This not only offers emotional catharsis but also makes their nicknames more engaging and attention-grabbing. Examples such as “反杀闰土的獠” and “螺蛳粉代言人” reflect a strong tendency toward humor and wit.

#### 4.3.4 The Pursuit of Literary Flair

“Language ideology is part of spiritual culture; it is a concrete manifestation of cultural values in the realm of language” (刑福义, 2000). A person’s name is not only a linguistic phenomenon but also a cultural one. Through the lens of online nicknames, we can observe that contemporary university students often exhibit a deep and unique appreciation for literary and cultural expression. Many choose names that reflect classical references, poetic inspiration, or philosophical undertones, demonstrating their desire to project intellectual and cultural depth through language (see Table 3).

Table 3

*Cultural factors in nicknames*

Types	Explanations	Examples
Literary artistic conception	Some students use some words containing special meaning to express their unique literary realm, reflecting the value orientation of the pursuit to beautiful aesthetic taste of the Internet nickname, so that the Internet name has an elegant artistic atmosphere.	“Nefelibata & Sonhadora”, a first-year Portuguese student, said: “Nefelibata means a person who travels or walks in the clouds, and Sonhadora means a dreamer, and the combination of the two makes up the current nickname”.
	Some also like to use ancient poetry and other literary works to reflect their pursuit of art	The student nicknamed “乌云压城 城欲摧” said that the nickname was taken from one ancient Chinese poem “塞外”.
	Some students borrow the characteristic words in literary classics, movies and music to name, so that the network nickname is full of artistic temperament and mystery, to	A junior student named himself “Avada Kedavra”, after a Harry Potter spell, and said he used the nickname to express his love for Harry Potter.

	show their love and worship. Using their favorite, iconic words on WeChat nicknames also helps students find common circles and find friends who share common topics.	
Idol culture	Some students use the names of idols and other people to name them, and put their ideals on the celebrities, which not only expresses their worship and love for idols, but also expresses their good wishes for their future.	“Stah!” It's a name taken from an electronic singer; “洗碗仔” is a homophone for a favourite singer's name.

#### 4.3.4 Expression of Personal Emotions

WeChat nicknames can, to a certain extent, serve as an authentic reflection of university students' emotional states. In such cases, the nickname becomes a subtle yet meaningful interpretation of one's inner world. It offers a unique channel through which individuals can externalize and articulate a wide range of personal emotions, such as joy, sorrow, longing, or nostalgia. As a result, these emotionally charged nicknames function not only as identifiers in the digital space but also as personal statements of the heart (see Table 4).

Table 4

#### *Emotional connotations embedded in Nicknames*

Types	Explanation	Examples
Release bottled-up emotions and get rid of anxiety	As a special social group, university students need to deal with various problems and pressures from life, study and emotions as they grow older, so these students use Internet nicknames to release repressed emotions and get rid of anxiety.	The student named “4.435km/s” said: In astronomy, escape velocity is the speed at which an object escapes the gravity of a star, and the escape velocity of Mercury is 4.435km/s. A student named “bird” said, “I hope I can be as free as a bird.”
Express	Some students want to	A student called “圆爹” said, “My

love, friendship and other feelings	show themselves and express their feelings on the Internet, pouring out their feelings and revealing their true feelings through Internet nicknames. Such feelings include love, friendship, family and so on.	cat's name is Yuanyuan. Although I am away from home, I would like to show my love and miss Yuanyuan by her nickname.” The student named “良尘吉时” said his name was a name mainly for couple and he wanted to express love.
Express one's wish	University students express their hopes and expectations of life through nicknames.	A senior student named “1441 (备考勿扰)” said that the number is said to be lucky for the exam. The student named “金金金” said: “I lack gold in the five elements (五行), so I want to show it more in the name and supplement my five elements.” The nickname “好运轩轩” said: I am very superstitious, I gave this name in the hope that good luck will find me.

## 5. Conclusion

Language serves as a vehicle for social culture and values, reflecting a wide range of cultural beliefs, personal pursuits, and value orientations. Online nicknames, as a unique form of language, represent a specific social phenomenon and capture the cultural essence of their time through distinct linguistic expression. By collecting, organizing, and analyzing students' nicknames, this study finds that influenced by the characteristics of the era and the emergence of new naming elements, WeChat nicknames among college students demonstrate renewed vitality in both structural patterns and semantic expression. The variety in naming strategies reveals students' creativity and autonomy in constructing their online identities. Furthermore, the choice of nicknames reflects diverse personal traits, value orientations, and psychological tendencies. These findings highlight the emotional richness and cultural openness present in the current networked linguistic landscape of university students.

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## 大学生微信昵称的语用分析

随着科技的进步, 人们通过网络便可以实现迅速交流的目的。网络昵称则是人们使用微信等软件进行线上沟通交流的第一印象建构, 透过网络昵称文化可以折射出用户的价值取向等因素, 因而研究微信昵称具有重大的意义。本研究采用问卷调查的方式收集了 85 名本科在校大学生的微信昵称, 从语用学的角度, 对其来源、背后的取名意图、隐含的文化心理等进行了调查与分类。研究结果显示, 大学生在选取微信昵称时大都具有自主性, 并且极具创造力, 不同的微信昵称也反映了大学生不同的个性追求以及价值取向等。通过对大学生微信昵称的深入分析, 不仅能增进我们对社交媒体语言使用的理解, 还能为探索当代青年文化和社交行为提供新的视角。

**关键词:** 网络昵称, 大学生, 分类, 成因