

An Analysis of Multimodal Metaphors in Cartoons: A Critique and Reflection on the “Credentialism” Phenomenon

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Abstract

Grounded in cognitive linguistics and multimodal discourse analysis, this study explores how editorial cartoons serve as critical tools for deconstructing the phenomenon of credentialism in contemporary society. By examining the interplay of visual and verbal modes in selected political cartoons, the research reveals how metaphor, imagery, composition, and color collaboratively expose the overemphasis on academic qualifications and its broader socio-educational consequences. Through a close analysis of four representative cartoons, this paper identifies key multimodal metaphors that critique institutional gatekeeping, pedagogical distortion, credential inflation, and the marginalization of vocational pathways. Notably, the case of Jiang Ping—a vocational student who achieved academic recognition—provides a counter-hegemonic narrative that challenges the traditional conflation of educational success with elite academic credentials. The findings demonstrate that editorial cartoons not only reflect social issues but also act as powerful vehicles for ideological critique and public reflection. The study concludes with recommendations for policymakers and educators aimed at fostering a more inclusive, equitable, and pluralistic understanding of educational success.

Keywords

Multimodal Metaphor; Editorial Cartoons; Credentialism; Visual Discourse; Educational Equity.

1. Introduction

In modern society, academic qualifications are often endowed with extraordinary significance, becoming the primary criterion for evaluating individual competence and achievement. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as “credentialism,” has not only shaped educational systems but also deeply influenced social values and personal development trajectories. However, with the evolution of society and changing ideologies, an increasing number of people have begun to reflect on this phenomenon, questioning its rationality and fairness.

Editorial cartoons, as an expressive art form with a broad audience, offer a unique perspective for examining and criticizing social issues. In today’s “visual era,” editorial cartoons are not only an essential component of opinion columns in newspapers but are also widely utilized in television and digital media, exerting considerable influence on political discourse and societal development [1].

The relationship between metaphor and multimodality is as entangled as quantum entanglement—inseparable and complex—which is one of the reasons multimodal metaphor has attracted significant scholarly attention [2]. As media discourse becomes increasingly multimodal, multimodal metaphor has emerged as a key communicative tool. A multimodal metaphor refers to the use of various semiotic resources—such as language, images, and color—to convey abstract concepts. This rhetorical strategy is widely applied in editorial cartoons.

The present study seeks to analyze multimodal metaphors in editorial cartoons to examine and critique the phenomenon of credentialism. Although previous studies have investigated the social impact of credentialism [3], few have analyzed how cartoons use multimodal metaphors for critical expression. Editorial cartoons, as a culturally significant medium, are ideally suited for social critique due to their distinct visual and narrative characteristics.

This study analyzes multimodal metaphors in specific cartoon works to reveal the deeper social structures and values underlying credentialism. The central research questions are as follows: How do editorial cartoons employ multimodal metaphors to critique the phenomenon of credentialism? How do these multimodal metaphors influence public perceptions of education and values? What role do editorial cartoons play in promoting educational reform and reshaping values? To address these questions, the study selects a set of representative editorial cartoons and conducts a detailed analysis. By deconstructing how metaphors operate across visual, textual, and symbolic modes, this research aims to expose the mechanisms through which cartoons challenge credentialist ideologies. Such analysis not only decodes artistic critique but also illuminates pathways for reimagining educational value systems in public discourse. The findings offer new insights into the role of cartoons in social critique and provide valuable implications for educational policymakers and social practitioners.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Metaphor and Multimodal Metaphor

Metaphor is a cognitive and linguistic process that links two different conceptual domains, where one domain (the source domain) is used to understand and describe another (the target domain). The primary function of metaphor is to help us comprehend abstract or unfamiliar concepts by relating them to concepts we already understand. The foundational theory of metaphor was proposed by Lakoff and Johnson [4] in their seminal work *Metaphors We Live By*. They argued that conceptual metaphors are fundamental cognitive tools that allow individuals to map characteristics from a familiar source domain to a less familiar target domain. According to them, our everyday understanding of actions and thought processes is constructed through metaphorical language and thought patterns.

Metaphor offers a systematic means of understanding how people perceive and interpret the world, making it an effective tool in various disciplines such as education [5], psychology [6], and sociology [7]. In recent years, with the development of multimodal theories, increasing scholarly attention has been paid to the multimodal manifestations of language, and multimodal discourse analysis has become a core field in linguistics. Kress and van Leeuwen [8] and O'Halloran [9] propose that multimodal discourse is a communicative phenomenon that transmits information and meaning through the integration of multiple human sensory channels—such as visual, auditory, and tactile—as well as symbolic resources such as language, images, sound, music, gestures, and even scent.

The evolution of metaphor theory and multimodality theory together has given rise to a new field: multimodal metaphor studies. According to Forceville [10], a multimodal metaphor is a metaphor in which the source and target domains are represented through more than one mode of communication, including text, speech, visual images, music, and bodily gestures. He argues that multimodal metaphors, compared to monomodal ones, utilize various sensory channels and dynamic interactions to convey richer and more layered meanings.

2.2. Empirical Research on Multimodal Metaphors

As multimodal metaphor theory has advanced, a growing body of empirical research has emerged. Forceville's monograph *Pictorial Metaphor in Advertising* [11], based on his doctoral dissertation, marked a milestone in early research. Subsequently, many studies have analyzed

multimodal metaphors across various discourse types, including advertising, political cartoons, films, oral presentations, and product design. Forceville and his colleagues compiled a seminal volume titled *Multimodal Metaphor* [12], which includes research on multimodal metaphors in advertisements, cartoons, gestures, sound, music, and sculpture. This collection has served as a valuable academic resource for future researchers.

Research on multimodal metaphors commenced relatively late in China, emerging around 2010. A keyword search of the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database yielded 919 documents on “multimodal metaphor.” Publications demonstrated a consistent upward trajectory, rising from 2 studies in 2010 to 92 in 2023. Early scholarship predominantly focused on theoretical exploration.

Analysis of topic distributions revealed three dominant discourse types: public service advertisements, political cartoons, and news cartoons. As an emerging field, multimodal metaphor studies exhibit significant potential for practical application and interdisciplinary development.

2.3. Editorial Cartoons as Multimodal Discourse

Cartoons constitute a multimodal discourse rich in metaphor, typically integrating visual and verbal semiotic resources [13]. Characterized by their satirical, humorous, or witty nature, cartoons leverage distinct conceptual domains represented through images and text. When these modalities interact to form metaphorical mappings, they inherently generate multimodal metaphors. Within such image-text configurations, each modality fulfills distinct cognitive functions: images concretize abstract concepts, while verbal elements designate entities and their relations, directing viewers’ attention to specific components within a shared cognitive framework.

Though frequently addressing political and social issues, cartoons also engage with cultural customs, celebrity narratives, and sporting events. Print media typically classifies cartoons into three categories: political cartoons, entertainment cartoons, and advertising cartoons [14].

Compared to general cartoons, editorial cartoons in media convey embedded political, cultural, and social messages. Their primary objective is to shape and influence readers’ cognitions, beliefs, stances, and perspectives regarding socio-political events. Beyond narrating current affairs, these cartoons frequently incorporate evaluative commentary, often adopting a critical stance. Focusing on domestic and international political issues or salient events, political cartoons aim to mold public opinion and dramatize news. As a form of social commentary, they are widely regarded as vital forces in advancing democratic processes and serve as a litmus test for a nation’s democratic development. Consequently, editorial cartoons offer critical insights into the social, political, and cultural environments they reflect. This synthesis of metaphor theory, multimodal discourse frameworks, and credentialism studies establishes the conceptual foundation for analyzing how editorial cartoons function as vehicles of social critique through multimodal metaphor.

2.4. Credentialism and Its Sociocultural Consequences

Credentialism refers to the overemphasis on educational qualifications as the primary determinant of individual ability and worth. It results in distorted social expectations, inflated job requirements, and systemic exclusion of those who lack formal degrees regardless of their skills or experiences. The phenomenon also intensifies educational competition, exacerbates social inequality, and limits career opportunities for those outside elite academic institutions.

Recent public discussions have highlighted paradoxical situations where individuals with advanced degrees accept low-skilled or mismatched jobs—for example, PhD holders becoming elementary school teachers or food delivery workers. This degree inflation not only signals

misalignment between education and employment markets but also reveals deep flaws in how societies define success and merit.

The case of Jiang Ping, a vocational student who gained national recognition through mathematical achievement, offers a counter-narrative that challenges credentialist assumptions. Her success suggests that talent and capability transcend institutional prestige, emphasizing the need for a broader, more inclusive understanding of educational achievement. In this context, editorial cartoons serve as both mirrors and critiques of credentialism, capturing its contradictions and offering alternative perspectives through visual metaphor and symbolic narrative.

3. Research Design and Data Collection

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in cognitive linguistics, particularly the theory of multimodal metaphor. The objective is to examine how editorial cartoons employ integrated semiotic resources to critique the phenomenon of credentialism. To ensure analytical depth and representativeness, the following methodological framework was adopted.

3.1. Selection Criteria for Cartoons

Four editorial cartoons were selected from China News Cartoon (<http://cartoon.chinadaily.com.cn>) using the keyword “educational credentials”. The cartoons were chosen based on the following criteria:

Topical relevance: Each cartoon must explicitly or implicitly reference issues surrounding credentialism, such as degree inflation, institutional bias, or employment discrimination.

Semiotic richness: The cartoon must demonstrate a clear multimodal configuration (visual, textual, spatial, and chromatic elements).

Public accessibility and recency: The cartoons must be publicly available and produced within the last five years to reflect current socio-educational trends.

3.2. Analytical Framework

The analysis synthesizes Forceville’s framework on pictorial metaphor with Kress and van Leeuwen’s theory of visual grammar. The analysis focuses on the following multimodal components:

Visual elements: Character positioning, gestures, symbols, and compositional balance.

Verbal elements: Captions, embedded text, and lexical choices.

Color and spatial organization: Use of chromatic contrast, directionality, and spatial metaphor. Each cartoon was subjected to a close reading to identify metaphorical mappings, source-target domain relationships, and semiotic strategies used to convey social critique.

3.3. Data Validity and Reliability

To enhance validity, triangulation was employed by comparing cartoon analysis with public commentary and academic literature on credentialism. Peer debriefing was also conducted: interpretations were reviewed by two scholars with expertise in cognitive linguistics and multimodal discourse analysis to ensure consistency and minimize researcher bias.

Furthermore, the study observes ethical considerations by using publicly accessible media without manipulating or decontextualizing content. The cartoons are interpreted within their socio-political milieu, taking into account the broader public discourse surrounding educational inequality and reform.

This robust design ensures that the research findings are not only theoretically grounded but also socio-culturally relevant, thereby providing valuable insights for both academic discourse and practical policy recommendations.



Figure 4.1 Credentialism in the Job Market



Figure 4.2 Credentialism in the Classroom

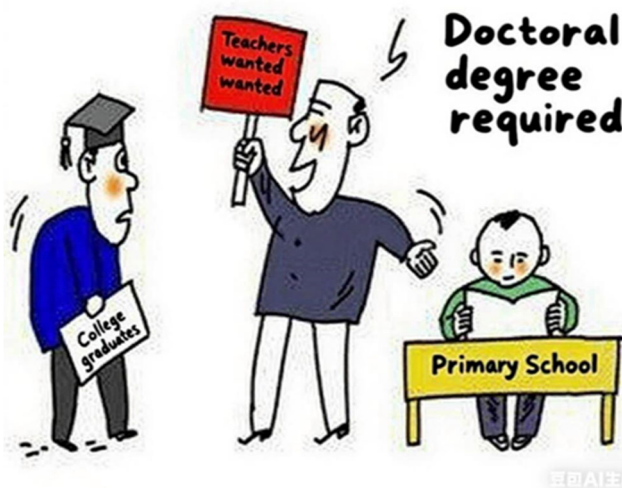


Figure 4.3 Credentialist Job Requirements



Figure 4.4 Counterexample to Credentialism

4. Multimodal Metaphor Analysis in Editorial Cartoons

Editorial cartoons constitute sophisticated visual rhetoric that strategically orchestrates multimodal resources to interrogate systemic credentialism—the cultural hegemony privileging institutional certifications over demonstrable capabilities. This analysis deciphers four cartoons (Figures 4.1–4.4) through the integrated theoretical prism of Forceville’s pictorial metaphor framework and Kress & van Leeuwen’s social semiotics, revealing how visual-textual constructions simultaneously expose credentialism’s institutional manifestations and articulate counter-discourses. The cartoons function as critical visual public pedagogy, deploying metaphorical complexity to challenge naturalized hierarchies in educational ecosystems.

4.1. Institutional Gatekeeping in Teacher Recruitment

The first cartoon (Figures 4.1) constructs a semiotic architecture of exclusion through its monolithic book-shaped elementary school edifice. From its central doorway, an ambiguously gendered arm extends with grasping motion lines, clutching a “Teacher Recruitment” placard that paradoxically signals both invitation and exclusion. The floating doctoral and master’s

mortarboards in the upper periphery operate as visual metonyms for qualified candidates, their spatial marginalization enacting credential devaluation through compositional syntax. Typographic hierarchies amplify institutional dominance: “Elementary School” dominates in assertive boldface, while academic credentials shrink into diminished italics, materially replicating hiring power differentials.

Chromatic semiotics deepen the critique: the school’s crimson façade leverages cultural codings of bureaucratic stringency, while the recruitment sign’s bureaucratic yellow signals procedural neutrality that masks exclusionary practices. The green sleeve introduces semiotic dissonance, connoting growth potential constrained by institutional barriers. Crucially, the doorway functions as a liminal threshold metaphor where institutional architecture physically materializes credentialist barriers. The gestural semiotics of the beckoning-yet-barring hand crystallize employer authority as the ideological actuator of professional trajectories. This visual-textual ensemble reveals credentialism’s core paradox: advanced degrees become simultaneously mandatory access tokens and experientially devalued currencies within employment economies.

This multimodal critique fundamentally exposes how credentialist gatekeeping transforms educational institutions into sites of credential alchemy—where human potential is transmuted into hierarchical capital. The spatial-visual grammar demonstrates how institutional power manifests through semiotic subordination of qualifications, naturalizing the disconnect between academic attainment and professional valuation. Ultimately, the cartoon renders visible credentialism’s invisible architecture of exclusion.

4.2. Pedagogical Distortion in the Classroom

The second cartoon (Figures 4.2) stages an absurdist pedagogical theater where visual disproportion materializes credentialism’s epistemic violence. An oppressive blackboard consuming over two-thirds of the compositional space physically embodies institutional authority, dwarfing a teacher whose diminutive “PhD” insignia appears incongruous against the grotesquely oversized elementary textbook she grips like a defensive shield. The students’ reduction to featureless silhouettes performs the symbolic annihilation of learner identity—their forward orientation suggesting docile compliance rather than engaged cognition.

This configuration operationalizes the conceptual metaphor “pedagogy as ritualistic spectacle” through precise visual rhetoric. The textbook’s typographical dominance visually subordinates doctoral credentials to rudimentary content delivery, enacting credentialism’s substantive displacement. Gestural semiotics compound the critique: the white-knuckled textbook grip signifies institutional enforcement of standardized knowledge, while the pointing finger enacts what Freire termed the “banking model” of education—unidirectional knowledge deposition that precludes critical dialogue. Chromatic coding accelerates the ideological commentary: the teacher’s detached blue attire signifies professional alienation, while students’ multicolored clothing implies individual potential erased by credential-focused pedagogy. The expansive negative space—rendered as stark white void—transforms absence into critical presence, signifying the evacuation of meaningful educational engagement.

Through calculated visual disproportion, the cartoon exposes how credentialism reconstructs education as epistemological theater—where the ceremonial display of qualifications (mortarboard as prop) displaces authentic knowledge co-construction. The composition indicts systemic perversions: doctoral expertise squandered on elementary instruction, pedagogical complexity reduced to performative ritual, and learner identities negated by credential fetishism. This metaphorical configuration ultimately reveals credentialism’s corrosive impact on education’s fundamental purpose—the development of critical human capability.

4.3. Qualification Inflation in Hiring Practices

The third cartoon (Figures 4.3) constructs a triptych of credentialism's collateral damage through three strategically positioned actors: a bewildered graduate (left) clutching a bachelor's diploma, an impassive corporate-garbed recruiter (center) wielding a "Hiring Teachers" sign, and a child (right) immersed in foundational reading at an elementary desk. The superimposed "Academic Requirement: Doctoral Degree" text functions as the ideological keystone, exposing arbitrary credential escalation.

The visual narrative generates the conceptual metaphor "employment access as movable barrier" through sophisticated semiotic interplay. The graduate's facial semiotics—furrowed brow and slack jaw—materialize the credential-job mismatch produced by institutional gatekeeping. The recruiter's averted gaze and rigid posture embody educational institutions' bureaucratic complicity in maintaining exclusionary systems. Most critically, the child's absorption in learning creates profound semiotic tension with the doctoral requirement, highlighting how credentialism distracts from pedagogical essentials. Chromatic rhetoric reinforces institutional critique: the recruiter's funereal black attire signifies bureaucratic rigidity, while the blood-red "Hiring Teachers" placard visually anchors systemic credentialism. The graduate's faded blue clothing signifies professional marginalization, contrasting with the child's vibrant green symbolizing untainted educational purpose.

The cartoon reveals credentialism's operational mechanics—the institutional alchemy transforming academic qualifications into exclusionary currency that manufactures artificial professional scarcity. This visual argument demonstrates how credential inflation precipitates critical resource misallocation: advanced degrees become prerequisites for elementary instruction while essential competencies like pedagogical sensitivity and developmental awareness are systematically discounted. Ultimately, the composition indicts credentialism as a self-perpetuating system that prioritizes symbolic capital over functional capability, undermining education's fundamental mission.

4.4. Jiang Ping as Counter-Hegemonic Narrative

The last cartoon (Figures 4.4) engineers a semiotic insurrection against credentialist hegemony through the symbolic representation of Jiang Ping—the vocational secondary student who achieved global distinction in the 2024 Alibaba Mathematics Competition. Centered compositionally, the uniformed figure executes a dynamic upward leap from a staircase of stacked academic mortarboards toward an apple inscribed with the character "Prize," all superimposed against a blackboard dense with advanced mathematical formulae. This configuration materializes the conceptual metaphor "intellectual achievement as transgressive ascent".

The school uniform semiotically anchors Jiang Ping's institutional identity within vocational education, while her airborne posture embodies the transcendence of credentialist barriers through kinetic metaphor. The mortarboard staircase materially represents the conventional academic hierarchy, transformed from exclusionary mechanism into launch platform through paradoxical visual syntax. The prize-inscribed apple—hovering beyond orthodox academic pathways—signifies exceptional achievement detached from institutional validation. Background mathematical formulae function as visual metonyms for specialized knowledge, traditionally reserved for elite academic trajectories but here claimed through autonomous scholarship.

Chromatic symbolism deepens the counter-argument: the uniform's vibrant azure signifies intellectual potential unbounded by institutional categorization, while the mortarboards' monotonous greyscale represents credentialism's rigid structures. The chalkboard's authentic mathematical inscriptions serve as epistemological grounding, certifying knowledge mastery

beyond ceremonial credentials. This visual narrative systematically deconstructs credentialist assumptions by demonstrating mathematical excellence emerging outside formal hierarchies. Jiang Ping's representation constitutes a semiotic counter-narrative that fundamentally destabilizes credentialist hegemony. Her symbolic ascent challenges the presumed isomorphism between institutional prestige and intellectual capability, exposing systemic failures in recognizing talent across educational strata. The composition reconceptualizes achievement beyond institutional validation, offering a transformative paradigm where intellectual rigor transcends credentialist constraints. Ultimately, this cartoon articulates a powerful alternative epistemology—knowledge as democratic praxis rather than credentialed possession—that reimagines educational justice through visual rhetoric.

Together, these cartoons illustrate a spectrum of critiques—from institutional exclusion and pedagogical misalignment to employment distortion and counter-narrative empowerment. By mobilizing multimodal metaphors, editorial cartoons make visible the systemic dysfunctions embedded in credentialist ideologies, while also offering visual spaces for reimagining equity in education. Their semiotic richness allows for both immediate emotional resonance and sustained ideological critique, positioning them as powerful tools in public discourse on educational reform.

5. Conclusion

From the perspective of multimodal metaphor theory in cognitive linguistics, this study has conducted a detailed analysis of how editorial cartoons critique the phenomenon of credentialism. The findings underscore the unique role of cartoons as reflective social mirrors—illuminating systemic issues within the education system—and as catalysts for reform and progress. Through metaphorical and visual rhetoric, cartoons not only reveal the absurdities and consequences of overemphasizing academic credentials but also inspire public reflection and discourse on educational values.

This study calls upon educational policymakers, practitioners, and broader society to collaboratively promote a profound transformation of the education system—one that advances genuine educational equity and supports the holistic development of individuals. The case of Jiang Ping, a vocational school student who achieved national recognition for her mathematical achievements, serves as a vivid counter-example to the prevailing credentialist ideology. Her story exemplifies how academic success and talent should not be narrowly measured by degrees alone.

This has important implications for redefining educational success. First, policymakers should recognize and celebrate non-traditional pathways to achievement, using public campaigns and supportive policies to raise awareness and respect for alternative forms of excellence. Second, reforms to higher education admission systems are needed, such as implementing more comprehensive evaluation mechanisms to reduce over-reliance on standardized test scores. This would ensure greater access and opportunity for students with diverse talents and potentials.

Third, support for vocational education and lifelong learning should be strengthened. Individuals should be encouraged to pursue personalized educational and career trajectories based on their interests and evolving market needs. Jiang Ping's experience also reinforces the importance of equitable access to quality education. Therefore, policymakers must guarantee that all students, regardless of background, have access to robust educational resources and opportunities.

Furthermore, career counseling and planning services should be enhanced to help students make informed educational and professional decisions, thereby improving the alignment between education and the labor market. Lastly, educational research must be expanded—

particularly studies on equity, diversity, and innovation in education—to provide an empirical foundation for policy formulation.

Through these strategies, we may move toward a more just, inclusive, and dynamic educational environment—one in which every individual has the opportunity to realize their potential and achieve success on their own terms. Ultimately, we envision an education system that celebrates diversity, nurtures creativity, and affirms the unique value each learner brings to society.

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