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Earned, Not Given: A Cross-Cultural Exploration of Identity Construction in Valedictorian Speeches

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ABSTRACT: *Valedictory speeches, delivered during graduation ceremonies, are a significant medium for graduates to reflect on their academic journeys and shape their identities. This study investigates how valedictorian speeches from various cultural contexts contribute to the identity construction of the speakers, with a particular focus on the interplay between personal expression and cultural narratives. Using self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), the study employs an inductive and creative synthesis approach to analyse twenty (20) valedictory speeches collected purposively from universities in Africa, Asia, North America, and Australia. The findings reveal that valedictorians often draw upon narratives of adversity to construct identities characterised by resilience, perseverance and self-sacrifice. Additionally, valedictorians from these regions portray themselves as self-reliant individuals, resilient achievers and interdependent members through their narratives about their journeys to academic success, accentuating the personal agency inherent in their paths to academic success. Two significant findings emerge from the analysis: first, valedictorians from Ghana, Nigeria, Japan and Pakistan incorporate quotations from distinguished figures to construct an identity of a well-read and scholarly individual. Second, in Africa, particularly Ghana and Nigeria, valedictorians often invoke deities as central figures in their academic journeys, positioning God as a source of support and constructing an identity of devoutness. This study concludes that valedictorians utilise their speeches to assert the legitimacy of their success as hard-earned, underscoring the cultural variations in how identity is constructed through narratives of struggle and achievement. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of how cultural contexts influence academic identity formation.*

KEYWORDS: Autonomy, Cross-Cultural, Identity Construction, Self-determination, Valedictorian Speeches

Introduction

Graduation ceremonies in higher education institutions serve as significant rites of passage, symbolising the successful culmination of a rigorous academic journey and the commencement of new, often ambitious pursuits (Warburg, 2009). Steeped in tradition, these ceremonies feature speeches, awards and various rituals that acknowledge individual achievements and collective milestones (Ackerman, 1991; Yang, 2022). At the heart of these ceremonies is the valedictory speech, delivered by the valedictorian - the student recognised for outstanding academic performance and exemplary character.

The valedictory address transcends mere ceremonial function; it serves as a platform for valedictorians to reflect introspectively on their academic journeys while also representing the collective experiences of their peers. Through these speeches, the valedictorian crafts a narrative that honours personal achievements while also emphasising the shared challenges, milestones and growth experienced by the entire graduating class. As a result, the speech becomes a celebration of both individual and collective accomplishments, highlighting the valuable lessons learned and the obstacles surmounted throughout their academic journeys (Flowerdew & Wang, 2015; Hyland, 2012).

Through carefully crafted language, valedictory speeches serve as a significant platform for identity construction, wherein valedictorians not only share personal narratives but also actively shape how their peers and the wider audience perceive them. These speeches stand as powerful expressions of identity, reflecting the intricate interplay of individual and collective experiences within the academic community (Borg, 2003; Swales, 2016). This paper focuses on the language employed in these speeches to explore how identity is constructed, analysing both the personal narratives shared and the broader cultural factors that influence these constructions (Antwi et al., 2026; Li, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). By adopting a cross-cultural perspective, this study examines the diverse ways in which identity is negotiated and shaped during these significant moments.

Two main research questions guide this study:

a. In what ways do valedictorians across different cultures construct their identities through narratives of adversity in their speeches?
b. How do valedictorians across different cultures construct their identities through their journeys to academic success in their speeches?

Literature Review

This section examines the narrative construction of adversity and overcoming challenges. It also focuses on identity and achievement across cultures.

Narrative Construction of Adversity and Overcoming Challenges

The narrative construction of identity plays a critical role in understanding how individuals construct their experiences of adversity and resilience. By examining lived experiences, we can gain insight into how individuals develop their self-concepts in the face of external challenges and systemic inequities (McAdams & McLean, 2013; Singer, 2004).

Andrews (2009) explores the identity formation of Black students in predominantly White high schools, focusing on how they navigate adversity as they negotiate their racial identities and academic performance in challenging educational environments. Employing interviews and participant observation, the study captures the students' perspectives on achievement and identity, emphasising their agency in constructing a racially affirming and

academically inclusive narrative of success. The findings reveal that high-achieving students actively redefine success to align with their academic and racial identities, thereby countering societal narratives that frequently dissociate Black identity from excellence. This process of self-representation reflects resilience, as these students challenge stereotypes and build a self-concept that is rooted in pride and cultural affirmation. Andrews concludes that these students engage in a complex process of identity formation that challenges conventional notions of race and achievement in educational settings.

Bereményi and Durst (2021) investigate the resilience narratives of Roma women who have navigated social barriers to attain academic success, through the lens of resilience theory. The study involves a comparative analysis of qualitative data collected from 185 university graduates in Spain and Hungary. By examining self-narratives, the study investigates the intricate relationship between personal experiences and social mobility. The findings reveal culturally specific interpretations of adversity and resilience within the narratives of these women. The researchers identify strategies such as reframing challenges as opportunities for growth and building positive identities that honour their Roma heritage while celebrating their academic accomplishments. The study concludes that achieving upward mobility does not inherently mitigate the emotional challenges tied to social class transition.

Olson (2022) examines the challenges encountered by valedictorians and their strategies for overcoming these obstacles, utilising Schlossberg's (1989) Marginality and Mattering theory as a framework. Through interviews, Olson investigates how these high-achieving students navigate a variety of difficulties, effectively challenging the prevailing stereotype that their academic journeys are devoid of struggle. The findings indicate that valedictorians faced adversities, including bereavement and undocumented status, in addition to stress and socio-economic challenges. However, resilience, proactive problem-solving and robust support networks comprising family, peers and educational mentors are coping traits identified. Olson concludes that resilience and community support play a crucial role in shaping the identities and successes of valedictorians, demonstrating that their achievements are influenced as much by the adversity they face as by their attributes and the support structures surrounding them.

Existing literature has explored the challenges students face in academic environments; however, limited attention has been given to how these students, particularly valedictorians, construct their identities through narratives of adversity in their speeches. This study addresses this gap by analysing how valedictorians from diverse backgrounds shape their identities through these narratives, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of identity formation within educational settings.

Identity and Achievement across Cultures

Cultural norms and societal expectations profoundly shape the interplay between identity and achievement within academic settings. Studies have highlighted how cultural contexts influence identity formation and the pursuit of achievement. These studies reveal marked variations in how individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds perceive, strive for, and define academic success (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Markus and Kitayama (1991) conducted a study examining the impact of cultural factors on self-concepts and identity, utilising the frameworks of independent and interdependent self-construals. Their research compared individualistic cultures with collectivistic cultures. The findings revealed that, in individualistic cultures, achievements are often perceived as reflections of personal accomplishments, with individuals viewing themselves as autonomous entities focused on their own goals. Conversely, in collectivistic cultures, achievement is closely linked to familial and community expectations, highlighting success as a means of

contributing to social cohesion and fulfilling roles within a group. This study concluded that cultural context plays a significant role in shaping how individuals define and pursue achievement, thereby shaping their identities in distinct ways.

In another study, Li (2001) examined the cultural perceptions of success among Chinese students compared to their Western peers. The study employed structured interviews and focus group discussions. Findings indicated that Chinese students often conceptualise their academic achievements as extensions of familial honour, interpreting academic success as fulfilling parental expectations and cultural obligations. Conversely, American students predominantly view success as an individual endeavour, prioritising self-actualisation and personal fulfilment. The study concluded that, for Chinese students, their identity is inextricably linked to academic success, emphasising familial pride over individual attainment.

In a longitudinal study conducted by Kiang and Fuligni (2009), the researchers explored identity and academic achievement among diverse ethnic groups within the United States, focusing specifically on Asian American, Latino and European American high school students. Over four years, the researchers examined the relationships between students' ethnic identity, academic motivation, and achievement outcomes. Their findings revealed that Asian American and Latino students who exhibited a strong sense of ethnic identity, characterised by pride in and active engagement with their cultural heritage, showed higher academic motivation than their peers with weaker ethnic identities. Additionally, a positive correlation was identified between ethnic identity and academic performance, particularly when familial expectations aligned with educational aspirations. In the case of European American students, ethnic identity appeared to have a less significant influence on academic motivation. The study concluded that the interactions between identity and achievement particularly impact minority students, who often draw resilience from their cultural identities.

The findings from these studies indicate that cultural values significantly impact the relationship between identity and achievement. In individualistic cultures, achievement is closely tied to self-concept and personal goals, whereas in collectivistic cultures, it tends to reflect family and community expectations. For minority students within multicultural contexts, a well-defined cultural identity is crucial in fostering academic motivation and resilience, underscoring the necessity for culturally responsive education. This cross-cultural perspective emphasises the influence of cultural, societal and familial factors in shaping academic identity, particularly in diverse and globalised contexts.

Theoretical framework

Self-Determination Theory

This study is grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000). SDT asserts that individuals who successfully meet their basic psychological needs are more likely to engage in self-directed behaviours that align with their interests and values. At the heart of SDT is the notion that human motivation is fundamentally underpinned by the satisfaction of three psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness.

Autonomy refers to the individual's sense of volition and capacity for self-direction, aligning actions with personal values and aspirations. This fundamental need is vital for developing a self-determined identity, enabling individuals to pursue goals that resonate with their true selves. Competence, which involves the need to feel effective and capable, is essential for fostering a sense of accomplishment and self-worth. It encompasses the drive to enhance skills and achieve mastery, contributing significantly to an individual's achievements.

Relatedness, or the need to feel connected to others, is crucial in forming relationships and building communal bonds. This need underscores the importance of social connections and support systems, providing the emotional and psychological foundation necessary for optimal functioning and well-being.

In the context of this study, valedictorian speeches serve as a compelling avenue for exploring how the three basic psychological needs are addressed. Speakers often assert their autonomy by sharing personal narratives that reflect their choices and aspirations. They highlight their competence by recounting achievements and overcoming challenges, thus reinforcing their self-worth. Furthermore, these speakers acknowledge the importance of relatedness by expressing gratitude to family, friends and mentors who have supported them throughout their educational journeys. Therefore, utilising SDT offers an analytical framework for investigating how identity is constructed within valedictorian speeches across diverse cultural contexts.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, primarily drawing on valedictory speeches from official university websites. Purposive sampling was utilised to select twenty (20) speeches that reflect a variety of cultural contexts (Amoah & Eshun, 2015). The selection criteria prioritised accessibility, ensuring all speeches were retrievable from their official university websites. Specifically, the sample comprises six speeches from Africa (three [3] from Ghana and three [3] from Nigeria), six from Asia (three [3] from Japan and three [3] from Pakistan), six from North America (three [3] from Canada and three [3] from the USA), and two [2] from Australia. The limited representation from Australia, with only two speeches included, indicates the restricted public availability of such data in the region. However, these speeches were integrated into the study to enhance global representation, thus contributing to a more comprehensive comparative analysis of identity construction across diverse cultural settings. This inclusion provides valuable insights into how valedictorians in Australia construct their experiences, thereby enriching the comparative scope of the study. Given the cross-cultural nature of this study, the researchers engaged in reflexive practices to address potential biases. Reflexivity was maintained through regular peer debriefing sessions, in which the researchers collaboratively discussed and documented their cultural assumptions, backgrounds and interpretations. This practice was essential for ensuring greater objectivity and integrity in the findings, thereby minimising undue influence from the researchers' cultural perspectives. Although the speeches were publicly accessible via university websites, ethical considerations were strictly followed. To safeguard privacy and enhance confidentiality, the names of the universities and individual valedictorians were anonymised, thereby reducing the risk of unintended disclosures and preserving the dignity and privacy of those involved. Furthermore, all data collected were exclusively intended for research purposes, aligning with established ethical principles in research practice. The data analysis employed an inductive analysis and creative synthesis approach, facilitating the identification of recurring themes across the speeches. Thematic coding was used to identify and describe the emerging themes effectively. A narrative-logic approach was adopted to present the analysis coherently. This method allows for a seamless transition between exemplars, enabling a thorough examination of the data while integrating relevant excerpts from the speeches.

Results and Discussion

This section of the study answers the main research questions posed.

In what ways do valedictorians across different cultures construct their identities through narratives of adversity in their speeches?

Valedictorians often use their speeches to reflect on the challenges they have encountered throughout their academic journeys. The analysis reveals that valedictorians draw on adversity narratives to construct their identities. Three predominant themes emerged from examining these narratives: resilience, perseverance and self-sacrifice. These themes form the foundation of identity construction, enabling the speakers to connect with their audience by reflecting culturally significant values. The following excerpts illustrate this.

Excerpt 1

> *Some of us have gone through "hell" in these four years, … because we experienced the loss of dear ones …* (GH2: p. 4)

Excerpt 2

> *Even when I got a "D" grade in a three-unit first-year course, I pressed forth.* (NG1: p. 5)

Excerpt 3

> *Every single one of us sitting here has experienced loss, grief or sacrifice in one way or another over the past few years. We lost a very dear faculty, our very own student; Yet we are all here, ... And if that isn't the definition of resilience, I don't know what is.* (PT2: p. 4)

Excerpt 4

> *Let me start with a small story about my best friend. My best friend was a genius and a very talented person. But he had this problem where whatever he did, he ended up being second or always missing the opportunity to succeed. Throughout school, he was consistently the second-highest scorer in class, always a step behind the top spot. … He missed being at the top of his undergraduate batch by a difference of 0.0003 in his GPA. ... Every time he was close to the winning post, he fell short at the finish line… Do you know where he is now? … Yes, my friend is me.* (JPN2: p. 2)

The excerpts demonstrate how valedictorians construct identities of resilience that reflect culturally specific challenges. In Ghana, resilience is closely associated with overcoming personal losses. Similarly, resilience is marked by a capacity to endure grief and loss in Pakistan. Conversely, Nigerian valedictorians emphasise resilience as a tenacity to surmount academic setbacks. Meanwhile, in Japan, resilience is framed around personal struggles, particularly the emotional strength required to transcend repeated failures. These observations are consistent with Olson's (2022) assertion that resilience shapes the identities and successes of valedictorians.

Valedictorians from Ghana, Nigeria, Australia, Canada and the United States converge on the theme of perseverance in their speeches, asserting it as a fundamental element of their academic journeys. Despite the shared emphasis on perseverance across these diverse cultures, each valedictorian highlights distinct challenges and experiences that shape their narratives. The excerpts below illustrate this.

Excerpt 5

> *… every one of us at one point chased the bus leaving campus at dawn to Korle Bu for clinical rotation. There were days one had to start dressing up in the hall and finish up on the bus. Those who were numb by the incessant alarms gradually became athletes overnight, for they had to sprint from Pent, Commonwealth and the traditional halls to catch up with the bus.* (GH1: p. 6)

Excerpt 6

> *We recollect our first university lecture in the Jones Quartey Building (JQB) … where we come face to face with the almighty modus ponens and modus tollens of critical thinking, as well as the Modern Language Association (MLA) and American Psychological Association (APA) referencing of academic writing.* (GH3: p. 5)

In Ghana, perseverance is reflected in two ways: the daily perseverance needed to manage the practical necessities of student life and the academic perseverance essential for overcoming intellectual challenges.

Excerpt 7

> *…there were times when I had no food; when soaked garri (and fibre Active biscuit) was my daily ration; when I used ropes as belts; had no shoes, and lacked money to photocopy materials.* (NG1: p. 5)

In Nigeria, perseverance is profoundly personal among valedictorians who highlight their encounters with financial adversity.

Excerpt 8

> *… during the time I have been studying, I have started a new job, got married, moved house, got pregnant and had a baby.* (AUS2: p. 2)

Valedictorians in Australia showcase perseverance by managing significant life changes.

Excerpt 9

> *we … also endured the harsh Niigata winter, and separation from loved ones, while many had added responsibilities of taking care of their families as well as jobs to support their education.* (JPN1: p. 4)

Valedictorians from Japan emphasise perseverance by highlighting physical, emotional and social hardships.

Excerpt 10

> *… while I was in the UK, I told her my story, … I said, "Jennifer, I have nowhere to go... can I come live with you?" and of course she said yes…*
>
> (CND2: p. 3)

Valedictorians in Canada also emphasise perseverance by sharing personal stories of hardship.

Excerpt 11

> *It would be an understatement to say that these past four years did not come without challenges. Whether it was dealing with our struggle not to fail exams, … deciphering our identities and values, … we have been challenged.* (USA1: p. 3)

In the United States, valedictorians highlight perseverance in the face of academic and personal challenges.

It is observed that valedictorians in Pakistan often construct their identities around self-sacrifice, reflecting cultural values that prioritise familial and community responsibilities over personal ambitions. This aligns with Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions, highlighting Pakistan as a collectivist society that values group loyalty and the willingness to sacrifice for the collective good.

Excerpt 12

> *The greatest adversity for me was the time I spent away from my family- especially my daughter …* (PT1: p. 5)

The excerpts reveal that valedictorians from diverse cultural backgrounds draw upon narratives of adversity to shape identities that align with their societal values, emphasising themes such as resilience, perseverance and self-sacrifice. Notably, the prominence of these themes varies across cultures: resilience is particularly emphasised in Ghana, Nigeria, Pakistan and Japan, suggesting its broad resonance amid personal and academic challenges. In contrast, its absence in speeches from Australia, Canada and the USA may indicate a more subtle, individualistic expression of resilience. Perseverance, on the other hand, is a common value across Ghana, Nigeria, Japan, Australia and Canada, though the specific challenges faced differ according to cultural context. Self-sacrifice is predominantly featured only in Pakistan, underscoring its collectivist cultural focus on familial and communal responsibilities (Hofstede, 2001). This uneven distribution of themes illustrates that while resilience and perseverance are nearly universal, their expression - and the emphasis on self-sacrifice - are profoundly influenced by cultural norms, indicating that the construction of identity through valedictory speeches is context-specific and culturally contingent.

Linguistically, the speeches utilise vocabulary and phrases that connect personal experiences with culturally embedded values. In Ghana and Pakistan, words such as *loss* and *grief* underscore resilience. In Japan, the narratives centred around *missed opportunities* and *depression* similarly emphasise resilience in the face of adversity. In Nigeria, resilience is conveyed through expressions such as *pressed forth*.

Additionally, perseverance in Nigeria is represented by phrases such as *when soaked garri … was my daily ration*, *when I used ropes as belts*, *had no shoes*, and *lacked money*. In Ghana, perseverance is depicted through phrases like *chased the bus, athletes overnight*, *modus ponens* and *modus tollens*. In Australia, phrases such as *new job*, *got married* and *got pregnant* reflect perseverance. Canadian speakers emphasise this quality through phrases like *nowhere to go*... In the United States, phrases such as *fail exams* and *deciphering our identities and values* convey perseverance.

Finally, the linguistic representation of self-sacrifice in Pakistan is illustrated through phrases like *greatest adversity* and *time away from my family.*

How do valedictorians across different cultures construct their identities through their journeys to academic success in their speeches?

This section examines how valedictorians from diverse cultural backgrounds construct their identities through the narratives they share in their speeches, focusing on their journeys to academic success. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), the analysis highlights three core constructs: autonomy, competence and relatedness. By examining these constructs, the study reveals that valedictorians present themselves as self-reliant individuals, resilient achievers and interdependent members.

Autonomy

Autonomy is centred on individuals' ability to self-regulate their actions and make decisions consistent with their values, goals and aspirations (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Valedictorians exemplify autonomy through their capacity to take control of their academic journeys with intention, making choices that align with their aspirations and beliefs. By exercising this autonomy, valedictorians construct an identity of self-reliance, positioning themselves as individuals who own their paths. The following excerpts illustrate this.

Excerpt 13

> *It is here (university), that we learnt to take charge of our own destinies*.
>
> (GH1: p. 1)

Excerpt 14

> *I embarked on my academic journey with a singular aim - to explore the art of learning with unwavering dedication.* (NG3: p. 2)

Excerpt 15

> *Doing an MBA in Japan has been a dream for me since childhood.*
>
> (JPN2: p. 7)

Excerpt 16

> *As someone who believes in lifelong learning, I decided to enrol on this programme and I hope this is just the beginning for all of us*
>
> (PT1: p. 13)

Excerpt 17

> *I have studied Communication and Writing over the last 3 years, which I have wanted to do since I was a teenager. So, you could say that I have fulfilled my childhood dreams.* (AUS2: p. 3)

Excerpt 18

> *I highly recommend it. I love learning and I've been bitten by that love bug and I'm infected, it's contagious, but it should never be quarantined.* (CND2: p. 6)

Excerpt 19

> *Overcommitted, my days were dictated by my schedule... What raised me out of this rut was recognizing my personhood and need for connection. For me, that meant joining an intramural sports team...*
>
> (USA2: p. 3)

The excerpts show how valedictorians from diverse cultural backgrounds construct an identity of self-reliance through their emphasis on autonomy, highlighting their proactive roles in shaping their academic journeys. Notably, the expression of autonomy is culturally contingent. In Ghana, autonomy is conceptualised as a learning experience, with valedictorians acknowledging how education has empowered them to take charge of their futures. The Nigerian valedictorian delineates autonomy as an individual commitment to scholarly pursuits, highlighting a personal focus on academic rigour. In the narratives from Japan and Australia, there is a celebration of the fulfilment of childhood aspirations, framing autonomy as the realisation of long-held dreams. The Pakistani speaker emphasises the value of lifelong learning, viewing their academic journey as a stepping stone for future growth. In contrast, the Canadian speaker frames autonomy as a contagious passion for learning, whereas the American speaker reflects on autonomy as balancing commitments, cultivating self-awareness and fostering personal growth through meaningful connections.

Competence

Competence involves being capable and effective in one's actions (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Valedictorians construct an identity as resilient achievers who have honed the skills and abilities necessary to surmount challenges and attain success. Their academic journeys exemplify the results of hard work and the self-efficacy that emerges from confronting adversity. The following excerpts demonstrate this.

Excerpt 20

> *Despite the obstacles, we faced each challenge head-on, refining our skills and building the competence needed to reach this point. It was not just about enduring, but about developing the capabilities to succeed.* (GH1: p. 4)

Excerpt 21

> *I was determined to do my best, knowing that through hard work, collaboration, and learning from others, I would gain the competence needed to achieve my goals.* (NG2: p. 2)

Excerpt 22

> *After countless challenges, each one taught me new skills and pushed me to grow. Today's victory is a result of the competence I've developed through perseverance and learning from every setback.*
>
> (JPN3: p. 2)

Excerpt 23

> *Graduating today shows not just my hard work and commitment but also the sacrifices I have made over the last few years.* (PT1: p. 3)

Excerpt 24

> *We leave not only with knowledge but with the competence to face future challenges. Through each challenge, we grew in our abilities and mastered the skills needed to succeed in the real world.*
>
> (AUS1: p. 3)

Excerpt 25

> *I've gained the competence to succeed through hard work and learning from my experiences. Today, I am confident in my ability to overcome challenges because I've mastered the skills needed to do so.*
>
> (CND3: p. 4)

Excerpt 26

> *You've demonstrated the competence to manage time effectively, conquer challenging coursework, and tackle independent tasks, showing mastery in your field of study*. (USA3: p. 5)

The excerpts highlight how valedictorians from diverse cultural backgrounds construct their identities around competence. In Ghana, competence is viewed as an evolving journey of skill refinement. In Nigeria, it is linked to individual effort, collaboration and academic rigour. The Japanese valedictorian emphasises that challenges foster personal growth, with competence emerging from perseverance and continuous learning. In Pakistan, competence is centred on hard work, dedication and the sacrifices made along the way, reinforcing the belief that success is earned rather than awarded. In Australia, valedictorians define competence as problem-solving abilities and the confidence to tackle future challenges. Conversely, the Canadian speaker attributes competence to experiential learning, while the American speaker points to time management and independence as crucial components of their academic achievements.

An interesting finding is how valedictorians from Ghana, Nigeria, Japan and Pakistan incorporate quotes from prominent figures into their speeches. This highlights their capability and helps construct an identity of a well-read, scholarly individual, underscoring their intellectual depth and engagement with a diverse array of ideas.

Excerpt 27

> *Nelson Mandela once said, "Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world."* (PT1: p. 1)

Excerpt 28

> *"Only those who dare to fail greatly can ever achieve greatly," said Robert Kennedy*. (JPN3: p. 4)

Excerpt 29

> *I am reminded of Theodore Roosevelt's wise words …: "Believe you can and you're halfway there."* (NG2: p. 4)

Excerpt 30

> *I will end with the words of Eleanor Roosevelt: "The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams".* (GH3: p. 14)

Relatedness

Relatedness involves forming relationships and nurturing communal bonds, emphasising the significance of social connections and support systems (Deci & Ryan, 1985). In their pursuit of academic excellence, valedictorians recognise and appreciate the role of their support systems. This recognition allows them to construct a scholarly identity grounded in gratitude and interconnectedness, effectively spotlighting the collective contributions that have shaped their achievements. The following excerpts demonstrate this.

Excerpt 31

> *… our story would not be complete without acknowledging the people who have contributed to our success story today in diverse ways. To our lecturers, we will forever remain indebted to you for your tutelage, words of wisdom and good counsel.* (GH1: p.8)

Excerpt 32

> *We thank the University staff and acknowledge the tireless efforts of our lecturers in imparting knowledge to us. …* (NG1: p. 3)

Excerpt 33

> *I would like to express my gratitude to those who made this journey possible; our chancellor whose vision guided us, our phenomenal faculty and mentors, our ever-supportive parents, who made countless sacrifices to ensure our success, and of course our friends, who have been the strongest pillars of support; Thank you!* (PT2: p. 3)

Excerpt 34

> *I'd like to thank my two supervisors first, Professor Funabashi and Professor Cooray, for their time, effort, and guidance throughout my thesis and life at IUJ. Professor Funabashi was my official mentor and Professor Cooray was my unofficial mentor. Professor Funabashi, thank you for being so kind and generous. … Professor Cooray, without you I know nothing about proper research.* (JPN2: p. 6)

Excerpt 35

> *I would like to begin with a round of* thank yous. *To the faculty who guided us in our academic journeys, and to the staff who worked tirelessly to keep us healthy and safe. … And, of course, to our families and friends, whose love and support kept us afloat over the past four years.* (USA2: p. 6)

Excerpt 36

> *Now, of course, a big thank you to our Professor, James, there's not enough good things that one could say about James...He made all of us feel welcome, made class fun, and made us laugh with his great sense of humour.* (CND3: p. 5)

Excerpt 37

> *… I'd like to thank parents, family members and friends who have helped us extensively through the tough times and encouraged us to do our best. Academic staff, tutors and the faculty staff, we appreciate your dedication and enthusiasm in the tertiary education that we are privileged to undertake.* (AUS1: p. 6)

The excerpts highlight a recurring theme of gratitude and interconnectedness in constructing valedictorians' identities, highlighting the universal significance of relatedness in achieving academic success. This observation aligns with the findings of Hyland and Tse (2004) and Hyland (2004), who assert that acknowledgement constitutes a fundamental aspect of scholarly discourse. Consequently, valedictorians enhance their scholarly identity by emphasising their engagement within academic networks. While expressions of gratitude are universally present, cultural differences become apparent. In all excerpts, except for the Australian one, valedictorians first recognise their academic institutions or key figures who contributed to their achievements. In contrast, the Australian valedictorian prioritises family before acknowledging academic support systems, diverging from Hyland's (2004) model, which typically places family acknowledgements last. This focus on family reflects the cultural significance of familial support in Australian society, where family provides emotional and financial stability throughout one's academic journey. By placing family first, the Australian speaker positions personal connections as the foundational support for academic success. It is worth noting that some speeches generalise their expressions of appreciation, while others, such as those from Canada and Japan, personalise their gratitude by naming specific mentors.

Another interesting finding from the data reveals that valedictorians in Africa, particularly Ghana and Nigeria, extend their acknowledgements to include deities as significant sources of academic support systems. This reflects a cultural identity deeply rooted in religiosity, where success is perceived not merely as a product of individual effort but as a collaborative achievement that involves divine intervention. By emphasising their faith, these valedictorians construct an identity of devoutness, positioning God as a pivotal figure in their academic accomplishments. This is evident in the following excerpts.

Excerpt 38

> *But you all will agree with me that it would not have been possible without God. Hence, to Him who has given us life, assisted, guided, and helped us through the ups and downs from admission to graduation, to the Almighty God, we say Thank you.* (GH2: p. 2)

Excerpt 39

> *First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to Almighty Allah, may His name always be exalted, for providing me with the courage, insight and understanding that have enabled me to get this far.* (NG2: p. 5)

Conclusion

This study explored the identity construction of valedictorians across diverse cultural contexts through their graduation speeches. It revealed that these speeches do not merely reflect personal academic journeys; rather, they are intentional sites for identity formation. The analysis indicated that speakers do more than recount experiences of adversity and achievement; they

strategically organise their narratives to portray themselves as both proactive individuals and socially connected actors. Interpreted through the lens of SDT, the emphasis on autonomy, competence, and relatedness throughout the speeches highlights a consistent pattern in the discursive legitimisation of academic success. Valedictorians align their personal efforts with socially valued ideals, thereby constructing identities that reconcile individual accomplishments with collective expectations. Thus, the construction of identity in these speeches is influenced not only by personal experiences but also by the need to create culturally recognisable narratives of success. The cross-cultural dimension of the analysis further demonstrates that while certain identity markers hold global significance, their expression is shaped by local contexts, reflecting culturally specific resources through which success is rendered meaningful and legitimate. This study positions valedictory speeches as valuable discursive spaces where academic identities are actively constructed and validated. By integrating narrative analysis with SDT, it reconceptualises valedictory discourse as a culturally embedded practice through which academic success is not only narrated but also socially legitimised. Future research could expand on this study by analysing larger datasets and investigating how these identity constructions are perceived by audiences, thereby providing deeper insight into the interplay among discourse, culture, and education.

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Appendix

Data Sources – Valedictory Speeches

Country	Source Link
Ghana	https://old1.ug.edu.gh/sites/default/files/documents/UG%20Congregation%20-%20Valedictory%20Speech%20-%20Keith%20Oko%20Cleland%20-%20Nov%2014%202019%20-%20Morning%20Session%20.pdf.pdf
Ghana	https://old1.ug.edu.gh/sites/default/files/documents/Ms.%20Michelle%20Martha%20Ayo%20Segla%20-%20Valedictorian%2019th%20July%202019%20-%20Afternoon%20Session.pdf
Ghana	https://old1.ug.edu.gh/sites/default/files/documents/02%2021st%20July%202018%20Morning%20Session%20-%20Valedictorian%20Speech%20-%20Malvin%20Ofosu-Boateng.pdf
Nigeria	https://www.fulokoja.edu.ng/assets/media/docs/valedictory-speech-delivered-by-isah-zafirah-eneyamire-best-graduating-student-2020-2021-session-on-sat-oct-21-2023_1698686548.pdf
Nigeria	https://www.fulokoja.edu.ng/assets/media/docs/valedictory-speech-delivered-by-mariam-ibrahim-best-graduating-student-2021-2022-session-on-sat-oct-21-2023pdf_1698686585.pdf
Nigeria	https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/valedictory-speech-presented-46th-convocation-nigeria-ifeanyichukwu
Japan	https://www.mbaib.gsbs.tsukuba.ac.jp/ms-tu-dung-nguyens-graduation-speech-on-behalf-of-the-entire-graduating-students/
Japan	https://www.iuj.ac.jp/graduation-speeches/valedictorian-im/
Japan	https://www.iuj.ac.jp/graduation-speeches/valedictorian-ir/
Pakistan	https://www.aku.edu/convocation/ke/Pages/valedictory-speech-2020.aspx

Pakistan	https://www.aku.edu/convocation/global/Pages/global-valedictorian-2021.aspx
Pakistan	https://the.akdn/en/resources-media/resources/speeches/speech-by-valedictorian-dr-javeria-tariq-at-the-2024-convocation-of-the-aga-khan-university
Australia	https://sarankim.art/2019/12/19/transcript-of-my-valedictorian-speech/
Australia	https://www.vu.edu.au/sites/default/files/mcd/pdfs/Valetictorian-Speech-Victoria-University-Graduation-2012.pdf
Canada	https://www.lakeheadu.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/45/Humanities_101/speeches/monica%202019%20hum%20101.pdf
Canada	https://www.lakeheadu.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/45/Humanities_101/speeches/Shelley2016speech.pdf
Canada	https://www.smus.ca/news/valedictory-speech-aspire-be-your-best-self
USA	https://www.cair.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/StatementbyAsna-Tabassum.pdf
USA	https://www.princeton.edu/news/2022/05/24/2022-valedictory-remarks-natalia-orlovsky
USA	https://news.nd.edu/news/devin-diggs-2022-valedictory-address/