



A Critical Discourse Analysis of “Baoyan Anxiety” in Social Media: A Case Study of Experience-Sharing Posts on The Rednote

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Abstract. Intensifying competition in Chinese higher education has made “Baoyan anxiety” a prevalent issue among undergraduates. This study employs Fairclough’s three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis framework and Social Comparison Theory to analyze 20 Baoyan experience-sharing posts on The Rednote. It investigates the discursive strategies constructing this anxiety and how they exacerbate it by distorting social comparison mechanisms. The analysis reveals that anxiety is systematically built through textual features like oxymorons and metaphors, amplified by platform practices, and rooted in social structures (e.g., the meritocratic trap). Crucially, these strategies distort comparisons by triggering extreme upward comparisons, invalidating downward comparisons, and intensifying multi-dimensional self-comparisons, thereby heightening anxiety. This research offers a new perspective on how social media shapes youth emotionality, with implications for education and platform governance.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis; Baoyan Anxiety; Social Comparison; The Rednote; Social Media Discourse

1 Introduction

As competition in Chinese higher education intensifies, “Baoyan” (a system where outstanding graduating undergraduates are exempted from entrance exams to pursue master’s studies) has become a highly competitive and stressful process for undergraduates, giving rise to significant “Baoyan anxiety”. This anxiety is prominently constructed and disseminated on social media platforms like The Rednote, where experience-sharing posts employ specific narrative and emotional frameworks.

Social media discourse is a communication and social practice conducted on digital platforms, encompassing modes of expression and their specific contextual settings [1]. While research on social media discourse in the Chinese context has advanced, it predominantly focuses on public issues on platforms like Weibo, paying insufficient attention to micro emotional practices on emerging platforms such as The Rednote, particularly regarding Baoyan anxiety. To address this gap, this study integrates Fairclough’s

three-dimensional framework of Critical Discourse Analysis with Social Comparison Theory. It examines the discursive strategies in Baoyan experience posts and their impact on readers' social comparison psychology, aiming to reveal how social media discourse shapes the emotional landscape of young students. This research not only deepens the understanding of educational anxiety in the digital age but also provides a new perspective for exploring the mechanisms of emotional communication on social media.

2 Literature Review

After the introduction of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to China, its theoretical methods, critical perspectives, and research trends have been widely discussed, and it has quickly been applied to media discourse research [2-5]. It is worth noting that early research mostly focused on mainstream media, analyzing and exploring discourse such as news reports and political speeches, while research on social media discourse is still in its infancy. Almost all research in this stage focuses on mainstream media in countries such as China, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan, and conducts research on news discourse related to certain major events or terms in China and abroad during a certain period of time [6-8].

With the escalating prominence of social media, research on media discourse has witnessed a paradigmatic shift toward social media—distinguished from mainstream media—thereby constructing a more diversified research landscape. From the perspective of platform selection, existing research shows a high degree of concentration, with Weibo becoming the most closely watched focus. Domestic scholars have conducted in-depth discussions on public issues on Weibo, such as fertility topics, teacher image construction, and online rumors [9-11]. Although in recent years, a few scholars have gradually paid attention to other platforms outside of Weibo, such as Li & Qu exploring the interpersonal significance of WeChat Moments likes [12], and Wang studying the discourse expression of live streaming sales [13], overall, the Rednote, as a new social media platform with the core functions of sharing personal experiences and building peer communities, has not received sufficient attention in the field of media discourse research in China.

In summary, existing research has focused too much on platform selection, emphasized public issues in research topics, and neglected personal experience narratives in discourse types. This has led to the core concern of this study, which is how the “Baoyan anxiety” prevalent among Chinese university students can be constructed, transmitted, and amplified through the specific discourse type of “experience posts” on the Rednote, a platform known for experience sharing and community interaction. The present study aims to address this research gap by conducting a rigorous analysis of the discursive strategies embedded in Baoyan experience-sharing posts, and uncovering how these strategies contribute to shaping the emotional configurations of young students and their perceptions of educational competition.

3 Theoretical Framework

Originating in the 1970s, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) aims to expose the underlying power dynamics and ideological foundations in discourse [14]. Fairclough believed that discourse not only expresses social behavior, but also participates in the construction of the entire society [15]. CDA has typical interdisciplinary characteristics and diverse analytical frameworks and methods. Currently, the most influential ones are Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, van Dijk's social cognitive analysis, and Wodak's DHA, among which Fairclough's model is considered the most systematic and comprehensive by the academic community [15-18].

Fairclough's model conceptualizes discourse as a form of social practice and analyzes it across three interconnected dimensions: the text dimension, namely the micro-level analysis of linguistic features such as vocabulary, grammar, and rhetorical devices; the discursive practice dimension, the meso-level analysis of text production, distribution, and consumption; and the social practice dimension, namely the macro-level analysis of the ideological and power relations embedded in discourse [19].

The Social Comparison Theory is introduced to explain why these discursive constructions are effective in exacerbating anxiety. The theory posits that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing with others [20]. While classical theory emphasizes upward (comparing with superior others) and downward (comparing with inferior others) comparisons [21], this study identifies a "parallel comparison" within the Baoyan community. This involves comparing oneself with peers in similar situations, which provides short-term emotional resonance but may ultimately normalize and reinforce anxiety by creating a shared narrative of suffering.

In integration, Fairclough's model serves to describe the construction of Baoyan anxiety discourse, while Social Comparison Theory acts as a key interpreter of its anxiety-amplifying mechanism. Together, they form a logical chain from describing the phenomenon to explaining its psychological impact.

4 Methodology

4.1 Research Questions

This study explores the following two questions: 1. What specific discourse strategies were used in the Baoyan experience posts on the Rednote to represent and convey anxiety emotions? 2. How do these discourse strategies potentially reinforce readers' social comparison and self-awareness threats, thereby exacerbating their Baoyan anxiety?

4.2 Data Collection and Filtering

A corpus of 15 Baoyan experience-sharing posts was purposively sampled from The Rednote. Posts were retrieved manually using keywords such as "Baoyan" and "Baoyan anxiety" to ensure contextual immersion. The selection criteria required that posts: (1) centrally focus on personal Baoyan experiences and emotional journeys; (2) have an

interaction count (likes + comments) of 500 or more; and (3) were published within a complete Baoyan cycle (June 2024 to September 2025). Purely commercial, fact-listing, or emotionally neutral posts were excluded.

4.3 Research Steps

A qualitative textual analysis was conducted, integrating Fairclough’s framework with Social Comparison Theory. The process involved three stages. First, close reading and manual annotation identified linguistic features constructing anxiety. Second, these features were interpreted in relation to discursive and social practices to understand their dissemination and socio-structural roots. Finally, the analysis explained how these strategies distort social comparison mechanisms, thereby linking discursive representations to anxiety amplification.

5 Analysis and Discussion

The analysis reveals that Baoyan anxiety is not an individual emotion but a discourse systematically constructed through the interplay of textual strategies, platform mechanics, and social structures. This construction operates across three interconnected dimensions.

At the textual level, anxiety is vividly engineered through specific linguistic strategies. Oxymorons like “Fangdan” (daring) versus “Zulan” (blocking) create a sense of inevitable psychological tension. Metaphors shape the experience cognitively: as a precarious “journey” to “Shang’an” (landing), a “war” of conscription, or a “performance” of packaging, which dramatizes the stakes and internal conflict. Furthermore, identity labels such as “Bianyuanren” (marginal candidate) solidify competitive positions and their associated emotional burdens.

At the discursive practice level, the platform’s technical and interactive features form an anxiety-amplification circuit. The intertextuality with popular genres, such as poetic confession and listicles, provides normative templates for emotional expression. More critically, algorithmic recommendations aggregate and disseminate content through hashtags like #BaoyanAnxiety, creating a personalized “filter bubble” that constantly reinforces anxious narratives by associating them with broader tags like #involution.

Underpinning this discourse are profound social practice factors. It articulates a “meritocratic trap”, where structural pressures are internalized as personal failure through discursive patterns like “should” statements. It also reflects the alienation of education, metaphorically described as an “assembly line” or “arena”, reducing learning to a commodified process.

The most critical finding is how these discursive strategies systematically distort social comparison mechanisms, turning them from potential regulators into engines of anxiety. Upward comparisons are polarized against deified, unattainable “superhuman” peers. Downward comparisons are rendered ineffective by narratives of universal suffering, eliminating any sense of relative safety. Meanwhile, comparisons become

multidimensional (academics, research, internships) and relentlessly self-reflexive (against one's ideal, past, or possible selves), ensuring a perpetual state of inadequacy. This distorted comparative landscape profoundly shapes the emotional experience of contemporary students, highlighting a symbiosis between platform logic and psychosocial distress.

6 Conclusion

This study concludes that Baoyan anxiety on social media is not simply an aggregation of individual concerns, but a discursively manufactured phenomenon. It is systematically generated through specific language features, amplified by the platform, and rooted in the structural pressure of educational alienation and a strained meritocratic ideology. The key mechanism for its amplification lies in the inherent distortion of social comparative psychology.

The findings imply that multiple interventions are required to address this anxiety: educators should advocate for diversified evaluation systems and provide psychological support; platform developers must consider the ethical responsibility of their algorithms in promoting emotional well-being; and student users can benefit from recognizing the constructed nature of this anxiety to cultivate critical distance.

A limitation of this study is its relatively small sample size and qualitative focus. Future research could employ quantitative or empirical methods, such as interviews, to verify and deepen these findings. This investigation underscores the critical role of discourse analysis in deciphering the emotional codes of contemporary youth, revealing how language actively constructs our affective experiences.

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