



Commodified Self-Compassion and the “Ai Ni Laoji” (Love You, Good Old Self) Narrative in Critical Discourse Perspective

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Abstract. This paper examines the emotional functions and consumerist transformation of the online trending expression “Ai Ni Laoji” (Love you, good old self) through critical discourse analysis of 13 *Douyin* comments, and links the cases to broader patterns of youth digital affective practices. The study finds that the phrase lowers the psychological threshold for self-care via a strategy of “self-othering,” but is encoded during diffusion as a quantifiable consumption script. Performance logic and purchase logic become mutually embedded, constraining practical pathways for self-care. Concurrently, under pressures such as aesthetic exclusion and dialectical misreading, the density of this emotional expression steadily declines. The findings indicate that internet buzzwords cloaked in positive psychology can redirect young people’s attention from the public sphere toward private consumption in a subtle, nonconfrontational manner, thereby compressing space for collective care. The paper provides an analytical reference for observing contemporary youth emotional expression and its socio-cultural implications, and suggests avenues for further research.

Keywords: “Ai Ni Laoji” (Love you, good old self), Self-compassion, Consumerism, Critical Discourse Analysis.

1 Introduction

“Ai Ni Laoji” (Love you, good old self) has recently disseminated rapidly across Chinese social media, especially *Xiaohongshu*, *Weibo* and *Douyin*. Its core syntactic pattern, “Love you + good old self” (where “old self” refers to oneself), employs a playful yet intimate tone to objectify the self and dispense affective consolation or material recompense; it frequently appears in contexts such as examinations, consumption and mundane daily tasks [1]. At first glance, this locution functions as a vernacular enactment of positive psychology online, furnishing a colloquial tool for self-care among young people beset by performance anxiety and emotional scarcity. However, when “loving oneself” is systematically translated into quantifiable consumption lists, for example self-reward signifiers such as milk tea and collectible figurines, the ostensibly benign expression reveals an underlying consumerist grammar. Self-care ceases to be

an intrinsic mode of being and instead requires role enactment through otherization, that is treating oneself as a friend, to legitimize consumption.

Against this background, the article adopts a critical discourse analytic approach grounded in Fairclough’s three-dimensional framework [2] to examine the emotional functions, mechanisms of consumerist co-optation and socio-psychological consequences of the “Ai Ni Laoji” discourse at the levels of textual, discursive practice and social practice. The primary contribution is to redirect critical scrutiny toward internet narratives that foreground self-care as a positive façade, exposing their incorporation into consumerist logics and offering an operational case for interpreting the complex entanglement of positive representation and negative substance within contemporary youth discourse.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Current Status of Consumerism Research

Tian (2017) examines the spectacle characteristics of television variety shows to argue that consumer culture objectifies desire and manifests cultural consumerism driven by capital imperatives [3]. Reeves et al. (2012) demonstrates that under the combined influence of consumerism and the idol economy, adolescent celebrity worship intensifies and consumption behavior becomes marked by impulsivity and entertainment, thereby shaping and eroding youths’ emotional norms and behavioral expressions [4]. More recently, Xu & Lu (2026) and Wang (2026) shift attention to the intelligent media era [5-6]. The former research describes youth emotional consumption as increasingly symbolic, instantaneous, and social, driven by capital’s precise capture of affective demand and by algorithmic mediation on media platforms [5]. Meanwhile, the latter paper highlights that cultural consumerism, aided by intelligent algorithms and immersive communication technologies, now disseminates in fragmented, stratified, and covert forms, calling for remedies in both technological regulation and value reconstruction [6]. Collectively, the literature reveals a consistent logic, i.e., capital embeds consumption into everyday life through affective capture, algorithmic amplification, and spectacular presentation, while technological iteration produces subtler and more pervasive modes of circulation.

2.2 Internet Buzzwords Related to Positive Psychology: The Case of “Lying Flat”

Several recent studies examine the “lying flat” phenomenon among contemporary youth from complementary perspectives. Yang & Zhao (2024) uses theoretical analysis and empirical inquiry with college student samples to show that although “lying flat” is not normative it is nevertheless present; she attributes its emergence to subjective factors such as value deviation and weakened striving, as well as to objective forces including family, educational institutions, digital media, and broader social transformation, and she advocates coordinated interventions at the individual, family, university, and societal levels [7]. Xu et al. (2026) adopts a media sociology lens and contends

that algorithmic recommendation and platform logics reinforce “lying flat” culture; short videos and other virtual practices function as buffers from reality, rendering the behavior a strategic combination of resistance and accommodation to structural pressures [8]. Fan & Yang (2023) emphasizes that intensified social competition, digital cultural influence, and shifting values produce “lying flat,” producing outcomes such as value dislocation and attenuated motivational drive; they recommend policy responses that cultivate a spirit of endeavor, and guide healthier consumption [9]. At the macro level, Deng & Gao (2024) links internet vernacular to public mentality, arguing that online language has moved from pure entertainment toward engagement with social issues and that it thereby reflects changing affective demands and collective moods; they note growing diversity in research topics and increased focus on youth populations [10]. Together, these studies treat internet slang not merely as linguistic phenomena but as indicators of social emotion and as channels through which young people articulate responses to structural stress, warranting multidimensional attention including value guidance, media governance, and psychological support.

2.3 Current Status of Positive Psychology Research

Empirical studies grounded in positive psychology frameworks report beneficial effects of targeted interventions. Yang et al. (2024) investigates vocational college students and argues that cultivating positive traits and potentials can effectively enhance self-awareness, self-management, and personal development capacities [11]. Zhang (2024) examines university students and finds that interventions fostering positive emotions, engagement, quality interpersonal relationships, a sense of meaning, and achievement significantly improve psychological well-being [12]. The two studies indicate that positive psychology not only addresses problem remediation but also emphasizes the identification of strengths and the cultivation of potential; through systematic interventions targeting positive psychological qualities, it can effectively promote psychological health and personal growth across diverse populations, thereby providing theoretical and practical guidance for future efforts to shape consumer behavior and foster value formation.

3 Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed qualitative approach combining textual analysis and critical discourse analysis. Grounded in Fairclough’s three-dimensional framework [2], it examines user-generated comment texts on the “Ai Ni Laoji” topic at three analytic levels, including textual, discursive practice, and social practice. At the textual level, the analysis focuses on semantic transformation, pragmatic strategies, and rhetorical features. At the level of discursive, practice it investigates meaning negotiation enacted through reply chains among commentators. At the social practice level, it explores how the discourse reflects intergenerational cultural shifts, the internalization of consumerist logics, and transformations in social support systems. To enhance the validity of the qualitative interpretation, the study incorporates the number of “likes” as a quantitative

proxy for discursive diffusion and resonance. The agenda-setting effect of highly liked comments and variations in like counts across opposing stances are treated as empirical indicators of discursive circulation mechanisms.

Data were collected from the *Douyin* platform using the keywords “Ai Ni Laoji”, “Laoji,” and the source phrase “Love you, see you tomorrow, mom.” These keywords follow a coverage logic of core term, colloquial abbreviation, and source phrase, thereby aiming to more comprehensively capture the discussion field. The final sample comprises 13 comments selected via purposive sampling according to three criteria. First, to ensure spectral coverage of communicative validity, the sample includes extreme-value screening on likes to capture both high- and low-engagement comments, so as to represent mainstream resonant discourse and marginal resistant discourse and to avoid exclusive focus on algorithmically amplified content. Second, to achieve positional diversity, the sample was chosen to include comment types such as identification, ritualized usage, consumption commitment, anxiety expression, radical permissiveness, extreme rejection, regional critique, and semantic defense, thereby presenting the value tensions within the discourse. Third, the sample preserves complete reply chains when present; comments that form short conversational sequences were retained intact to allow analysis of back-and-forth meaning negotiation. Table 1 reports the content, like counts, and discourse-type classification for the 13 sampled comments.

Table 1. Summary of sample comments and discourse type distribution.

No.	Comment (translated)	Likes	Discourse type / Position	Interaction relation
C1	Chinese kids have finally learned to treat themselves well through joking dialogues.	27,000	Identification	Independent, high likes
C2	Ai Ni Laoji, happy birthday.	298	Ritualized use	Independent
C3	Don't be afraid, Laoji. Even if you get zero on the exam, I will still buy you your favorite things.	--	Anxiety consolation (consoling end)	Interact with C6 and C7
C4	Laoji, you've been running a fever all night. It's fine if you don't go (to the exam), your health matters most.	--	Radical indulgence	Independent
C5	Laoji, take the CET-4 seriously this Saturday, stay till you hand in the paper. Once you leave the exam room, I'll treat you to the chocolate you want and a large cup of fully-sugared hot milk tea. I'll buy you a prize figure, and I've already got that comic book you've been wanting lately.	--	Consumption promise	Independent, thematically linked with C3 and C6

No.	Comment (translated)	Likes	Discourse type / Position	Interaction relation
C6	But... that figure and comic are a bit expensive.	--	Anxiety consolation (anxious end)	Reply to C5
C7	It's fine, Laoji. Even if you get zero on the exam, I still love you the most.	--	Anxiety consolation (consoling end)	Reply to C6
C8	It's strange. I've always been stingy with myself, but when I treat myself as my own friend, I suddenly become much more willing to spend.	36,000	Identification	Independent, highest likes
C9	I've realized I can't rely on anyone, only Laoji is reliable.	1,980	Defensive narcissism	Independent
C10	So disgusting, so disgusting, physiological aversion.	--	Extreme rejection	Independent
C11	We in northern Anhui don't use this narrative. The word "Laoji" doesn't sound good where we're from.	2	Regional criticism / dialect taboo	Independent, low likes
C12	This "Laoji" is not "Laoji" [a derogatory term]. It's more like old friend, deriving from treating yourself as well as you would an old friend. It's not the disrespectful "Laoji" meaning who do you think you are. So, it depends on context.	2	Semantic defense / etymological distinction	Reply to C11
C13	I said I wanted to eat grapefruit but didn't want to peel it. After hearing myself say that, I immediately peeled it and gave it to myself. Ai Ni Laoji. See you tomorrow (with photo of neatly peeled grapefruit).	--	Functional dilution / performative consumption	Independent

Note: "--" refers to zero likes, or likes that were not publicly displayed.

This study constructs a three-tiered progressive analytic framework. At the micro level, the analysis conducts pragmatic and rhetorical examination of texts, considering sentence structure, rhetorical strategies, emoticons, ellipses, parentheses and other pragmatic markers. At the meso level, the analysis addresses discursive strategies and interactional dynamics. Individual comment strategies are identified and related comments are aggregated according to interaction relations to examine meaning negotiation and position differentiation. At the macro level, the analysis interprets social practice

implications by situating the discourse within socio cultural contexts, exploring inter-generational value shifts, the collusive structure of meritocratic pressure and consumerism, and relational fatigue and emotional contraction among young people.

4 Data Analysis

4.1 The Positive Psychological Significance of “Ai Ni Laoji”

Comment 1 suggests that this discourse rescues self-care from the customary moral reproach of selfishness by means of a joking conversational frame. Framing “Chinese children” as a collective subject, the comment presents “Ai Ni Laoji” as a vernacular supplement to emotional education. Comment 8, which accrued 36,000 likes, exemplifies the discourse’s most resonant articulation; its operative mechanism is the strategy of treating the self as a friend, which circumvents internal prohibitions against self-kindness through a form of personality splitting. This othering strategy lowers the psychological threshold for self-care and can be read as a networked, colloquial instantiation of self-compassion theory within positive psychology.

Comments 3, 6, and 7 constitute a prototypical anxiety-soothing interactional chain. Confronted with the prospect of exam failure expressed as “zero score,” participants construct a virtual safety space through worst-case rehearsal and unconditional promise. The checklist-style pledge in Comment 5, promising immediate post-exam rewards, links the impending stressful event to proximate gratification and thereby performs an emotional regulatory function via behavioral activation and expectation management.

4.2 Fatigue, Indifference, Misreading, and Resistance: Multilayered Negative Responses

Despite its therapeutic potential, the discourse has encountered resistance from diverse positions with differing intensity and rationale. Comment 10 manifests extreme rejection and a form of cultural immunity. Comment 11 notes that in the northern Anhui dialectal context, the term “Laoji” is homophonous with a pejorative expression that implies hierarchical humiliation. That comment received only two likes, indicating the structural marginalization of dialect-speaking groups within Mandarin-dominated online norms. Its euphemistic wording combined with a laughing-crying emoticon evidences self-censorship and the suppression of regional linguistic sensitivity by dominant discourse practices. Comment 12 attempts to defend the term’s legitimacy by distinguishing etymologies and proposing an analogous reading (old friend rather than the pejorative term) but likewise received 2 likes. The limited uptake of this nuanced pragmatic defense suggests that discursive legitimacy in rapid, affect-driven online interaction is less often secured by logical argumentation than by affective resonance and frequency of use.

Comment 13 exemplifies a different negative stance, namely indifference rather than overt opposition. When mundane practices such as peeling pomelo are subsumed under the rubric of “Ai Ni Laoji,” the expression’s original reparative context is stripped away and the phrase becomes a performative device whose emotional weight is progressively

eroded. This functional dilution produces fatigue among early adopters and observers, who, while not openly hostile, no longer invest affective energy in the expression.

4.3 Systematic Evidence of Consumerist Tendencies

The comment sample indicates that the “Ai Ni Laoji” discourse has undergone a process of consumerist grammaticalization. Comment 5 exemplifies the substitution of commodity lists for affective language such as chocolate, full-sugar hot milk tea, comics and similar items are quantified as purchasable compensations. The descriptor “full-sugar hot” emphasizes sensory saturation rather than health, and the colloquial term for queuing to obtain goods romanticizes the labor of consumption as proof of care.

Comment 3’s pledge to buy favorite items even if one scores zero attempts to counter evaluative pressure with consumer promises, yet the apparent unconditionality of this promise presupposes purchasing power. Comment 6’s retort, “But... that figure and the comic are a bit expensive,” exposes the rupture between virtual consolation and real economic anxiety; the ellipsis marks the unresolved material constraint. Implicitly, achieving acceptable grades or possessing sufficient purchasing power remains a precondition for enacting the promised self-care.

Comment 8’s central insight is that treating the self as a friend enables willingness to expend on oneself. This suggests that the subject-self relation is colonized by commodity exchange logic, which is generosity toward a friend versus stinginess toward oneself. Such alienation converts self-care into a consumption practice that requires role enactment rather than arising as an intrinsic mode of being.

Comment 13, paired with an image of neatly sectioned pomelo, transforms mundane labor into content amenable to likes. The ritualized valediction “see you tomorrow” implies a continuous content production tempo. As “Ai Ni Laoji” shifts from private psychological consolation to public self-image management, its consumerist dimension extends beyond material purchases to encompass attention economy accrual and the accumulation of symbolic capital.

4.4 Value Confusion and Internal Tensions: Radical Permissiveness and Ironic Ambiguity

Comment 4 presents an extreme formulation: “Laoji, you’ve been running a fever all night. It’s fine if you don’t go (to the exam), your health matters most.” It foregrounds the prioritization of bodily wellbeing over externally imposed obligations, thereby articulating a care-oriented counterargument to performance imperatives. The comment also embodies normative ambiguity. Its surface permissiveness can be read as genuine endorsement of health-first choices, yet in the rapid, context-poor environment of online exchange the remark may also be interpreted as blasé abdication of responsibility or as ironic hyperbole. Some readers may experience relief at an authorization to rest, while others may perceive an evasion of duty. Consequently, the utterance both challenges meritocratic demands and contributes to value confusion by collapsing the boundary between legitimate self-preservation and potential neglect of civic or perfor-

mance responsibilities. Comment 9, which received substantial endorsement, uses exclusivist language such as “only” to signal a defensive narcissistic stance and relational contraction.

4.5 Discourse Lifecycle and Social Resonance

Synthesizing the 13 comments allows reconstruction of an evolutionary trajectory and the current dilemma of the “Ai Ni Laoji” discourse. Stage one functions as an ad hoc buffer addressing exam anxiety, emotional deprivation and self-disgust, thereby producing authentic psychological relief. Stage two entails viral diffusion, in which the “friendification” strategy lowers the barrier to self-care and generates strong affective resonance among youth. Stage three involves functional alienation. Self-care is translated into quantifiable consumption, quotidian practices are subsumed into the discourse, and value ambiguity emerges. Stage four is characterized by resistance and backlash, manifesting as physiological aversion, regional linguistic contestation and contested semantics.

In the present stage five, the expression operates as a form of social currency and its affective potency is steadily depreciating. High-resonance articulations of psychological mechanism coexist with highly contentious performances of consumption and anti-intellectual sentiment, yet meaningful dialogue between these positions is limited. The cohort most in need of the discourse, those who are economically constrained or deeply self-disparaging, appears in Comment 6 and illustrates the discourse’s inability to deliver structural support.

5 Conclusion & Discussion

Based on a critical discourse analysis of 13 *Douyin* comments, this paper identifies a threefold tension within the discourse of “Ai Ni Laoji”. First, the discourse supplies young people with an emotional grammar for self-care via a strategy of self-othering, and this mechanism provides genuine psychological compensation. Second, in the process of diffusion, the expression is systematically translated into quantifiable consumption practices, thereby reinforcing meritocratic pressures and jointly constraining the enactment of self-care. Third, the discourse has elicited resistance and backlash across multiple dimensions, including physiological revulsion, dialectal taboos, and functional dilution, and it currently appears to be undergoing functional depreciation as a form of social monetization.

Situating “Ai Ni Laoji” within the broader online ideological ecology transcends a narrow reading as a youth subcultural phenomenon. On April 28, 2026, the Ministry of National Security published a commentary titled “Those who incite ‘lying flat’ are so busy that their feet are not touching the ground,” reporting that an overseas organization had supported “lying flat” influencers, mass-produced negative narratives such as “lying flat is justice” and “anti-over-competition equals anti-exploitation,” and engaged in systematic cognitive infiltration intended to undermine youth motivation and social values [13]. This official intervention signals that certain online catchphrases have been

elevated from expressions of social sentiment to matters of national security. Within this macro context, although “Ai Ni Laoji” does not manifest the explicit oppositional stance of “lying flat,” its internal structure exhibits deep isomorphism with that discourse. Both leverage affective resonance for viral transmission, convert structural pressures into individualized consolation, and to varying degrees erode the value coordinates of collective struggle and public care. Crucially, because “Ai Ni Laoji” is presented under the positive guise of self-care, its consumerist grammar and entanglement with performative practices produce a subtler form of value dilution. Rather than rejecting struggle through a radical posture, the discourse privatizes and commodifies the meaning of struggle with a conciliatory logic of self-indulgence. When “being good to oneself” is equated with purchasing particular commodities, the space for public care and collective action is constricted. This conciliatory logic may lack the overt radicalism of “lying flat” yet produce a comparable disengagement effect, as youth shift from pursuing collective development toward seeking individual consumption satisfaction, thereby reallocating developmental dividends and the nation’s future in a depoliticized manner. Consequently, critical scrutiny of “Ai Ni Laoji” constitutes not only a semantic analysis of a single narrative but also a cautionary examination of the complex entanglement between positive appearance and negative substance in contemporary youth discourse. It also responds to the Ministry of National Security’s concern about cognitive influence operations manifesting in affective, seemingly benign discourse.

The study also has certain limitations as a single-case analysis. Constrained by the article’s length, it focuses exclusively on “Ai Ni Laoji” and does not undertake cross-textual comparison with other discourses such as “lying flat,” “slacking off,” or “over-competition.” It also does not systematically investigate platform algorithmic recommendation mechanisms and their effects on comment visibility and dissemination. Nonetheless, given the expression’s peak circulation from late 2025 to early 2026, its concurrent evidentiary functions of emotional compensation and consumerist colonization, and its temporal coincidence with the official warning regarding “lying flat,” the case of “Ai Ni Laoji” is timely and exemplary for observing mutations of ostensibly positive online discourse. Future research should adopt larger-scale mixed methods, incorporate more discourse samples and platform-level data, and further test the tripartite interaction among positive discourse, consumerism, and ideological security identified in this study, thereby contributing more robust empirical guidance for youth value formation and digital ecosystem governance.

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