

A Critical Discourse Analysis Perspective on the Discourse of Overconsumption in Social Media

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Abstract: This study adopts Fairclough's three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis to examine two performative discourse samples from Xiaohongshu and Douyin, systematically analyzing the textual features, dissemination mechanisms, and socio-ideological interactions of overconsumption discourse on social media. The findings reveal that such discourse constructs value linkages between consumption and identity through lexical, grammatical, and rhetorical choices, and achieves meaning dissemination via performative production by mid-tier KOLs, platform algorithm distribution, and diversified audience interpretations. At the social practice level, consumerism intertwines with identity anxiety in gender-differentiated ways. Capital power dominates multiple forms of contestation, while gender culture profoundly shapes discursive logic. The study extends the application of critical discourse analysis to the field of consumer discourse, uncovering the construction mechanisms and ideological penetration pathways of overconsumption discourse.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis; Overconsumption Discourse; Consumerist Ideology; Identity Anxiety

1. Introduction

With the widespread adoption of social media, it has gradually replaced traditional media to become the primary arena for the dissemination of consumer attitudes and the guidance of consumer behaviour, profoundly reshaping the public's consumption perceptions and decision-making logic. Against this backdrop, the discourse on beyond-one's-means consumption exhibits a distinct media shift. Popular expressions such as 'refined poverty' and 'buy early, enjoy early' have spread widely across platforms such as Douyin and

Xiaohongshu. Through diverse textual carriers—including captions, comments and dialogue—they continually rationalise consumption behaviour that exceeds income levels, driving the penetration and proliferation of beyond-one's-means consumption concepts across different demographic groups. As a research tool that focuses on the implicit connections between discourse, power and ideology, critical discourse analysis, drawing upon Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, is capable of precisely dissecting the construction logic and ideological penetration pathways of the discourse on beyond-means consumption. It provides crucial support for unravelling the intrinsic links between media discourse and consumer behaviour, offering both significant theoretical value and practical guidance.

Against this backdrop, this study explores four core questions to achieve a systematic analysis of the discourse on pre-emptive consumption on social media. Firstly, it identifies the core textual characteristics of this discourse in terms of lexical choice, sentence structure and rhetoric, clarifying the linguistic logic underpinning its meaning-making; secondly, to analyse the practical mechanisms of such discourse in the stages of production, dissemination and interaction, and to investigate how it achieves widespread diffusion and consensus-building; thirdly, to explore the pathways through which the discourse of pre-emptive consumption permeates consumerist ideology, revealing its interactive relationship with social structures such as identity anxiety and class consciousness; and fourthly, to compare the differences in the discourse of pre-emptive consumption across different social media platforms and among different publishers, summarising the diverse characteristics and underlying patterns of discursive expression.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) emerged in the 1980s and is rooted in critical linguistics, which seeks to reveal, from the perspectives of linguistics, sociology, psychology and communication studies, the influence of ideology on discourse, the reciprocal effect of discourse on ideology, and the interrelationship between the two [1], social theory such as Michel Foucault's famous theory that 'discourse is power', which posits that discourse is not merely a tool for expressing ideas, but a force capable of influencing and shaping social reality [2], and the Frankfurt School's critical theory, which reveals the alienating control of instrumental rationality in capitalist society over human nature, forming an interdisciplinary research paradigm. Its core theory was jointly constructed by scholars such as Fairclough, Wodak and van Dijk, adopting a critical stance that argues discourse is not a value-neutral tool of communication, but rather a vehicle for the reproduction of social power and ideological struggle [3]. CDA focuses on the dialectical relationship between language, power and society, aiming to reveal how discourse maintains the dominant order by legitimising social inequality [4]. Research Methods combines linguistic text analysis with sociological contextual examination, emphasising the dissection of public texts such as government documents and news reports, thereby demonstrating how discourse is used to construct, maintain or challenge the social status quo, and ultimately serves social critique.

2.2 The Three-Dimensional Model of Norman Fairclough

The three-dimensional model proposed by Norman Fairclough in *Language and Power* and *Discourse and Social Change* is the most operational methodological framework within CDA [5]. This three-dimensional analytical model bridges the gap between micro-level textual analysis and macro-level social critique, establishing three interrelated analytical dimensions: the textual dimension focuses on the specific features of language itself—such as lexical choice, grammatical structure and rhetorical devices—analysing how these construct meaning and represent the world [6]; the discourse practice dimension examines the processes of text production, distribution and

consumption—that is, how discourse is created, disseminated and understood by readers within specific social contexts [7]; whilst the social practice dimension situates discourse within a broader socio-cultural context, investigating its interactions with power relations, ideological struggles and social institutions [8]. Fairclough emphasises that any discursive event is the result of the interaction between these three dimensions; this model provides a highly operational analytical tool for the in-depth analysis of the social construction of discourse and power relations [9].

3. Textual Analysis of Discourse on Pre-emptive Consumption on Social Media

This paper employs Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) three-dimensional model as its core tool, selecting two examples of social media discourse illustrating pre-emptive consumption (a case of a female university student using instalment payments on Xiaohongshu, and a case of a middle-aged man purchasing a car on instalments on Douyin), to conduct annotation and analysis across three interrelated dimensions—textual practice, discursive practice and social practice—with the aim of revealing the construction logic and dissemination mechanisms of pre-consumption discourse, as well as its deep-seated connections with social ideology and power relations. Corpus 1 consists of a reenactment video posted by a Xiaohongshu blogger (female, 146,000 followers), featuring a female university student named "Jingjing". Through a dialogue with her roommate, the video reenacts her behaviour of using loans to service existing debts and her pursuit of high-end consumption; it received 130,000 likes and 2,117 comments. Corpus 2 consists of a dramatised video posted by a Douyin blogger (male, 193,000 followers). The protagonist is an unemployed middle-aged man, who, through conversations with his father and friends, portrays his behaviour of buying a second-hand Audi A6 on instalments and his pursuit of social status. The video received 114,000 likes and 11,000 comments.

3.1 Vocabulary Selection

Corpus 1 (female) centres on emotions and identity, using carefully selected vocabulary to construct a sense of recognition for a lifestyle of refined consumption. For example: "Investing in oneself" imbues irrational instalment-based

consumption with positivity and legitimacy, thereby offsetting the guilt associated with living beyond one's means; phrases such as "the flower of earthly luxury" and "high-end circles" directly establish a link between consumption and social status, continually reinforcing the ideology that "consumption equals identity". In the protagonist Jingjing's soliloquy, she also cites the proverb "one respects the clothes before one respects " to justify her own excessive spending, equating material consumption with social capital; "Youth lasts only a few years" uses young women's anxiety about youth and ageing as a starting point to incite the impulse for excessive spending; simultaneously, "paying off loans with loans" and "tailor-made" accurately characterise a consumption pattern where the pursuit of a high-end lifestyle leads to a cycle of debt.

The second male examples centre on saving face and downplaying risk, using vocabulary to construct a false sense of identity and perceived boldness. "Boosting one's prestige" and "looking down on others" directly highlight that the core motivation for consumption is to flaunt one's status and demonstrate one's social standing, transforming car ownership from a practical necessity into a status symbol; "Three melons and a couple of dates" and "Daring to dream and daring to act" deliberately downplay the pressure of car loans and the risk of debt faced by this man, an unemployed middle-aged man, framing irrational consumption as a "bold" masculine trait and thereby rationalising the behaviour. Both approaches, through the selective use of vocabulary, continuously reinforce the link between consumption and identity, whilst tacitly obscuring the potential risks of living beyond one's means.

3.2 Syntactic Structure

As short videos of the situational drama genre, both examples primarily employ colloquial grammatical structures to enhance immersion and use sentence patterns to strengthen the persuasiveness of the discourse. However, the choice of sentence structures and the logic of interaction reflect the differing expressive habits of the two genders in similar scenarios, resulting in distinct narrative effects [10]. The female sample primarily combines dialogue with monologue, fitting the everyday setting of a university dormitory. Colloquial dialogue structures ("That foundation must cost over 800

yuan, right?" "Pay in 12 monthly instalments, just 2.19 yuan per month") are grounded in real-life experiences, reflecting the common mindset of those engaging in pre-emptive consumption by deliberately downplaying the actual cost; soliloquy-style phrases ("Youth lasts only a few years—if not now, when else should we splurge? ") more directly reveal underlying consumption psychology, externalising female university students' anxieties and fixations regarding youth and age into discourse, thereby reinforcing the perceived rationality of pre-emptive spending.

Male discourse centres on ambiguous expressions and conversational manoeuvring, tailored to social contexts with family and friends. Ambiguous phrasing ("It's only about three thousand quid, isn't it?") deliberately downplay the actual financial disparity of the car loan, constantly sidestepping economic pressures; commitment-based phrasing ("Don't worry, Dad," "If we can afford to buy it, we can afford to pay it back") serve as responses to others' doubts; in essence, also serve as self-reassurance and expressions of false confidence, further reinforcing the perceived rationality of the behaviour. Throughout the dialogue, the father's concerns contrast with the older brother's evasiveness, whilst the friend's envy and hesitation create a discursive tension, highlighting their disregard for the risks of borrowing; both types of discourse employ context-specific phrasing to lower the audience's psychological defences, thereby implicitly conveying the concept of pre-emptive consumption.

3.3 Rhetorical Devices

The female discourse centres on contrastive rhetoric, deliberately creating consumption hierarchies and cognitive biases. "Only hicks shop online; mine is bespoke, at least 28,000 yuan" uses the contrast between "online shopping" and "bespoke" to establish a consumption hierarchy between Jingjing and her flatmate, highlighting the "high-end" nature of her own spending whilst disparaging others' choices; The contrast between "New user even get three interest-free instalments" and "That's nearly 20% annualised—that's usury!" reveals how the protagonist, Jingjing, deliberately exaggerates the superficial benefits of online loans whilst obscuring the hidden risks, demonstrating the misleading nature of her

discourse and luring her flatmate into a consumer trap.

The male discourse centres on the construction of exaggerated claims and fabrications to satisfy vanity and the need to flaunt status. “Even if I parked this car right next to a Range Rover, I wouldn’t feel out of place”—by making exaggerated comparisons with high-end models, he elevates the perceived status of his own vehicle and reinforces his sense of identity; Statements such as “Just tell them that I bought it outright for 400,000 yuan” and “I didn’t pay a penny; my child bought it himself” deliberately fabricate lies to construct a false image of a successful individual, using the act of purchasing a car as a tool for status display whilst concealing the reality of instalment debt and down-payment loans.

4. Analysis of Discursive Practices in Social Media Discourse on Pre-Emptive Consumption

4.1 Text Production

Both pieces of content were produced with a mid-tier blogger as the central figure, employing a deductive production model. By carefully tailoring the characters and settings to the target audience, they achieved the dual objectives of driving traffic and delivering value, whilst simultaneously demonstrating distinct differences in gender and audience positioning. The first piece was produced by a mid-tier female KOL with 146,000 followers and a total of 3.535 million likes. As her fanbase consists primarily of young women, the protagonist was set as a ‘female university student’, with the narrative centred on consumer goods of interest to women, such as foundation and bespoke clothing. This narrative is not a record of real events, but rather uses fictional dialogue between flatmates to distil typical instances of excessive consumption. It heightens the dramatic conflict between young women’s pursuit of a refined lifestyle and the risks of debt, conveying the implicit message to “beware of excessive consumption” through irony. This approach satisfies the audience’s appetite for relatable, everyday storylines whilst aligning with the platform’s preference for positive content, thereby striking a balance between traffic generation and value delivery.

The second piece of content was produced by a mid-tier male KOL with 193,000 followers,

garnering a total of 2.1 million likes. The target audience is middle-aged men. Consequently, the protagonist is an ‘unemployed middle-aged man’, and the narrative centres on the high-value purchase of an Audi A6 on instalments, and constructs scenarios of interaction between fathers and sons, as well as among friends. Through everyday dialogue, the plot recreates the real-life behaviour of “saving face and buying a car on credit”, exposing the absurdity of living beyond one’s means whilst precisely addressing the identity anxieties and social needs of certain middle-aged men. By evoking a strong sense of real-life resonance, it satisfies the audience’s desire to discuss social issues and achieves traffic conversion.

4.2 Content Distribution

Xiaohongshu is a social media platform centred on interest-based tagging for targeted reach. With young women as its core user base, the algorithm uses interest tags such as ‘student spending’, ‘instalment purchases’ and ‘beauty and fashion’ to precisely push the video to the target audience. The video garnered 130,000 likes and 2,117 comments; the high number of likes indicates that the content attracted widespread attention from a female audience. The platform, through its positive feedback mechanism of likes and comments, incorporated high-quality content into a larger traffic pool, enabling the controversial topic of excessive consumption to form a public discussion space within female audience circles, with a concentrated and precise reach.

The Douyin platform primarily utilises topic-based recommendations to enhance interaction and dissemination. Douyin’s algorithm combines tags such as “car topics” and “real-life scenarios” for recommendations, whilst the title “An in-depth portrayal of a person engaging in a certain form of pre-emptive consumption” clearly establishes the narrative’s interpretative nature and critical stance, guiding the audience to focus on the core of the topic. The video garnered 114,000 likes and 11,000 comments, with the volume of comments far exceeding that of Xiaohongshu’s data, reflecting that topics related to men’s car purchases and pre-emptive consumption are more likely to stimulate audience engagement. Douyin’s traffic distribution mechanism favours realistic narratives and highly interactive content, further propelling the topic beyond its original niche to

generate broader social discussion, demonstrating the decisive influence of platform attributes on discourse distribution.

4.3 Textual Consumption

At the level of textual consumption, both examples exhibit characteristics of diverse interpretations. Audiences engage through watching the plot and participating in comments; the confrontational discourse within the text provides audiences with multiple perspectives, transforming the consumption process into a space for ideological collision. Consumption and interpretation of the Xiaohongshu corpus focus on rational reflection and risk warnings. Audience consumption encompasses both viewing the dormitory storyline and participating in interactions through comments, giving rise to diverse interpretative directions such as ‘criticising Jingjing’s irrational consumption’, ‘sharing personal experiences of instalment shopping’, and ‘warning of the risks of high-interest loans’. The rational rebuttal by the roommate functioning as “contradictory discourse” within the text, directly exposes the hidden risks of instalment-based consumption. It offers the audience a rational perspective distinct from the protagonist’s “lifestyle-oriented” approach, guiding them to reflect on the dangers of living beyond one’s means and transforming the discourse consumption process into an ideological contest between “aspirations for a refined lifestyle” and “rational consumption awareness”.

The consumption interpretations in the Douyin corpus revolve around the culture of saving face and practical considerations. After watching the plot, the audience forms divergent interpretations: some criticise the man for being image-conscious, unrealistic and evading responsibility; others empathise with the anxieties and class aspirations of middle-aged men and aspirations for social status; whilst others remain wary of the financial risks to the family posed by buying a car on hire purchase. Ultimately, a three-way value conflict: the father’s concerns represent traditional, conservative consumption values; the friend’s envy reflects the profound influence of face culture; and the friend’s hesitation simultaneously embodies rational consumption awareness. These three elements provide the audience with a multi-faceted interpretative framework, transforming the discourse on

consumption into a collision between traditional notions, face culture and modern rational consumption values.

5. Social Practice Analysis of Discourses on Pre-emptive Consumption on Social Media

As the core dimension of Fairclough’s three-dimensional model, social practice situates discourse within a broad socio-cultural context, focusing on its deep-seated interactions with ideology, power relations and social structure [11]. This section combines two corpora to conduct an integrated analysis across three dimensions—ideological permeation, power relations, and socio-cultural background—revealing the social logic and gendered characteristics underlying the discourse on pre-emptive consumption, and highlighting the discourse’s representational and constructive functions regarding social reality [12].

5.1 Ideological Infiltration

Both examples demonstrate a deep intertwining of consumerist ideology and identity anxiety, presenting material consumption as the primary pathway to identity formation and social mobility, thereby eroding traditional notions of rational consumption; however, the nature of the anxiety and the manner in which the ideology permeates society reveal distinct gender differences. The female-oriented text focuses on the overlapping influence of ‘youth anxiety and the pursuit of refinement’. Phrases such as ‘being packaged as a flower of luxury’ and ‘breaking into high-end circles’ accurately capture the identity anxieties of contemporary young women. The ideology of consumerism capitalises on this by transforming external material consumption—such as cosmetics and bespoke clothing—into a shortcut for entering high-end social circles and gaining social recognition. “Youth lasts only a few years” resonates with young women’s perception of time and age-related anxieties, deeply linking hedonism with consumption behaviour. This reinforces the ideology that consumption equates to value, making irrational, premature spending a rationalised choice for seizing the fleeting nature of youth.

The male discourse focuses on the fusion and permeation of face culture and class anxiety. Phrases such as “Buy a car first to boost your prestige” “Who are these people to look down

on you?” and “Enter high society” reflect the profound influence of traditional Chinese face culture on male consumption behaviour, with vehicles being transformed into core symbols of prestige and social status; His insistence on purchasing an Audi on hire purchase despite being unemployed reflects the class anxiety prevalent among middle-aged men—using large-scale material consumption to compensate for the frustration of professional failure. Consumerist ideology and the culture of face intertwine, shaping irrational consumption into the sole pathway for achieving class identity and proving one’s worth, thereby further cementing the perception that ‘material possessions determine identity’.

5.2 Power Dynamics

The discourse on excessive consumption in both examples contains multiple power dynamics, centring on capital power, individual perception and family responsibilities. Whilst the focal points and manifestations of these dynamics vary across different scenarios, they ultimately reveal common feature of power imbalance. The female text focuses on the binary struggle between capital discourse and individual cognition. The statement “Use this app to borrow money; new users can even get three interest-free instalments as a new user” exemplifies the pervasive influence of capital discourse from consumer finance platforms. Through promotional rhetoric such as “interest-free” and “low monthly repayments”, these platforms deliberately obscure the true risk of “an annualised rate nearing 20%”, luring young women into the trap of pre-emptive consumption. This demonstrates how capital power manipulates and misleads individual perceptions of consumption. Meanwhile, her flatmate’s exposure of the risks of high-interest loans represents a rational challenge to the discourse of capital, reflecting the struggle between capital power and individual autonomy. Ultimately, however, due to the protagonist Jingjing’s cognitive bias, the situation favours capital.

The male narrative primarily depicts a three-way struggle between capital power, individual vanity and family responsibility. The instalment services provided by consumer finance platforms make his excessive consumption a realistic possibility; in essence, this is capital power’s precise exploitation of the individual’s desire for

vanity, pushing the family into economic risk. His vanity clashes sharply with his father’s sense of family responsibility; the father’s “The 80,000 down payment was borrowed” and ““We’ll pay off the five-year car loan gradually,” demonstrate a clear awareness of and commitment to the family’s financial pressures, whilst His constant evasiveness exposes his disregard for family responsibilities. Ultimately, the combined forces of capital power and individual vanity suppress the rational demands of family responsibility, resulting in a situation of power imbalance. Both types of discourse confirm the dominant position of capital power within the discourse of pre-emptive consumption, where individual perceptions and family responsibilities often struggle to mount an effective counterbalance.

5.3 Socio-cultural Context

The discourses on pre-emptive consumption in both examples are deeply rooted in specific gendered cultural contexts. Gender role expectations determine differences in product categories, consumption motives and consumption logic, forming distinct systems of consumption discourse tailored to different genders, reflecting the combined influence of gender culture and consumerism. The female-oriented text exemplifies a culture that links external appearance with social capital. It reflects female university students’ pursuit of an 800-yuan foundation and 28,000-yuan bespoke clothing, aligning with society’s gender expectation that women should prioritise their external appearance. This deeply binds external consumption with social capital and class identity. Within the context of traditional gender culture, a woman’s social standing is often linked to the refinement of her outward appearance. Consumerism deliberately amplifies this perception, trapping women in the misconception that social advantage is built through external consumption, ultimately fostering a discourse that equates refined consumption with a woman’s worth.

The male corpus highlights a culture where material symbols are bound to a man’s identity value. The corpus links the Audi A6 to “a man’s jing‘masculine vigour’, ‘high society’ and ‘face’, aligning with societal gender expectations regarding men’s career success and material superiority. Major material symbols such as cars and property thus become the core vehicles

through which men demonstrate their self-worth. In traditional gender culture, men are burdened with the responsibility of providing for their families and achieving social mobility. When a man's career fails to meet these expectations, he turns to material consumption in search of compensation, leading some middle-aged men to fall into the trap of self-imposed materialism. Both phenomena reflect how gender culture provides fertile ground for consumerism, jointly shaping the logic of discourse and the pattern of excessive consumption among different genders.

6. Conclusion

Based on Fairclough's three-dimensional model, this paper examines two sets of social media discourse on pre-emptive consumption—one from each gender and platform—conducting a systematic analysis across the dimensions of textual practice, discursive practice and social practice. It reveals the construction logic, dissemination patterns and social context of social media discourse on pre-emptive consumption. The study found that such discourse exhibits common underlying characteristics and core features of gender differentiation, forming a complete closed loop of meaning production and ideological permeation across the three dimensions, thereby providing an important perspective for understanding the operational mechanisms of consumer discourse on social media.

At the level of textual practice, both corpora rationalise pre-emptive consumption and obscure its risks through the binding of lexical values, the adaptation of syntactic contexts, and rhetorical cognitive misdirection. The only difference lies in gender: female discourse focuses on refined image and social capital, whilst male discourse emphasises face, identity and the perception of boldness, highlighting the profound shaping of linguistic expression by gender culture; At the level of discursive practice, the interpretative production by central KOLs, precise algorithmic recommendations by platforms, and diverse audience interpretations constitute the core dissemination chain. Xiaohongshu focuses on young female circles, whilst Douyin leans towards broad topic-based interaction; platform attributes directly determine differences in dissemination outcomes; at the level of social practice, consumerist ideology intertwines with identity anxiety and permeates through gender

differentiation, with capital power dominating amidst multiple power struggles; The superimposition of gender role expectations and consumerism has shaped distinct consumption misconceptions across genders. This study not only enriches the application of critical discourse analysis within social media consumption discourse and deepens our understanding of the interactive mechanisms between gender culture and consumerism, but also provides practical guidance for the public in identifying discursive traps and for platforms in regulating content dissemination.

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