

A Move Analysis of Chinese High School Enrollment Promotional Discourse

Yunqiao Chen^{*#}, Shanshan Du[#], Limin Lin

School of Foreign Studies, Lingnan Normal University, Zhanjiang, Guangdong, China

^{}Corresponding author*

[#]Co-first author

Abstract: With the acceleration of educational marketization, private high schools in China increasingly rely on enrollment promotional discourse to construct institutional identities and attract prospective students. This study examines the generic structure and discursive strategies of private high school enrollment promotional discourse through move analysis. A corpus of enrollment promotional texts from 30 private high schools in three major cities was compiled and analyzed. The findings reveal that eight moves constitute the generic structure of this promotional genre, with four obligatory moves and four optional moves identified. Although elite and ordinary schools share a similar repertoire of rhetorical moves, they differ significantly in how these moves are strategically deployed. Elite schools tend to construct institutional legitimacy through symbolic resources, including institutional reputation, faculty qualifications, and academic achievements, whereas ordinary schools emphasize material resources, student experiences, and interpersonal strategies to enhance attractiveness and establish relational proximity. These differences reflect divergent institutional positioning strategies under educational market competition.

Keywords: Private High Schools; Enrollment Promotional Discourse; Move Analysis; Genre Analysis; Discursive Strategy

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, the transition toward a market economy has transformed various aspects of society in China. Market discourse has been penetrating the social life, including the field of education [1]. It is in this context that schools have struggled to cope with more and more competitive educational environments [2]. Market-oriented strategies have been adopted in private high schools as they have engaged in self-promotional

practices to attract potential parents and students and institutional branding [3]. Enrollment promotional discourse has therefore become an important means through which private high schools present their advantages and influence parents' school choice decisions. Existing research has primarily focused on higher education, while relatively few studies have examined private high school enrollment promotional discourse [4]. To address these gaps, this study adopts a comparative case study and employs move analysis to investigate the enrollment promotional discourse of private high schools in China. Specifically, it examines the generic structure of this promotional genre and explores how elite and ordinary private high schools differ in their rhetorical strategies and linguistic realizations.

This study addresses the following research questions: (1) What are the typical moves in the enrollment promotional discourse of private high schools in China? (2) How do elite and ordinary private high schools differ in terms of move distribution, rhetorical strategies and linguistic realizations? (3) What socio-economic factors may help explain the differences?

2. Related Studies of Educational Discourse

A substantial body of research has examined higher education recruitment discourse, with particular attention being paid to the move structures of recruitment brochures, the About-us webpag of universities and academic biographies [5,6]. For example, Hidalgo-Tenorio et al. and Jones identified core moves in university and high school recruitment materials, including “establishing institutional legitimacy,” “demonstrating academic strengths,” and “highlighting indicators such as personalized care and critical thinking” [7,8]. In the Chinese context, researchers have also examined the discursive features of university recruitment from various perspectives. For instance, studies have explored the visual grammar and move structures of recruitment brochures from “Double

First-Class” universities, as well as evidentiality strategies and move configurations in university promotional videos [9,10].

Compared with research on higher education, studies on the move analysis of high school recruitment discourse remain relatively limited. Existing research has largely focused on qualitative content description, with insufficient attention being paid to macro-level structural analysis grounded in move theory. For example, Chen identified thematic categories but did not examine how these themes are organized into moves and steps serving specific communicative functions [4]. Li compared the differences in enrollment promotional discourse between private and public high schools, while Wang examined the competitive landscape of high school enrollment; however, neither study investigated the schematic structure underlying these practices [2,3]. To address the above research gaps, this study employs move analysis to analyze the moves and discursive strategies of enrollment promotional discourse in Chinese private high schools.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

We compiled a corpus of official enrollment materials from private high schools in Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Dongguan, three major cities in the Pearl River Delta region. Based on criteria such as school size, brand influence, admission scores, and social reputation, private high schools were classified into two categories: elite schools and ordinary schools, with 15 schools in each group. Two types of texts were collected from each school: official enrollment brochures and materials from the “Enrollment” and “School Introduction” sections of school websites. All texts were published between 2024 and 2025. A total of 60 texts (approximately 150,000 words) were included in the corpus. The elite school corpus contains approximately 80,000 words, whereas the ordinary school corpus contains approximately 70,000 words. All texts were converted into plain-text format while preserving their original paragraph structures.

3.2 Analytical Procedures

The analytical framework of this study draws on genre analysis and move analysis [11]. Swales defines a move as a segment of text that serves a specific communicative purpose. He also argues that discourse consists of a sequence of moves

serving specific communicative purposes, with each move further divided into smaller steps [11]. Building on Swales’ framework, Bhatia extended move analysis to promotional genres such as advertising discourse and argued that such texts often display “mixed move” characteristics by simultaneously performing informational and persuasive functions [12,13]. Bhatia further argues that promotional discourse typically combines informational and persuasive functions [12,13]. In this study, move analysis is employed not only to identify the generic structure of enrollment promotional discourse but also to examine how different types of schools strategically realize promotional purposes through different rhetorical resources.

The analytical procedures consist of three stages.

(1): Move Identification. Each text was segmented into smaller units according to shifts in content or topic. Then we identify the communicative role and possible move.

(2): Move Classification. After coding all 60 texts, units with similar communicative functions were grouped into broader move categories. The relative frequency of each move was then determined. A move that appeared in over 90% of the texts was considered obligatory and the rest as optional. The 90% threshold was chosen based on the conventions in past move analysis studies.

(3): Steps Identification. The steps were defined as smaller functional units within each move, which serve as the sub-units that collectively serve the communicative purpose of the move.

4. Findings

4.1 Generic Structure

We analyzed 60 enrollment brochures from 30 private high schools and identified eight rhetorical moves, including Titling, School Profile, Admission Policy, Faculty, Hardware Facilities, Admission Score, School Life, and Contact Information (see Table 1). Four of the eight moves were found to be obligatory moves, in that they appeared in all 60 texts: Titling, School Profile, Admission Policy, and Contact Information. The remaining four moves, namely Faculty, Hardware Facilities, Admission Score, and School Life, were classified as optional moves because they appeared less consistently across the corpus. The distribution of obligatory and voluntary moves implies that this promotional genre of the private high school is relatively stable, and it has flexibility in the choice of rhetorical resources to be used in institutional

self-presentation.

The identified moves fulfill several communicative functions, such as promotional, informational, relational and empowering functions. Promotional moves construct institutional attractiveness by highlighting school reputation, educational resources, and academic achievements. The informational moves give viable information regarding the policies of enrollment, admission and the contact information. Relational moves aim to create closer relationships with the potential students and parents whereas empowering moves facilitate enrollment-related actions by offering procedural advice.

One of the most distinctive aspects of the genre is the combination of policy-oriented and promotional. Discourse [13]. Policy discourse mainly includes information such as enrollment quotas, tuition fees, and target student groups, whereas promotional discourse highlights the school's image and key selling points. Through the combination of these two discursive orientations, enrollment brochures function not only as informative texts but also as promotional instruments for constructing institutional identities in an increasingly competitive educational market [14].

While both elite and ordinary schools employ similar moves, the realization of these moves varies across the two groups. The following sections therefore examine how different types of schools strategically deploy these moves to construct institutional identities, enhance attractiveness, and establish relationships with prospective audiences.

4.2 Rhetorical Strategies

4.2.1 Constructing legitimacy

Elite and ordinary private high schools adopt

different discursive strategies to establish institutional legitimacy. While both groups seek to present themselves as credible educational providers, elite schools tend to rely on symbolic resources, including institutional reputation, faculty credentials, and academic achievements. Ordinary schools, by contrast, are more likely to construct legitimacy by means of developmental narratives.

The School Profile move provides an initial site for constructing institutional identity. Elite schools tend to establish legitimacy by referring to symbolic capital to build its external recognition and reputation. For example, one elite school describes itself as “the only A-class high school located in a town street in Dongguan,” while also highlighting its status as a “Dongguan brand school” and its membership in professional organizations. These descriptions place the school in a wider pyramid of educational appreciation, as opposed to merely telling about the school. Ordinary schools, on the contrary, tend to forge geographical benefits and campus settings. As an example, one school boasts of its location, as being at the southern foot of Luotian Forest Park and talks about the campus as being quiet and conducive to learning. These schools are built to be appealing by tangible and visible elements instead of depending on the reputation of the existing institutions. Examples are as follows:

(1) The only A-class high school located in a town street in Dongguan, a Dongguan brand school, a member of the Guangdong Physics and Chemistry Society, and a Guangdong Biology Competition Training Base. (Elite school)

(2) Located at the southern foot of Luotian Forest Park, the campus is surrounded by picturesque mountains and waters. It is quiet and suitable for learning. (Ordinary school)

Table 1. Move Distribution

No.	Move	Elite schools (N=15)	Ordinary schools (N=15)	Functions
M1	Titling	15 (100%)	15 (100%)	Promoting/informing/relating
M2	School profile	15 (100%)	15 (100%)	Promoting/informing
M3	Admission Policy	15 (100%)	15 (100%)	informing
M4	Faculty	15 (100%)	11 (73.3%)	Promoting/informing
M5	Hardware facilities	13 (86.7%)	15 (100%)	Promoting/informing
M6	Admission score	15 (100%)	12 (80%)	Promoting/informing
M7	School life	11 (73.3%)	13 (86.7%)	Relating/informing
M8	Contact information	15 (100%)	15 (100%)	Empowering/informing

The Faculty move further demonstrates the different ways in which the two groups construct credibility. This movement is observed in all the elite schools but 73.3% of the ordinary schools as indicated in Table 1. Quantified evidence is

commonly used in elite schools. As an example, a elite high school has detailed statistics on the number of teachers, their professional qualifications and their academic qualifications: 761 teachers with 114 senior professional titles,

174 masters degrees or higher. The faculty resources can be converted into quantifiable indicators of the quality of education and bolster institutional reputations through the use of accurate numerical data. In comparison, ordinary schools which incorporate such a move are more likely to use general evaluative descriptions, including “strong responsibility,” “professional competence,” and “rich experience,” which focus on the judgement of the teachers.

A similar distinction can be observed in the Admission Score move. Elite schools predominantly employ precise and absolute academic indicators to demonstrate established educational outcomes. In Example 3, one elite school highlights that “46 students had their scores shielded” and “287 were admitted to Tsinghua and Peking University.” Such evidence functions as a form of academic legitimation by presenting achievement as objective and measurable. Ordinary schools, however, are more likely to emphasize relative improvement and developmental outcomes. This is shown in Example 4. The ordinary school emphasizes its ranking has been improved from the 15th to 6th. Rather than presenting themselves through established academic superiority, they construct educational value through narratives of student progress and growth. This difference indicates that elite and ordinary schools rely on different forms of legitimacy: elite schools capitalize on accumulated symbolic capital, whereas ordinary schools emphasize developmental potential.

A similar distinction can be noticed in the Admission Score move. Elite schools predominantly use precise and absolute academic indicators to demonstrate their educational results. In Example 3, one elite school emphasizes that 46 students had their scores shielded and 287 were enrolled to Tsinghua and Peking University. This evidence serves as a way of academic legitimation by making achievement objective and measurable. More likely, though, ordinary schools should focus on relative improvement and developmental outcomes. This is reflected in Example 4. The ordinary school emphasizes its ranking has been improved from the 15th to 6th. Rather than presenting themselves through established academic superiority, they construct educational value through narratives of student progress and growth. This difference indicates that elite and ordinary schools rely on different forms of legitimacy: elite schools capitalize on accumulated symbolic capital, whereas ordinary schools

emphasize developmental potential.

(3) 46 students’ scores were shielded, 287 were admitted to Tsinghua and Peking University. (Elite school)

(4) Our school's admission score ranking rose from 15th to 6th place among the city's 50 private schools. (Ordinary school)

4.2.2 Constructing attractiveness

In addition to creating legitimacy, enrollment promotional discourse also plays a role of creating institutional attractiveness. In this respect, ordinary schools are more inclined to focus on resources and daily educational experiences whereas the elite schools make use of the resources in more generalized accounts of overall development.

This difference is reflected in the Hardware Facilities move. As shown in Table 1, this move occurs in all ordinary schools but in only 86.7% of elite schools. Material facilities emerge as a powerful tool of institutional competitiveness in the case of ordinary schools, which might have comparatively limited symbolic resources. Ordinary schools often display certain details regarding campus size, facilities, and learning conditions, which are often backed by visual materials. For example, one of the ordinary schools focuses on its campus grounds, library facilities, computer labs and playgrounds. These kinds of descriptions convert physical facilities to signifiers of the quality of education and offer parents a sign that there are positive learning conditions. In comparison, elite schools do not rely on hardware descriptions to be their key promotional tool. Though this move is part of most elite schools, the facilities are typically offered as an additional testimony to more general accounts of educational excellence.

The School Life move further demonstrates differences. Elite schools are more inclined to emphasize the development of students, cultural activities and individual growth opportunities. The descriptions about student associations, campus events, and extravagant events create a picture of a vibrant learning atmosphere. Ordinary schools, in the meantime, pay attention to safety, accommodation and day to day management. These descriptions also deal with practical issues of parents and serve as reassurance mechanisms. With a focus on the daily life of the students, ordinary schools are trying to create less uncertainty and develop confidence in potential families.

In general, the various forms of realizations of the above moves represent various approaches of institutional attraction. Elite schools mobilize these

resources to deepen an already existing institutional image, and ordinary schools to mobilize them as key resources in competitiveness and parental trust.

4.2.3 Constructing proximity

Besides building legitimacy and attractiveness, enrollment promotional discourse entails management of relationships among schools and potential students and parents. Ordinary schools are more inclined to use interpersonal strategies that decrease the institutional distance and produce a perception of accessibility as compared to elite schools.

The Titling move is where interpersonal relations are formed in the first place. Despite the relatively formulaic nature of most school titles (usually the school name and terms reflecting the school enrollment, as in the case of Example 5), the personalized and conversational nature of the school titles is more common in ordinary schools (as in the case of Example 6). These headings are usually interrogative or imperative in nature, they also use personal pronouns like *we*, *you*, which make the interaction between the institution and the audience more personal. Elite schools, in contrast, are more formal and institutionalized, foregrounding school identity as opposed to direct contact with readers. The examples below directly target potential students and parents, decreasing the institutional distance between the school and the audience.

(5) Enrollment Brochure of DG Senior High School in 2025.(Elite school)

(6) Choosing LR means choosing a school with leading quality. LR High School welcomes you!(Ordinary school)

A similar contrast can be observed in the Admission Policy move. Elite schools focus on restricted publicly funded slots and admissions, building a reputation of choice and academic aggressiveness. This is shown in Example 7. The elite school mentions explicitly its public and private places. It makes students applicants who must conform to institutional standards. Conversely, normal schools would emphasize on scholarships, reduction in fees, and conducive policies. In the case of the elite school (Example 8), it is emphasized that there is no charge, whereas in the case of another standard school (Example 9), it is stated that there is a certain amount of scholarship information. These strategies construct schools as accessible and supportive, reducing parents' financial concerns and encouraging enrollment decisions. The examples are as follows:

(7) 280 public-funded students, 2,220 private-funded students; Ecological Park Campus: 160 public-funded students, 1,140 private-funded students. (Elite school)

(8) No charge for selecting minor languages; students with excellent grades may enjoy tuition reduction.(Ordinary school)

(9) Excellent students may gain a scholarship of 20,000-300,000 yuan. (Ordinary school)

The Contact Information move further reveals differences in interactional orientation. Although every school offers the contact information, ordinary schools are more likely to have diversified ways of communication such as QR code, online consultation and pre-registration services. Accessibility is created by these resources that enable direct communication. Elite schools, in contrast, tend to offer less interactive, and more formal institutional, contact information.

Overall, the different realizations of these moves indicate divergent interpersonal strategies in private high school promotional discourse. Elite schools are more likely to sustain institutional distance based on selectivity and established power whereas ordinary schools strive to create relational proximity based on personalized manifestations, supportive policies, and accessible communication channels. Such differences are not just the reflection of opposite promotional policies, but also the differences of the position on the competitive educational market.

5. Conclusions and Discussions

The findings indicate that the enrollment promotional discourse in private high schools is not just an informational genre that is used to convey admission-related information. Rather, it is a place where schools are built and negotiated institutional identities in an ever-competitive educational marketplace. Though the generic structure of elite and ordinary schools is relatively stable, involving similar rhetorical moves, they differ significantly in the strategic realizations of these moves. To begin with, elite schools have more likelihood to build legitimacy using symbolic resources. Second, ordinary schools are more likely to increase the institutional appeal by focusing on physical resources, campus life, and students. Third, the relational proximity with personalized language, supportive policies, and accessible communication channels is more prone to be established in ordinary schools.

The various promotional tactics used by elite and ordinary schools can be interpreted, in connection

to their unequal access to symbolic resources. In competitive educational markets, schools do not possess the same levels of institutional reputation, academic recognition, and social prestige. As a result, different types of schools rely on different forms of discursive resources to establish legitimacy and attract prospective students. Elite schools tend to have accumulated symbolic capital and this enables them to foreground the discourse of achievement. Their promotional materials frequently emphasize external recognition, highly qualified teachers, and outstanding examination results. By presenting these resources as measurable evidence of quality, elite schools reinforce their selective institutional identities. In contrast, ordinary schools might experience difficulties in the competition on the basis of traditional reputation and academic performance. Thus, they are more likely to implement other forms of promotion focusing on material conditions, developmental opportunities and supportive educational services. These strategies do not simply compensate for weaker symbolic resources; rather, they construct a different form of institutional value based on accessibility, care, and student development. This study contributes to research on promotional discourse by demonstrating that educational promotional genres involve multiple communicative functions beyond persuasion and information provision. Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. The sample size is restricted to 30 private high schools in three big cities. In the future, the corpus can be enriched with schools across geographical regions and with diverse institutional backgrounds. This paper is mainly based on textual materials and does not address the multimodal aspects of enrollment promotional discourse. Future studies may take a multimodal discourse analysis approach to study the ways of institutional identities construction.

Acknowledgements

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Lingnan Normal University 2026 Reform Project of Teacher Education Innovation Mechanisms (Grant No.2026JSJY61); Lingnan Normal University 2026 High-Level Talents Research Project (Grant No.ZW2622); 2025 Zhanjiang Philosophy And Social Science Project (Grant No.ZJ25YB109); 2025 Higher Education Institution Characteristic & Innovation Project of Guangdong (Grant No.

2025WTSCX067; Project Name: A Study on the Development of College English Grammar Textbooks from the Perspective of Embodied Cognition); 2023 Lingnan Normal University Empowerment Project for High-Quality Development of Basic Education (High School English Grammar Cognitive Experience Research, Grant No: JCJYCB202316); Lingnan Normal University 2024 Teaching Quality and Teaching Reform Project (Project Name: English Experience Cognitive Grammar).

References:

- [1] Ding, J. X., Liao, Y. Q. (2001). A Review of Critical Discourse Analysis. *Contemporary Linguistics*, 3(4):305-310
- [2] Wang, J. Q. (2023). A Study on the Competitive Landscape and Coping Strategies of Senior High School Enrollment in Guangdong In the context of High School Entrance Examination Reform. *Guangdong Education (Comprehensive Edition)*, (3), 23-26.
- [3] Li, Y. (2022). A Study on Differences in Enrollment Promotion between Private and Public Senior High Schools in Guangdong. *Journal of Educational Development*, (9), 37-43.
- [4] Chen, L. F. (2022). A Study on Content Focus and Communication Effects of Senior High School Admissions Promotion — Based on a Survey of 100 Senior High Schools in Jiangsu and Zhejiang Provinces. *Educational Science Research*, 39(5):56-62
- [5] Mu, Y. X. & Zhang, L.X.Y. (2025). The marketization of higher education in China: a comparative multimodal genre analysis between top-public and international universities, *Multimodal Communication*, 14(3), pp. 293-312. <https://doi.org/10.1515/mc-2025-0008>.
- [6] Liu, S. (2025). Discursive construction of the 'scholar' identity: a critical genre analysis of Chinese and English academic biographies. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16, 1581772.
- [7] Hidalgo-Tenorio C, Plo M A. (2018). Move structure in international university prospectuses. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 39(7): 623-636.
- [8] Jones R. H. (2019). The rhetoric of high school recruitment materials in the United States. *Educational Policy*, 33(4): 589-612.
- [9] Zhang, Y. (2021). A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of University Admissions

- Prospectuses — Taking "Double First-Class" Universities as Examples. *Foreign Languages in China*, 18(4), 29-36.
- [10] Li, M. H., Wang, J. (2019). Pragmatic Strategies and Image Construction in University Admissions Promotional Videos. *Modern Communication (Journal of Communication University of China)*, 41(7):158-161
- [11] Swales, J. M. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [12] Bhatia, V. K. (1993). *Analysing Genre: Language Use in Professional Settings*. London: Longman.
- [13] Bhatia, V. K. (2010). Interdiscursivity in Professional Communication. *Discourse & Communication*, 4(1): 32-50.
- [14] Chen, Y. Q., LI W.F., Wang S.H.(2025). Marketing graduates on social media: a move analysis of university graduates reference posts on WeChat. *Media and Communication Research*, 6(5): 102-109.