

Marketing Graduates on Social Media: A Move Analysis of University Graduates Reference Posts on WeChat

Chen Yunqiao^{1,a,*}, Li Wenfeng^{1,b}, Wang Shuhui^{1,c}

¹*School of Foreign Studies, Lingnan Normal University, Zhanjiang, China*

^a3057512232@qq.com, ^b2811812496@qq.com, ^cShuhuiWANGluck@163.com

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Abstract: The economic downturn resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the rapid expansion of Chinese higher education, has led to new challenges for the universities in terms of the graduate employment. In response to this pressure, a new genre—the university graduates reference post—has emerged on WeChat. These posts aim to promote graduates as “products” to the market and potential employers. This article examines this emerging genre, analyzing its generic structure, rhetorical moves, and communicative functions. It further connects these elements to broader shifts in Chinese university discourse, the marketization of higher education, and the influence of social media. The study is based on a corpus of 49 WeChat posts published for the 2020 graduate cohort. The principal findings are as follows: (1) The genre is dynamic and unstable in its internal components, exhibiting interdiscursive features. The dominant move types serve informative and promotional functions, while the relational function is less emphasized; (2) The most conventional moves are titling, department profile, graduate profile, and support; (3) The language is predominantly formal, with occasional instances of a personal, casual style. This suggests a hybrid register that combines authoritative dominance with promotional appeal. Multimodal resources are prominently used in key moves to enhance promotion; (4) While the primary communicative purpose of these posts is to “sell” graduates, the prevailing formality of the language somewhat mitigates the promotional force. A discernible power asymmetry within the genre indicates that higher education institutions are struggling to reconcile their authoritative position with the demands of the market. The findings are discussed within the theoretical contexts of higher education marketization and social media discourse.

1. Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed a radical expansion of Chinese higher education. However, as the number of graduates continues to reach new highs, each year is subsequently declared “the most difficult employment season in history” in media headlines. This trend underscores the influence of national expansion policies and marketization, which have intensified competition in the graduate job market. The situation was exacerbated in 2020 by the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused economic disruption due to widespread shutdowns [1]. During the pandemic, most on-site recruitment activities ceased, and surges in unemployment were recorded globally [2]. In response,

China's Ministry of Education (MoE) issued a series of policies to bolster graduate employment rates. Most notably, in March 2020, the MoE released the Notice on the Employment and Entrepreneurship Work for 2020 Graduates of Higher Education Institutions, which mandated that universities prioritize graduate employment and enhance their online employment services [3]. Under this pressure, universities began to actively advertise their graduates, with online promotion becoming the primary channel. A key initiative was the emergence of a new genre of articles on the WeChat platform—which I term graduate reference posts—intentionally crafted to promote graduates. These posts are authored by a university or its departments and addressed to potential employers. This study addresses the following research questions: (1) What are the constituent rhetorical moves and their distribution in these posts? (2) What rhetorical strategies, particularly in terms of linguistic and visual resources, are used to realize these moves? (3) What do these discursive features reveal about the changing identity of universities, the state of Chinese higher education, and the influence of social media?

2. The Marketization of University Discourse

Over the past decades, Chinese higher education has expanded into one of the world's largest systems. This expansion was initiated in December 1998, when the Ministry of Education (MOE) announced the Plan for Revitalizing Education in the Twenty-First Century. The marketization of Chinese higher education began alongside with the expansion and the economic reform, utilizing a neoliberal discourse, whose the main organizing concepts being “consumer choices, personal investment (private good), and rising consumer demand” [4]. The governance of market is then introduced into the running of universities.

The impact of marketization and promotional culture on university discourse has been a significant topic of critical inquiry in recent years [5]. Historically, universities established a dignified and privileged position based on their mastery of knowledge [6]. However, studies have documented a shift in the status of universities globally under pressures of competition and expansion. Their traditionally superior and solitary image has been eroded, as it has become common for institutions to “package” educational products for potential consumers. Zhang and O'Halloran[7] suggest that constructing educational programs as a self-fulfilling lifestyle and transformational experience shifts the focus to the student-consumer rather than the institution. Another salient discursive feature is the proliferation of promotional genres. Bhatia [6]argues that with the spread of promotional values, many institutional genres are adopting the characteristics of promotional discourse due to mass communication and information explosion. This trend was identified early on; Fairclough's [8]pioneering work analyzed promotional practices in academic job advertisements, conference materials, curricula vitae, and undergraduate prospectuses, noting that the communicative purpose of prospectuses is to “sell the university to potential applicants.”

Research on Chinese university discourse reveals a unique blending of authoritative discourse with conversational, advertising-oriented discourse, shaped by specific socio-cultural features. For instance, Xu [9]identifies the incursion of promotional culture in university prospectuses, indicating that Chinese universities are adopting the role of promoters. Conversely, Zhang and O'Halloran [10], in an analysis of university homepages, find that Chinese institutions remain deeply steered by a “high text culture” and “wall culture,” maintaining a gatekeeper role compared to their Western counterparts. Xiong [11] proposes that Chinese university discourse is characterized by a “bureaucracy-market duality,” a feature subsequently identified in studies of graduation ceremonies, “About Us” sections, and presidents' messages using various methodologies[12][13][14][15]. From a multimodal perspective, Feng [5] finds that university discourse is influenced by the combined force of social media and marketization, leading to the use of personal language and multimodal

resources to attract readers and achieve promotional goals.

To date, there has been little discussion of promotional genres that actively recommend another key "product" of higher education: the graduates themselves. A traditional practice in China is the publication of annual employment or career development reports on university websites. The Ministry of Education (MoE) mandates these reports to demonstrate educational quality, showcase achievements, and guide program adjustments based on labor market needs. Printed reports are distributed to employers, while online versions are posted on career development websites; some universities also share them via WeChat official accounts for promotional purposes. Surprisingly, these brochures have not been systematically studied.

Furthermore, the "outcomes" of higher education are manifested in another, newer genre: the "graduate reference posts" that constitute the data for this study. Particularly in the context of the 2020 crisis, some university departments began publishing such posts on platforms like WeChat to recommend their graduates directly to potential employers and solicit job vacancies. As this practice is novel, no systematic move analysis has been conducted on these posts, presenting a clear gap in the literature that this paper aims to address.

3. Methodology

3.1 Analytical Framework

Genre are reflections of institutional and cultural norms; consequently, changes within a genre signify shifts in shared aims, structures, and norms. Analyzing genre provides insight into how institutions, such as universities, communicate through language. Previous studies have documented the incursion of promotional genres into academic discourse, illustrating how universities navigate market relationships within a competitive landscape. This study builds on that work by examining a new, emergent genre. The analysis adopts Feng's[5]four-level genre analysis model, which is developed from Swale's [16]framework: genre identification; move analysis; semiotic analysis;

3.2 Data collection

The corpus for this study consists of 49 university graduate reference posts published by Chinese university departments on the WeChat platform between October 2019 and August 2020. These posts were collected using the WeChat section of the Sougou search engine, which, at the time of research, was the primary computer-based search engine capable of indexing WeChat content without requiring the mobile application. The search terms used were: "graduate information", "graduate recommendation", "graduate introduction", and "graduate source". All collected posts were manually checked to ensure relevance to the research topic. During the collection process, it was noted that some universities had begun releasing similar reference posts for the 2021 graduating class, with the earliest instances dating back to 2018. This suggests that the genre is emerging and gaining traction. However, the vast majority of posts targeted the 2020 graduates, indicating a significant uptake of this practice by universities during the peak of the employment challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Findings

4.1 Generic Structure

Following Bhatia's[17] macro-level taxonomy, genres can be grouped into colonies such as "promotional genres," "academic introductions," and "reporting genres." The primary identification

of a genre rests on its communicative purposes, which in this case are to advertise graduates, solicit recruitment resources, and generate publicity. These purposes are realized through the text's rhetorical move structure, as each move contributes to the overall meaning[18][19].

Drawing on Halliday and Matthiessen's [20]field-based register range, an analysis of the 49 posts identifies eight move types (see Table 1). These moves serve five key communicative functions: (1) informing: providing factual information about the "deal" [21], such as department and graduate profiles; (2) promoting: highlighting students' excellent performance, particularly significant awards, to attract attention; (3) relating: establishing a personal relationship with the audience, particularly potential employers; (4) enabling: providing contact information and additional services for employers; (5) reporting: specifying the impact of COVID-19 on graduates.

A key feature of these posts is their hybrid nature, blending informative and promotional discourse. Informative discourse presents "largely factual information on the deal" [21], which in this context includes details about the department (Move 6), graduates (Move 7), and support services (Move 8). Promotional discourse aims to attract reader attention and promote the deal [21], evident in the promotional aspects of the department (Move 6) and graduate (Move 7) profiles. As shown in Table 1, individual moves often serve multiple functions simultaneously [5][21], most commonly a blend of informing and promoting. For instance, the department profile (Move 6) provides information while also showcasing "shining points" to attract employers. Similarly, the supportmove (Move 8) is versatile, serving three functions. This functional blending exemplifies the interdiscursivity noted in prior research [5][21].

Table 1 Move analysis of the posts.

No.	Move	Frequency	Percentage	Functions
1	titling	49	100%	promoting/ informing/relating
2	Greetings	7	14.30%	Relating
3	Expressing gratitude	10	20.40%	Relating
4	Highlighting the impact of Covid-19 on the employment of graduates	8	16.30%	reporting
5	Asking for resources of recruitment	21	43%	promoting
6	Department profile	48	98%	informing/promoting
	6A History (development)	34	69.40%	informing/promoting
	6B Features	41	83.70%	informing/promoting
	6C Structure and setting	47	95.90%	informing/promoting
	6D Faculties	29	59.20%	informing/promoting
7	Graduates profile	49	100%	informing/promoting
	7A Numbers and distribution	46	93.90%	informing
	7B Major introduction	43	87.80%	informing
	7B Student awards	32	65.30%	informing/promoting
	7C Extracurricular activities	24	49%	informing/promoting
	7D individual resume	7	14.30%	informing/promoting
8	Support	45	91.80%	enabling/relating/informing
	8A contact information	45	91.80%	enabling/informing
	8B Additional services	12	24.50%	enabling/relating/informing

Another feature we can conclude from the move structure that such genre is dynamic at the stage, it is unlikely to form obligatory or optional moves. Conventional moves like titling, department profile, graduate profile and support are the most frequent (more than 90%), serving the informing and promoting purposes. And additional moves like relating, enabling, and reporting are less focused. In the following, I will discuss the most typical moves.

4.2 Titling

The titling move is conventional and functions to provide essential information [5]. As illustrated in example 1, titles typically include the institution name and the purpose (e.g., "graduate recommendation").

(1) 2020 Excellent Graduates of the School of Safety Recommending

Approximately 95% of the titles follow formulaic patterns such as "[Institution Name] + Graduates Introduction/Recommendation," indicating a highly informative and self-centered focus. Judged by Joos's [22] formality scale, the dominant register of these titles is frozen. Only two exceptions were found, which used the pronoun "you" to directly address the target audience. These exceptions, shown in examples 2 and 3, create a more casual tone and fulfill a key promotional function: attracting the reader's attention [6].

(2) Graduate Recommendation: Take you to know the 2020 graduates of Foreign Languages Studies in Zhongkai University of Agriculture and Engineering

(3) @Employer: Huazheng International Law graduates are waiting for you to pick!

4.3 Department Profile

Establishing credentials is an essential component of promotional genres [23]. The department profile move, present in 98% of posts, is typically described through its setting, features, history, and faculty. As Feng [5] notes, promotion is realized not only through information but also via positive evaluation. This move promotes the department by highlighting "luring" facts and achievements to project a well-established reputation. Descriptions of history and indirect evaluations (e.g., credentials from external agencies) are common promotional strategies.

(4) The college has one Chongqing municipal teaching team...; our English major is the first-class undergraduate major in Chongqing in 2019.

(5) The college currently has 95 faculty members... and more than 70% of the teachers have overseas... experience.

However, this move closely resembles the impersonal, distant, and settled introductory moves found on university websites or in prospectuses [8]. Its highly frozen formality indicates the dominance of authoritative discourse. For example, features are often presented as impersonal slogans (e.g., "The college adheres to the philosophy of...").

4.4 Graduate Profile

As the core of the posts, the graduate profile move serves the primary promotional goal. It involves "product-detailing" [23] through five steps: (1) numbers and distribution; (2) major introduction; (3) student awards; (4) extracurricular activities; and (5) individual resumes. While the presentation of steps 1 and 2 is often static and formal, this move is the most multimodal. Of the 314 photos in the corpus, 80% are dedicated to graduates, primarily showcasing awards, group activities, and student work. This visual "product appraisal" strategy [6] publicizes graduates and creates a differentiation of excellence. Some posts also include student CVs via charts or QR codes.

(6) This major cultivates basic knowledge, basic theories, and basic skills for drug research and development institutions, pharmaceutical companies, medical schools, hospital pharmacies, drug distribution companies and other units to engage in drug research, production and inspection. Those who meet the requirements will be awarded a Bachelor of Science degree.

4.5 Support

The support move provides contact information (91.8%) and additional services (24.5%), serving informing, enabling, and relating functions. Consistent with the "soliciting response" move in promotional letters [23], it aims to build politeness and lay the foundation for further cooperation. Unlike the more formal moves analyzed above, the style here shifts to a "consultative casual" register. The departments position themselves as "we," the agents providing services to employers ("you"). This use of personal pronouns fosters closer relations. Despite its importance, this move is not compulsory. Surprisingly, some posts omit it entirely or provide only minimal contact information, potentially hindering employer engagement.

(7) The department will provide the following services for employers. Thank you very much for your concern and support! Provide recruitment information release channels. We will conduct comprehensive publicity based on the needs of employers, relying on the college's official account, website, WeChat group, QQ group and other platforms. We will provide recruitment support services. According to the needs of employers, we can organize and carry out special web seminars, online double selection meetings, online interviews and other services; we can also provide employers with a comprehensive and objective comprehensive evaluation of graduates or recommend outstanding graduates.

5. Conclusion and discussions

This article has examined the generic structure of university reference posts, identifying four typical moves: titling, department profile, graduate profile, and support. The principal findings are as follows: (1) The genre exhibits interdiscursive features, blending informative and promotional discourse within its move structure; (2) The most frequent moves serve informative and promotional functions, while relational, reporting, and enabling functions are less emphasized; (3) A notable characteristic is the predominant use of a frozen-to-formal register, reflecting the persistence of authoritative discourse; however, promotional techniques and multimodal resources are concentrated in the core promotional move—the graduate profile—to engage the target audience; (4) A power asymmetry is reflected in the self-centered descriptions and authoritative language, underscoring the institutions' struggle to reconcile their traditional role with market demands. The study suggests that this genre, while dynamic in its internal structure, is emerging as a strategic response to graduate unemployment. The fact that some universities have already released similar posts for the following graduating class indicates that the genre is becoming an established feature of Chinese university discourse.

The findings can be further explained by contextual factors, echoing the fourth level of our analytical framework. The emergence of reference posts is a unique phenomenon, shaped by low employment rates resulting from the expansion of higher education and economic pressures. Unlike their Western counterparts, Chinese universities operate under significant government and societal pressure to enhance graduate employment rates, a key metric for families choosing universities [24] and for institutional evaluations that affect reputation, ranking, and funding. For instance, in September 2020, the Ministry of Education (MoE) announced that employment rates would be included in the "Double First Class" initiative evaluation. This pressure has prompted the release of numerous official documents urging universities to address graduate employment [25]. Furthermore, the dominance of authoritative discourse persists even within these promotional texts. While the graduate profile move is heavily promotional and multimodal—aligning with the essential step of providing favorable product descriptions [17]—the genre largely neglects the relational work crucial for building client relationships [23]. The highly formal and factual language diminishes the promotional effect, revealing that authoritative and bureaucratic characteristics remain deeply

embedded in Chinese university discourse. This reflects a habitus steeped in high-context culture and implicit expression[10], leading universities to default to authoritative language even in promotional contexts. This struggle mirrors the broader context of Chinese higher education marketization, which has been largely state-driven over the past 25 years. The government has pushed universities to adopt market-oriented governance paradigms, emphasizing links between education and the market through reforms in finance and management [4][26]. The very directive to promote graduates, as seen in the MoE's 2020 notice, originates from the state, illustrating the dual pressure on universities: to market their "products" while maintaining their authoritative, state-steered position. In conclusion, this study provides a generic analysis of the emerging genre of university reference posts, offering insight into the latest practices of higher education marketization in China. The analysis reveals universities' struggle to navigate marketization while constrained by a bureaucratic ideology. As the Chinese government continues to expand higher education—evidenced by policies like Guangdong Province's plan to increase gross enrollment rates—and the global economy faces uncertainty, the pressure to promote graduates in a competitive market will intensify. Reference posts may serve as one remedy to alleviate anxieties. Future research should explore its multimodal features in greater depth and investigate its reception among employers to further understand the evolving nature of Chinese university discourse.

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