

An Appraisal Analysis of Sina Weibo Texts about Reforms of Undergraduate Education

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Abstract: In recent years, Chinese government departments have created accounts on Sina Weibo, a rising communication platform in China, to spread information related to social issues and interact with the public in an informal way. Reforms of undergraduate education is a heated issue because it is relevant to public interests and can evoke active engagement of the public. Weibo texts about reforms of undergraduate education contain various stances and opinions, so the appraisal meanings in Weibo texts are worth analyzing. This study, adopting the appraisal framework proposed by Martin and White and with the help of corpus method, attempts to investigate the appraisal strategies and underlying meanings in 50 Weibo texts about reforms of undergraduate education quantitatively and qualitatively. Hopefully, this study may enrich the research of the appraisal framework on Chinese social media and provide valuable implications for the Chinese government to reconsider the way it interacts with the public in an effective and informal style by leveraging social media platforms like Weibo, so the government can better disseminate information, promote publicity and guide public attitudes towards a positive direction.

Keywords: Appraisal framework; Weibo text; Reforms of undergraduate education

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1. Introduction

Sina Weibo (Weibo) has emerged as a vital social media platform in China where public opinions can be reflected in Weibo posts and interactions among users are encouraged. According to the 2020 User Report, Weibo boasted 511 million daily active users and 224 million monthly active users as of September, 2020 with interactions among different users exceeding 6.68 billion. Also, the report verified that the number of registered government Weibo accounts reached more than 140,000 ^[1]. More and more accounts are designed to bring in topics related to issues concerning the public interests and other events that could promote extensive discussions. Since most Chinese Weibo users are active “initiators” and “commentators” ^[2], it is worthwhile to analyze individuals’ attitudes towards the heated topics based on Weibo posts.

By exploring how writers or speaker’s express opinions, appraisal framework provides a systemic approach to analyze Weibo texts, where Weibo users convey their attitudes, judgements or value orientations in concise language. Among popular topics discussed online, reforms of undergraduate education, a long-term project closely relevant to public interests, has come under the spotlight and sparked extensive discussions. Considering the interactive features of Weibo, this study, adopting the appraisal framework proposed by Martin and White and with the help of corpus method, attempts to investigate attitudinal features in 50 Weibo texts about reforms of undergraduate education in order to study how Weibo users interact with each other. It is hoped that this study could reveal different stances conveyed in Weibo discourse and the poster-reader relationships to provide implications for effective communication

between the government and the public on Weibo.

2. The application of appraisal framework in discourse analysis

Proposed by Martin and White, the appraisal framework has been developed for nearly 20 years and applied in different research fields, offering a new angle to study evaluative resources in discourse ^[3]. Most of the studies to date center on discourse analysis, demonstrating that the appraisal framework is feasible to analyze attitudes and voices in different discourse of various contents and genres.

Initially, scholars applied the appraisal framework to study journalistic discourse. White first adopted the appraisal framework to analyze the rhetoric in news and journals ^[4]. The research indicated that rhetorical devices, which depend on writers' language choices, are used to stress writers' attitudes and persuade readers to investigate the news so that readers can share views through communication. When investigating appraisal resources in the case of Bush v. Gore 2000 with Attitude and Engagement, Miller discovered that speakers convey their subjective positions via covert lexis, ellipsis or declarative sentences, which are effective ways to show dialogic contraction ^[5]. Later, Hood compared the introduction part in undergraduates' academic theses and that of published papers based on appraisal framework ^[6]. The study suggested that with quotations of statements or statistics from the authorities, the application of heteroglossia can promote academic communication and maintain the objectivity of the theses. Paronen investigated the online reviews of South Park posted on IGN by referring to engagement system, arguing that dialogic expansion is more likely to be used in online reviews to evoke interactions ^[7]. Appraisal framework has also been employed to study advertisements. Beangstrom and Adendorff compared three real estate advertisements and revealed how they respectively manipulate linguistic choices to arouse different feelings of potential customers ^[8].

In China, the development of the appraisal framework began later but appeared more diversified. Analyses of news and literary discourse are dominant. Researchers found that attitude is less applied in hard news to maintain objectivity ^[9] while engagement can convey authorial stances and influence readers' comprehension ^[10]. Wang and Guan, combining appraisal framework with narratology, analyzed the appraisal resources in Hemingway's novel *In Another Country* and stated that certain appraisal resources could reflect the author's stance and help readers to understand the theme, providing a new path to appreciate literary works ^[11]. However, analyses of social media discourse, including Twitter and Weibo, are still limited. The latest and relevant discourse analysis of social media under the appraisal framework attempted to investigate the stances and views of Weibo users towards suicide so as to provide implications for the prediction and prevention of youth suicide ^[12].

Researchers have proved the possibility and significance of appraisal framework to analyze attitudes in different discourse at both microscopic and macroscopic level, ranging from literary, journalistic and legal discourse to online discourse and advertisements. However, most of studies mainly focus on written language where writers and readers lack real-time interaction. Since social media can spread information widely and offer space for interaction, it is necessary to analyze discourse in social media in order to better understand the interactions among people ^[13].

3. Previous studies on social media

Social media is a web-based communication tool that enables people to interact with each other by acquiring and sharing information. With the emergence of Web 2.0, microblog has become a newly rising social communication platform featuring fragmented information, rapid dissemination and real-time interaction. Among various microblogs, Twitter garnered great attention among users and researchers. Zappavigna discussed how hashtags on Twitter share attitudes and attract readers as a linguistic marker. With hashtags, posts could be easily disseminated in a wide forum, so they could capture potential readers' attention and

start interactions ^[14, 15]. Korenek and Simko employed appraisal framework to identify words with sentiments from tweets, showing that people tend to express their feelings on Twitter directly ^[16]. Previous research has introduced the basic functions of social media and applied various theoretical frameworks to analyze the distinct features of social media language. However, few studies have paid attention to the attitudinal resources presented in microblog posts, which could directly or indirectly reflect posters' stances of one topic.

Since Weibo is one of the earliest social media platforms in China, Chinese scholars started to pay attention to people's interaction on Weibo. Li and Zhang attempted to analyze the primary reasons influencing users' interaction in government Weibo from the perspective of public management and provided useful strategies for promoting official-to-public interactions ^[17]. Researches related to Weibo cover various fields, including ways of communication and distribution of attitudes. From the perspective of public relations, Zhang studied the content, effect of interaction and the positioning of three Weibo accounts of government officials, concluding that these accounts can play a role in demonstrating government image and bettering communication via social media ^[18]. Based on communication strategy, Wu introduced the "double-funnel model" to explore the polymerization of public opinions in Weibo, finding that public opinions are gathered and disseminated through the process of onlooking, polarization and mobilization ^[19]. Zhao and Hou, from the semantics perspective, analyzed people's attitudes and emotions towards hotspot issues on Weibo ^[20]. In recent studies, involvement of the public towards brand advertisements ^[21] and the public sentiments of rumor-refuting posts related to COVID-19 pandemic ^[22] were investigated.

Previous research mentioned above mainly focuses on the structure, basic functions and language style of social media. Some studies also explore the communication mode, interactive behavior and emotional impact of posts on social media. However, in-depth analyses of stances and attitudes reflected in lexical choices of Weibo texts are still limited, and poster-reader relationships represented at the text level require further investigation. It can be seen from the review that few scholars have adopted appraisal framework to analyze Weibo texts, and studies on reforms of undergraduate education from a linguistic perspective are scarce.

4. Appraisal analysis and discussion

4.1. Research method

Weibo posts integrate multiple modes, including written texts, images, audios and videos. One Weibo post may consist of characters or words with no limit and it may also be composed of a text with hyperlinks. Reforms of undergraduate education is one of the major concerns in our society where various social groups are involved. People may utilize different linguistic choices to express opinions and arouse discussions. Weibo posts of government departments and mainstream media are worth analyzing due to its representativeness and high quality. Data of the study is selected from government Weibo and official Weibo mainly posting government affairs, and these accounts enjoy more than 1 million followers, including Weiyang Jiaoyu, Guangming Daily, China Youth News, China Education Journal, and CCTV news. The data consists of 50 texts about reforms of undergraduate education from January 2016 to June 2021. All texts are gathered via the keyword search ("Reforms of Undergraduate Education").

Chinese texts are first analyzed for the accuracy and consistency of this study. However, since the appraisal framework is based on western paradigms of discourse analysis, it is of necessity to translate Chinese texts into English if the research employs the appraisal framework in a Chinese context. The English version is translated literally by the author and proofread by two fellow students from the class of Corpora and Discourse Studies of Shanghai International Studies University and one teacher from the School of International Studies, Sun-Yat sen University.

This study adopts both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative method is used to present distributions and frequencies of appraisal resources in Weibo texts with the help of UAM Corpus Tool. Qualitative method is applicable to further investigate the appraisal resources in specific Weibo texts about reforms of undergraduate education.

This study attempts to analyze attitudes and stances reflected in Weibo texts. The underlying research questions are as follows:

- (1) How do Weibo texts about reforms of undergraduate education convey different attitudes via lexical and semantic choices?
- (2) What appraisal meanings are conveyed in Weibo texts about reforms of undergraduate education?
- (3) How are poster-reader relationships reflected in Weibo texts about reforms of undergraduate education?

4.2. The appraisal framework: A new approach for evaluating meanings

Martin and Rose ^[23] noted, “appraisal is concerned with the attitudes negotiated in a text, the strength of the feelings involved and the ways in which values are sourced and readers aligned.” Accordingly, appraisal framework can be categorized into three major domains: attitude, engagement and graduation.

As the primary system in the appraisal framework, attitude is classified into three sub-systems: affect, judgement and appreciation. Affect deals with resources for construing positive or negative emotional reactions, involving un/happiness (e.g. happiness or hate), in/security (e.g. trust or anxiety), dis/satisfaction (e.g. respect or displeasure) and dis/inclination (e.g. desire or fear) ^[3]. Judgement is the assessment of people’s behavior according to ethics, morality or other principles. It can be further divided into social esteem and social sanction ^[3]. Appreciation, evaluating the aesthetic quality of certain semiotic and natural phenomena, has three sub-categories: reaction (notability and likeability), composition (balance and complexity) and valuation (social significance) ^[3].

The engagement system deals with sources of attitudes, which includes monoglossia and heteroglossia. Martin and White stated that monoglossia, with no reference to other voices and viewpoints, is generally regarded as a fact or bare assertion. Heteroglossia, however, provides dialogical alternatives either contracting or expanding the dialogic space ^[3].

The Graduation system is concerned with gradability and has two sub-categories: force and focus. Force, dealing with gradable resources, comprises quantification, covering number, mass and extent, and intensification, which is used to scale quality and process. Focus deals with non-gradable resources and can adjust the strength of the boundary between categories ^[3].

appraisal framework is highly interpretive ^[24], so it enjoys distinctive advantages to explain how writers/speakers influence readers/listeners through attitude, engagement and graduation resources.

4.3. An appraisal analysis of Sina Weibo texts about reforms of undergraduate education

4.3.1. Appraisal resources employed in Weibo texts

The 50 Weibo texts about reforms of undergraduate education collected in this study mainly report current circumstances, positive outcomes and plans for further reforms, which represent positive attitude of the government to see the reforms through. Praises on achievements and expectations for a better future are presented as well. However, some Weibo texts criticize the ineffectiveness of certain policies, voicing dissatisfaction about previous failures or evaluating current conditions.

The appraisal resources in the collected data are tagged with the help of UAM Corpus Tool and reviewed and analyzed manually according to appraisal framework. The distributions of appraisal resources are shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Appraisal resources employed in Weibo texts

Attitude	Engagement	Graduation	Total
215 (52.4%)	105 (25.6%)	90 (22%)	410 (100%)

It can be seen from the statistics that there are 215 tokens of attitude resources (52.4%), 105 of engagement resources (25.6%) and 90 of graduation resources (22%) with attitude resources most frequently employed in Weibo texts. Since Weibo creates a flexible atmosphere for communication, users can express their emotions and ideas freely through texts and emojis. Thus, their stances and attitudes towards reforms of undergraduate education can be conveyed through Weibo texts.

4.3.1.1. Attitude Resources Employed in Weibo Texts

Attitude system is the major part of the appraisal framework. It contains three categories: affect, judgement and appreciation. Each of these attitudes can be expressed positively or negatively in an explicit or implicit way. According to the statistics, 41 tokens of affect resources, 130 of judgement resources and 44 of appreciation resources are found. See **Table 2**.

Table 2. The distribution of attitude resources in Weibo texts

	Affect	Judgement	Appreciation	Total
Positive (70.7%)	26 (17.1%)	91 (59.9%)	35 (23%)	152 (100%)
Negative (29.3%)	15 (23.8%)	39 (61.9%)	9 (14.3%)	63 (100%)
Explicit (71.1%)	31 (19.9%)	85 (54.5%)	40 (25.6%)	156 (100%)
Implicit (28.9%)	10 (16.9%)	45 (76.3%)	4 (6.8%)	59 (100%)

Specifically, tokens of positive attitude (152) outnumber those of negative ones. Weibo users are inclined to be positive when releasing information about reforms of undergraduate education. The reasons are as follows: first, the government tends to convey positive attitudes to reforms of undergraduate education in order to guide positive public opinions and gain popular support. Second, Weibo users would express positive emotions to accomplishments made in reforms.

As is shown in **Table 2**, explicit attitude (156 tokens) is of higher frequency than the implicit one (59 tokens). With the help of characters, hyperlinks and emojis, Weibo users can express themselves vividly and explicitly, so they could pass their feelings, mainly satisfaction towards effective policies or criticism on discouraging phenomena, to others quickly and directly.

4.3.1.1.1. Affect

Affect, as the central sub-system of Attitude, is related to resources involving emotional reactions. Affect can be realized through epithets, affective behavioral or mental processes or attributes ^[3].

It is found that positive affect resources are frequently presented in the collected data. Positive affect is used to elaborate plans for reforms, showcase government's determination to carry forward reforms and evaluate current achievements, so government Weibo could attract the public's attention and evoke interaction.

Example 1: Administrators should respect the law of higher education and create an environment that values teaching. (China Youth News, Sep. 12, 2018)

In discussing the existing problems in undergraduate education such as an overemphasis on research-oriented teaching mode and loose teaching environment, the Weibo poster shares his/her opinion with

“respect” and “value” while attempting to provide advice on advancing the quality of undergraduate education. They are two behavioral processes representing a positive expectation for a better teaching environment in higher education system. With positive feelings towards reform efforts in this text, the poster is inclined to advocate more active responses and actions of administrators to improve the current system.

Positive attitude can also be conveyed through explicit mental processes, as is shown in the following example:

Example 2: I agree that efforts should be made to continue to deepen reforms, advance innovation and promote the quality of undergraduate education. (China Youth News, Nov. 21, 2019)

When commenting on how to improve the quality of undergraduate education, the Weibo poster introduces his/her understanding of reforms with a mental process “agree”, which signals the feelings of certainty and confidence. Positive affect is directly reflected because the poster explicitly agrees on efforts to promote reforms and innovation. The mental process implies that the poster has confidence in reforms. By approving of the reforms in an explicit style, the poster is inclined to align more potential readers to support his/her view. This way can also expand further discussions because different opinions on the reform measures or even objections are welcomed.

Epithets, modifying processes or participants, may directly reflect abundant feelings of users, so the positive attitudes to the achievements or commitments can be traced through certain epithets.

Example 3: Carry forward reforms of undergraduate education in a serious manner to ensure that young people can succeed without regret! (CCTV News, Oct. 13, 2019)

The example is excerpted from a comment on reforms of undergraduate education released in the CCTV commentary program. The fact that the Weibo user shares this statement in the post is indeed an acknowledgement of the reforms. “carry forward...in a serious manner” conveys feelings of security and determination, defining the commitment of the Ministry of Education (MOE) to advance reforms. The Weibo poster uses the epithet “serious” to illustrate that if the government steadfastly implements concrete reforms, it can deliver real benefits to undergraduates. This positive interpretation is intended to seek support from the audience.

Tokens of negative affect, which take up a small proportion of data, are still worth mentioning, because Weibo users may criticize previous failures of reforms and express dissatisfaction toward recent conditions. Negative feelings of Weibo users can be conveyed through an attribute. For example:

Example 4: The policy has been issued for more than two years. However, a survey suggests that, unlike previous sensational effects, the current pace of transformation of undergraduate colleges and universities is not as fast as expected. (Guangming Daily, Feb. 23, 2017)

The Weibo user criticizes the limited effects of the policies on the transformation of undergraduate colleges and universities. The feeling of unhappiness is conveyed via the attribute “not as fast as expected”. Although reforms of undergraduate education have been put forward for several years, actions are still far from expectation. The unpleasant emotion is aggravated through the comparison with previous positive outcomes. The explicit negative affect could reflect the poster’s dissatisfaction so as to invite comments from potential readers to investigate how discouraging the condition is and influence readers to reconsider the effects of reforms.

Presenting an attitudinal behavioral process is a direct approach to express Weibo user’s negative feelings in the following example:

Example 5: A dean of the School of Computer Science at a Chinese university complains, “I came across a student lacking programming expertise, and he asked me to help him select a major that do not require programming skills.” (China Youth News, Aug. 14, 2017)

The behavioral process “complain” shows negative emotions towards an existing problem in

undergraduate education, i.e. the lack of comprehensive skill training. By quoting a complaint directly from a dean, the poster is also unsatisfied that students receive little training in undergraduate study. It also implies that reforms of undergraduate education should provide more courses to develop students' comprehensive skills. "complain" is frequently used in Weibo to discuss unhappiness or dissatisfaction in an easy and relaxed way, creating resonance for potential readers and attracting readers' attention to read more about existing problems.

Weibo posts about reforms of undergraduate education, which begin with individual emotions, would further evoke collective feelings, mainly because of the collectivism in China and the publicity of reforms of undergraduate education. Therefore, personal feelings, whether positive or negative, could raise resonance and invite further appraisals.

4.3.1.1.2. Judgement

Judgement deals with resources related to the assessment of behavior based on various principles^[3]. In Weibo posts about reforms of undergraduate education, judgement resources enjoy higher frequency than those of affect and appreciation. According to the statistics shown in **Table 2**, positive judgement resources are of the highest frequency. Weibo users prefer to explicitly praise the government efforts and validity of reform policies or express aspirations for a better education system. Positive judgements are realized via epithets containing positive meanings.

Example 6: Recently, Tsinghua University and Peking University open parts of the undergraduate courses to each other. This decision indeed symbolizes a powerful combination between two top universities. (China Youth News, Jan. 17, 2020)

As the Weibo poster comments on the sharing of selective courses between two well-known universities in China, he/she shows strong approval for the decision via the underlined epithet "powerful", which conveys the meaning of capacity. This decision matches the social expectation that colleges and universities should introduce more beneficial policies for the development of students. By expressing positive judgement, the poster attempts to persuade readers to believe that this policy would be successful in providing more alternative courses for students in two universities and enlarging their knowledge base.

It is worth noticing that metaphor is employed to express judgements implicitly. Through a vivid metaphor, the Weibo post may capture lots of attention from potential readers and generate more comments on the topic.

Example 7: Colleges and universities offer "hot pot" with abundant ingredients for undergraduates. The fundamental "hotpot seasoning" is the concept of nurturing virtue and talents. (Weiyan Jiaoyu Jun. 25, 2018)

The Weibo poster stresses the goals of colleges and universities with a metaphor presented above. It is an implicit judgement, which should be understood with the help of social and cultural backgrounds. In China, a hotpot contains various ingredients, epitomizing integration and comprehensiveness; hotpot seasoning is critical, since without it, the whole hotpot would be insipid. Here, "hotpot" means that colleges and universities should provide students with diverse courses and comprehensive training programs so that they can equip themselves with different skills beneficial to future careers. Because "hotpot seasoning" is essential, universities and colleges should also focus on the fundamental task of nurturing virtue and talents in order to cultivate students with both ability and moral integrity. Through covert judgement, the poster expresses the positive expectation for improvement of undergraduate education. The use of metaphor also captures readers' attention and can arouse further exploration of this post.

Negative judgement resources, however, are employed to point out current shortcomings, criticize loopholes in undergraduate education system and call for improvement.

Example 8: It is unwise to only focus on employment-oriented training mode for undergraduates. This

may lead to shortsightedness and undermine the fun of learning. (China Youth News, Jul. 4, 2018)

In terms of the current training mode for undergraduates, the Weibo poster explicitly conveys the feelings of dissatisfaction in this example. The epithet “unwise” reflects the poster’s objection to employment-oriented training mode, showing the meaning of capacity. The poster also stresses the negative impact of such a training mode. This individual post, which implies the severity of the problems, could evoke collective feelings among potential readers and allow more space for further discussions between readers and the poster, urging people to reflect on the weaknesses in undergraduate training and find out feasible training modes to better cultivate undergraduates.

Since reforms of undergraduate education are closely connected to public interests and social development, Weibo users tend to express their judgements towards reforms and relevant actions so as to convince potential readers to believe in their judgements and consolidate the sense of solidarity.

4.3.1.1.3. Appreciation

Appreciation resources appeared less frequently in Weibo texts because the major purposes of Weibo texts about reforms of undergraduate education is to release information about events and implementations of policies or to comment on achievements or failures. Appreciation resources are more likely to show people’s evaluation of certain events, describe processes or criticize undesirable phenomena. **Table 2** shows that tokens of positive appreciation resources are far more than those of negative ones and they are mainly realized through attributes.

Example 9: The policy of sharing courses is complementary and can draw on each other’s strengths, offering students in both universities more course alternatives. It is not only conducive to increasing the knowledge reserve, broadening their horizons, but is also beneficial to promoting the exchanges between students. (China Youth News, Jan. 17, 2020)

This example expresses positive appreciation of the policy of sharing selective courses between Peking and Tsinghua Universities. With attributes like “complementary” and “conductive, beneficial”, the poster points out the advantages of sharing courses and the force is intensified through conjunctive words with progressive meaning.

Weibo users are inclined to express positive appreciation explicitly because this way could reflect users’ approval to reforms, policies or actions, and thus create a relatively relaxed atmosphere which allows space for readers and invite further comments. Expressing positive appreciation directly may also influence readers’ feelings or even alter their attitudes, thus aligning with the readers.

4.3.1.2. Engagement resources employed in Weibo texts

As is mentioned, engagement system deals with writer-reader relationships and focuses on the negotiation with attitudes. Engagement resources can be classified as monoglossia and heteroglossia. Weibo users can adopt various strategies to modulate their attitudinal expressions. They could provide potential readers with dialogic space by embracing different opinions in their expressions, or they may restrain other voices.

In Weibo texts about reforms of undergraduate education, heteroglossia is of far higher frequency than monoglossia. See **Table 3**.

Table 3. Heteroglossia and monoglossia in Weibo texts

Monoglossia	Heteroglossia	Total
10 (9.5%)	95 (90.5%)	105 (100%)

There are 95 tokens of heteroglossia and 10 tokens of monoglossia in the data. Monoglossia presents

explicit assertions that allow no space for negotiation, so the speaker/writer assumes full responsibility for the discourse. In Weibo posts about reforms of undergraduate education, monoglossic resources are mainly used to disseminate information and maintain the sense of authority and authenticity of government and mainstream media.

Example 10: From the end of this year to the beginning of the next, the MOE will promulgate and implement teaching quality standards for all 92 undergraduate majors. These are national standards and basic requirements for undergraduate cultivation. (China Youth News, Oct. 30, 2016)

To introduce the teaching quality standards for undergraduate majors, the poster clearly states the policy released by the MOE. Monoglossia in this Weibo text directly spreads information to the public while rejecting negotiations. The information remains credible since there is no dispute and it allows no further dialogic alternatives from the public.

Heteroglossia is more frequently employed in Weibo. Heteroglossia can be analyzed through dialogic contraction and dialogic expansion. In Weibo texts about reforms of undergraduate education, dialogic expansion is more likely to be found. There are 48 tokens of dialogic contraction resources and 57 of dialogic expansion resources in the data. See **Table 4**.

Table 4. The distribution of dialogic expansion and dialogic contraction in Weibo texts

Dialogic Expansion		Dialogic Contraction				
57(54.3%)		48 (45.7%)				
Attribute	Entertain	Proclaim 39 (81.3%)			Disclaim 9 (18.7%)	
23 (40.4%)	34 (59.6%)	Pronounce	Endorse	Concur	Deny	Counter
		28 (71.8%)	8 (20.5%)	3 (7.7%)	6 (66.7%)	3 (33.3%)

When releasing information about or commenting on reforms of undergraduate education, Weibo users' resort to dialogic expansion so that space for different attitudes or positions remains and interactions can be continued. Several reasons could explain why dialogic expansion enjoys high frequency. First, quotations from authorities or government officials could ensure the objectivity and authority of Weibo posts, helping readers better understand the message. Second, since Weibo is an effective platform for communication, Weibo users are inclined to start interactions with others. Third, when interacting with each other, Weibo users are prone to extend the discussion or allow space for potential readers to express their opinions.

In dialogic expansion, the usage of entertainment (59.6%) is more frequent than attribution (40.4%), as is shown in **Table 4**. Weibo users employ entertainment to invite interactions and avoid absolute comments. As for Weibo texts about reforms of undergraduate education, posters make assessments through evidence-based postulations (e.g. *The research suggests...*), modal auxiliaries (e.g. *should, must...*) and rhetorical questions.

Example 11: The policy has been issued for more than two years. However, a survey suggested that, compared with the previous sensational effect, the current pace of transformation of undergraduate colleges and universities is not as fast as expected. (Guangming Daily, Feb. 23, 2017)

This example contains the subjective feeling of disappointment to the discouraging outcomes of the transformation process of undergraduate colleges and universities. By quoting a reliable result of a survey, the Weibo user may strengthen his/her opinion. However, this view is just one among a range of potential alternatives, because other surveys may be conducted to praise the achievements in the transformation. Therefore, this approach could offer dialogic alternatives and invite more comments with different attitudes from others.

Example 12: Universities should assume more responsibilities to strengthen undergraduate education. (China Youth News, Sep. 12, 2018)

As the Weibo poster highlights the critical role of colleges and universities in advancing reforms of undergraduate education, the “deontic” modal “should” explicitly expresses his/her personal demand for universities to shoulder more responsibilities. This modal auxiliary construes a communicative setting and open up space for further dialogue. When other users read this post, they want to figure out what responsibilities the universities should assume so that the interaction could be continued.

Example 13: How to develop high-level undergraduate education? Here comes the recipe! Colleges and universities should offer “hot pot” with abundant ingredients for undergraduates. The fundamental “hotpot seasoning” is the concept of nurturing virtue and talents. (Weiyan Jiaoyu Jun. 25, 2018)

To answer the question of how to improve undergraduate education, the Weibo user posts a rhetorical question first and later provides an answer. It can be seen from this example that the poster is positive about efforts made in education reforms because he/she utilizes an exclamation mark, an epithet of intense feelings and an attribute of positive attitudes. This rhetorical question is open-ended and spares space for potential readers to give their answers or further investigate the Weibo post.

For attribution, Weibo users tend to quote from authentic sources to strengthen their opinions and invite other evaluations from readers. By attributing to others’ voices, Weibo users present their opinions explicitly but hide their stance back. Such expression may help avoid responsibility and reveal the reliability of the information.

Example 14: Jin Donghan believes that facing the diversity and uncertainty of the future world, we must re-examine talent cultivation in undergraduate education from the perspective of lifelong education. (China Youth News, Dec. 2, 2019)

This Weibo post directly quotes an external voice from Jin Donghan, President of Tianjin University, to stress the importance of reconsidering the talent cultivation mode for undergraduates. When commenting on the efforts on talent cultivation, the Weibo poster chooses an objective remark from a university president in order to gain more approvals from potential readers. Dialogic space is reserved for different opinions because the topic of undergraduate cultivation is worth discussing.

The resources of dialogic contraction are also essential in Weibo texts about reforms of undergraduate education. Weibo users restrain dialogic alternatives and cut down the space for further interaction via dialogic contraction. **Table 4** shows that tokens of proclaim resources take up 81.3%, which are far higher than those of disclaim resources (18.7%). This indicates that Weibo users prefer to express views in a prudent and objective way instead of bluntly opposing the contrary opinions.

Proclaim means that an opinion is put forward clearly and other alternatives are thus removed. It can be realized through concurrence, pronouncement and endorsement. According to **Table 4**, pronouncement appears most frequently. With additional external support, pronounce resources are mainly used to limit the scope of dialogic alternatives.

Example 15: China's Ministry of Education has issued a guideline to deepen the reforms of undergraduate education and teaching and improve the quality of talent cultivation. The guideline asked universities to issue serious assessment in exams and graduation. (China News, Oct. 12, 2019)

When introducing the policies to deepen the reforms of undergraduate education, the Weibo poster directly quotes the requirements of a guideline issued by the MOE, narrowing the space for dialogue. Since the Weibo posts in official accounts are released by opinion leaders, such as universities, government departments or officials, users express their evaluation with an authorial voice to guide the public opinions and form a positive stance of reforms.

Compared to proclaim, disclaim can be realized through denial and countering. **Table 4** shows that Weibo users tend to employ denial to negate certain views.

Example 16: Tutors are not exclusive to postgraduates. (Weiyao Jiaoyu Mar. 15, 2016)

This example is excerpted from a remark where the poster supports the idea that undergraduates also need a tutor, and then points out that undergraduates could seldom receive instructions from teachers. With the word “not”, the proposition that tutors are exclusive to postgraduates is negated. The underlying meaning is that undergraduates need help from tutors. The poster expects that potential readers can support this view, and a sense of solidarity could be created.

Countering refers that a new opinion is proposed to replace or supplant the existing viewpoint or stance instead of rejecting it only.

Example 17: China has invested a lot of money in undergraduate education, but all talents have gone abroad. Obviously, this is a worrisome problem. (China Youth News, Aug. 14, 2017)

This example shows a criticism of the current mode of undergraduate cultivation. Instead of stating directly that the goals for student cultivation have problems, the Weibo poster chooses an implicit way by bringing into a new concept “worrisome problem” to support his/her opinion. In this way, the poster holds a relatively subjective stance, which may create resonance with others' feelings. The potential readers may thus be persuaded to align with the poster.

The high frequency of engagement resources in Weibo texts about reforms of undergraduate education reveals that Weibo users, when conveying their attitudes, may tactfully allow space for dialogue and interaction. This strategy can effectively increase communication, helping to strengthen the relationship between posters and readers.

4.3.1.3. Graduation resources employed in Weibo texts

Graduation resources are employed to assess plans, achievements and current conditions of reforms and actions in Weibo. In this way, Weibo users attempt to strengthen or weaken their attitudes, adjust degrees of appraisals and form closer relationships with readers.

Table 5. The distribution of graduation resources in Weibo texts

Force		Focus	Total
69 (76.7%)		21 (23.3%)	90 (100%)
Intensification 53 (76.8%)	Quantification 16 (23.2%)		

As is shown in **Table 5**, 69 tokens of force resources and 21 of focus resources are found. Tokens of force resources take up a larger proportion of the data. When commenting or expressing opinions, Weibo users often employ certain words to intensify or quantify their expressions. Intensification is frequently used to stress viewpoints according to the statistics and can be realized via comparatives or superlatives, modal adjuncts or repetition.

Example 18: Undergraduate education, which promotes the overall development of Chinese universities, represents the core competitiveness of countries' universities. Obviously, a high-quality undergraduate education is the most needed in university development. (Guangming Daily, Jul. 2, 2019)

The superlative “most” in this example may intensify the poster's force of utterance when he/she emphasizes the significance of a high-quality undergraduate education. This superlative would strengthen the positive attitude of the poster and represent strong support to advance the development of undergraduate education. That may boost the public's confidence in reforms and persuade readers to believe in the positive outcomes brought by reforms of undergraduate education.

Example 19: After the MOE repeatedly stressed the importance of Chinese class, colleges and universities in China started to act one after another. (Guangming Daily, May 18, 2017)

In this example, the Weibo poster comments on the reform of opening Chinese classes made by universities and colleges. Modal adjuncts in Chinese can adjust the degree of utterance. “one after another” intensifies the positive attitude of the Weibo poster towards the swift actions taken by universities and colleges. This expression may align readers with the poster and win favor from the public as well, because people may hope to see positive outcomes of the reforms.

Example 20: Xu Dongqing: It is necessary to change the following conditions: insufficient energy input of school leaders, insufficient devotion of teachers, insufficient dedication of students and insufficient resource allocation in certain universities. (China Education Journal, Dec. 12, 2018)

Parallel structure and repetition can effectively intensify the force of the utterance. The epithet “insufficient” appears four times in a single sentence, heightening the dissatisfaction towards current discouraging conditions in certain universities. The poster tends to emphasize the existing problems and call for changes and solutions, inviting more comments from potential readers to criticize the discouraging facts or offer feasible suggestions to tackle the problems mentioned above.

Quantification can be realized through comparatives such as “more outstanding talents”, “more individualized scheme”, “more courses”. These phrases, which reveal the government’s determination to implement plans and policies for positive outcomes, may also strengthen potential readers’ confidence in government efforts and persuade the public to support the reforms. Solidarity between the government and the public will thus be enhanced.

Apart from force, focus is used by Weibo posters to sharpen their tones in texts about reforms of undergraduate education. Modal adjuncts or epithets containing strong feelings are mostly employed when commenting on current conditions in reforms, as can be seen in the following example.

Example 21: In college education, students often study and acquire knowledge passively. This mode simply limits students’ creativity and innovation ability. The key to college education is to transform the role of students from listeners to real participants in the class. (China Youth News, Jan. 14, 2019)

The poster’s relatively strong criticism of passive learning in college education is reflected by the modal adjunct “simply”, which could sharpen the poster’s tone. It could align with readers who are also against this learning mode so as to win support. The poster then claims that it is critical to enhance students’ engagement in the class and make them real participants. The epithet “real” conveys a strong attitude and indicates a maximal investment in the value position. Sharpening the tones can help convince readers of the effectiveness of students’ participation and maintain poster-reader solidarity.

Overall, graduation system, as a modification of attitude system, is essential to express posters’ attitudes and stances. Force is an important way to construct Weibo posts and intensify appraisal degrees, while focus can sharpen tones of posters, thus aligning with the readers and maintaining close relationships.

4.3.2. Additional appraisal strategies in Weibo texts

The above sections demonstrate that Weibo texts contain nearly all types of appraisal strategies. First, positive attitudes are inclined to be explicitly expressed by Weibo posters in order to gain acknowledgement from readers and maintain solidarity; second, strategies of dialogic expansion are frequently adopted to allow space for interactions and maintain close poster-reader relationships; third, the intensification of attitudes and the sharpening of voices are employed to reinforce posters’ stances, thus further aligning posters with readers. Analyses of the appraisal framework suggest that Weibo text formation is a choice-making process at various linguistic levels. Through years of usage and development, Weibo discourse, a new type of electronic discourse, has formed its own way to convey appraisal meanings. In Weibo texts about reforms of undergraduate education, additional appraisal strategies are adopted to reflect attitudes and stances of Weibo users.

First, Weibo users are inclined to employ emojis to express their attitudes towards reforms of

undergraduate education. The use of emojis indicates that Weibo is a platform for users to express personal feelings in an informal way. The attitudes revealed by emojis may arouse recognitions of the readers and invite further discussions. For example:

Example 22: Wu Yan: Problems still exist in many fields of reforms of undergraduate education. 🙄 (Guangming Daily, Oct. 26, 2018)

When criticizing the insufficient efforts in reforms of undergraduate education, the Weibo user adds an emoji to extend his/her suspicion to the effectiveness of reforms. The emoji “🙄” could vividly reflect a teasing emotion. Putting the emoji at the end of the post could draw readers’ attention to and urge them to consider the weaknesses in reforms.

Example 23: The Ministry of Education issued a document not long ago and asked universities to issue serious assessment in exams and graduation. The MOE is taking real action to carry forward reforms of undergraduate education! 🙄 (People’s Daily Nov 1, 2019)

The emoji “🙄” means that the poster takes the policies released by the government into account and then expresses the opinion with full consideration. Readers would tend to believe in the poster’s opinion since he/she seemingly has a thorough understanding of the reforms. This emoji would influence readers’ attitudinal reactions and evoke poster-reader interactions.

Through posting the facial expressions in a Weibo text, users can create a “face-to-face” communication and express themselves in an explicit and quick way. This strategy could help to foster closer relationships between readers and posters.

Second, since Weibo is an online social platform, the integration of written texts, hyperlinks, images and videos in one post can be seen as a gesture of request and invitation to readers. Weibo posters could reinforce their attitudes with external support because hyperlinks, videos and images may all be quoted from other reliable sources. By presenting a hyperlink alongside an imperative or interrogative sentence, Weibo posters hope to draw potential readers’ attention. For example: “Click the pictures below and know more”, “Click the following hyperlinks to watch the live broadcast”, “Repost quickly”, “What is your view on this issue?”. These strategies, which can invoke positive attitudes of large scale, express eagerness to inform readers and in return, readers will have a better understanding of the topics and may engage in further discussions. Moreover, communicative functionality can be realized by the use of heteroglossic engagement, which is employed by writers or speakers to start interactions with or to align themselves with potential readers or listeners [25]. Hyperlinks, a novel strategy of heteroglossic engagement [25], serve as prompts to continue the poster-reader interactions because potential readers may be willing to click the hyperlink, lists or pictures, repost the original text or comment on posters’ view. Weibo posters leverage the interactive feature of hyperlinks to open up dialogic space and to encourage potential readers to explore further information.

Third, Weibo users tend to use the first person like “we”, “all of us” and the second person “you” to strengthen the sense of solidarity and seek support from more readers. They attempt to construct a collective stance with a positive attitude through the use of “we” to report progress in reforms. When outlining plans for further action, the government employs “we” to seek support from the public. Users try to receive comments from potential readers by using “you” in the last sentence of a post because employing the second person can narrow the distance between posters and readers, and thus the sense of solidarity may be enhanced.

Lastly, as a new type of electronic discourse, Weibo discourse enjoys distinct features which are informal expression, various rhetorical devices or witty remarks. According to the data in the study, the usage of exclamation marks and irony can catch the attention of potential readers, because the positive or negative attitudes of posters are intensified through slightly exaggerated expressions. For example:

Example 24: The good old days for college students to play games and start romantic relationships

have passed!!! Universities should increase “academic burdens” in a reasonable way to boost student’s development. (CCTV News, Oct. 12, 2019)

In this example, the poster highly rejects a loose and comfortable undergraduate life. One exclamation mark can denote the feeling of the poster and three exclamation marks using together can undoubtedly intensify the strong feeling of the poster. In addition, the word “good old days” is an irony. The poster believes that university life should not be an easy and idle one. With irony combined with three exclamation marks, the poster strengthens the disapproval of current conditions and attempts to pass his/her negative attitude onto potential readers, influencing readers’ previous attitudes towards college lives.

5. Major findings and discussion

Through quantitative and qualitative analyses of the appraisal meanings conveyed in 50 Weibo texts about reforms of undergraduate education, certain points should be highlighted.

First, Weibo users generally prefer to convey positive appraisals to reforms of undergraduate education in an explicit way. In terms of attitude system, judgement is frequently employed to express users’ positive attitudes. It shows that the public are in favor of the reforms, related policies and swift actions made by the government. They are also confident in the improvement of undergraduate education system. However, negative attitudes are also found in certain Weibo texts, criticizing the failure and ineffectiveness of government actions. Influenced by cultural contexts, some Weibo users are inclined to use metaphor and irony to express negative attitudes. At the same time, other strategies are adopted to convey attitudes such as emojis and repetition of exclamation marks. Such approaches could garner readers’ attention towards issues related to reforms of undergraduate education and try to create a sense of solidarity.

Second, as for engagement resources, dialogic expansion is employed more frequently than dialogic contraction. Government Weibo serves as an authoritative platform for releasing important messages and guiding positive public opinions, so users may proclaim government decisions and policies explicitly to narrow the dialogic space. Different from traditional news discourse, Weibo texts are constructed in negotiable and daily language, which could promote interactions with potential readers. By quoting from government documents or officials, Weibo users’ resort to attribution to maintain the authority of the released information. While using entertainment, posters can invite further comments from potential readers and continue the dialogue. It is worth mentioning that Weibo users tend to employ the first and second person to foster a sense of proximity so that they can align with readers and gain support.

Third, based on the analysis of graduation resources, Weibo users tend to intensify their tones and sharpen their voices when commenting on reforms of undergraduate education. When it comes to effective policies on undergraduate education, Weibo users strengthen their confidence and positive attitudes towards reforms through intensified expressions; as for discouraging conditions in colleges and universities, Weibo users sharpen the tones to show dissatisfaction and criticism. In this way, Weibo users are more likely to convey stances and attitudes directly and be responsible for what they said, trying to convince potential readers to agree with their opinions.

Appraisal resources are successfully employed in Weibo texts. Through constructing Weibo posts, the government could convey the stance to reforms of undergraduate education and start interactions and “face-to-face” dialogues with users in an informal manner. Readers of those posts could actively engage in interaction rather than passively receive opinions and messages.

6. Conclusion

Through the analysis of appraisal resources in 50 Weibo texts, the study proves that appraisal framework is applicable to analyzing Chinese discourse. It provides a valuable reference for government Weibo. Based on the analysis of attitude resources in this study, it is hoped that the government can obtain a basic

knowledge of users' attitudes towards the reforms, so government Weibo could better guide the positive attitude of people. By studying the engagement strategies employed in presenting evaluations, government Weibo can improve its ways of disseminating information and generate effective communication with the public. However, it should be admitted that, studies with a larger database are encouraged to further investigate the appraisal strategies employed in Weibo texts. In addition, since the study is confined to main texts of government posts, it is also of great help to analyze the attached comments or reposts combined with the main texts because they can convey posters' attitudes more explicitly. In a word, more studies need to be conducted to obtain a thorough understanding of the development and applications of appraisal framework in social media.

Disclosure statement

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