

## Analyzing Empathetic Discourse in China's State-Run Youth Media: A Socio-Cognitive Approach

Qijun Song<sup>1\*</sup>, Enci Huang<sup>1</sup>, Yucheng Zhong<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Guangdong University of Education, Huadu District, Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, China, 510800

\*Corresponding author: Qijun Song

| Received: 21.07.2024 | Accepted: 26.08.2024 | Published: 29.08.2024 |

**Abstract:** New media empathetic discourses harness the power of digital platforms to achieve empathetic effects, driven by both social cognition and individual psychology. This study focuses on the empathetic discourse on the “Night Thoughts” column of China Youth Daily, a state-run media aiming to foster youth development. Adopting a socio-cognitive approach with positive discourse analysis, this research examines 208 articles published up to December 31, 2023. It identifies three strategies in building the empathetic discourse: relevant mental representation, close discourse order and naturalized social order. Additionally, a “socio-cognitive” model of empathetic discourse is proposed to provide a theoretical reference for future research.

**Keywords:** Empathetic discourse, socio-cognitive approach, China Youth Daily, new media, positive discourse analysis.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

New media refers to the medium of disseminating information through computer or similar digital devices (Kuang, 2012). The development of new media has made platforms such as WeChat and Weibo in China a fusion field for discourse dissemination. The fragmented, diversified, and vertically segmentary self-media system seizes the discursive power with acute response to hot topics and popular discourse, thus undermining the mainstream media. The youth, especially college students, are popular users of new media for obtaining information. They are, however, susceptible to negative values and misinformation (Gao, 2019). These negative effects are related to the weakening of mainstream media's voice in the complex discourse field, as well as the social cognition, topic preferences, and discursive habitus of young people. To attract young people's attention in these chaotic discourses, deliver the voice of mainstream media, and to guide the youth to think rationally require consideration of the empathic mechanism of new media discourse, empathic discourse and rational thinking interaction. The socio-cognitive analysis of empathetic discourse, particularly within state-run media targeting youth, offers a compelling intersection of linguistics, psychology, and media studies. This review critically examines the empathetic discourse in “Night Thoughts,” a column from “China Youth Daily” through a socio-cognitive lens.

In recent years, the rise of new media platforms has significantly influenced the construction of empathetic discourse (Forceville, 2009; Yu, 2009). These platforms, owing to their vast reach and interactive nature, have facilitated a nuanced integration of empathy within media content, catering especially to the youth. The socio-cognitive perspective, as posited by renowned scholars (Gibbs, 2012; Hampe, 2017), suggests that empathetic effects are not solely products of textual structures but are deeply intertwined with both social cognition and individual psychological processes. The examination of 208 articles from “Night Thoughts” reveals a strategic construction of empathetic discourse, orchestrated through three primary mechanisms: relevant mental representations, maintaining a close discourse order, and naturalizing social order. These strategies underscore an educational and emotional resonance with the youth, facilitating their growth and cognitive empathy development (Maalej, 2015; Rocci *et al.*, 2018).

The study introduces a “socio-cognitive” model of empathetic discourse, emphasizing the role of cognitive operations like metaphor and metonymy in crafting empathetic narratives. The exploration of empathetic discourse in “Night Thoughts” significantly contributes to our understanding of the socio-cognitive mechanisms underpinning empathy in media narratives. By highlighting the educative potential of empathetic discourse, this research provides a valuable framework

Quick Response Code



Journal homepage:  
<https://saspublishers.com/>

**Copyright © 2024 The Author(s):** This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution **4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0)** which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

**Citation:** Qijun Song, Enci Huang, Yucheng Zhong (2024). Analyzing Empathetic Discourse in China's State-Run Youth Media: A Socio-Cognitive Approach. *Cross Current Int Peer Reviewed J Human Soc Sci*, 10(6), 137-145.

for future studies, aiming to enhance the appeal and impact of mainstream media discourse in the digital era.

## 2. From Empathy to Empathetic Discourse

It is necessary to clarify the concept of “empathy” before discussing the connotation and elements of empathetic discourse. “Empathy” also known as “sympathy” or “vicarious feeling” was initially proposed by Carl Rogers (Rogers, 1951), the founder of humanistic psychology. Empathy refers to the ability to understand the inner world of others. Individuals with empathetic abilities can experience the inner world of others as if they were experiencing their own, thus enabling them to better understand the feelings and experiences of others. This process also involves perspective-taking and emotional and non-emotional reactions from perspective-taking. Emotional reactions are commonly observed in emotional empathy, where individuals can experience emotions such as joy, pain, sadness, or worry when faced with the situation of others, which belong to shallow representations. Correspondingly, cognitive empathy is deeper and related to factors (Yuan, Liu, & Liu, 2019) such as knowledge, experience, social cognition relationships, and situational evaluations. Media psychologist Arthur Ciaramicoli (Ciaramicoli, 2017) extended the definition of empathy to the behavioral ability, suggesting that empathy is not just about understanding the experiences of others but also about being able to respond after careful consideration. This emotional and behavioral ability is not acquired after birth but innate to humans, and the enhancement of empathetic abilities relies on communication and interaction between individuals. From a physiological perspective, empathetic activities are closely tied to the decisive role of “mirror neurons.” Therefore, language plays an important role in empathy, as individuals use words to convey emotions, exchange thoughts, psychological perception and experiences, providing empathy with the medium, emotional and behavioral presets.

In the process of communication between different individuals, empathy reflects a unique intersubjectivity, laying the foundation for building good interactive relationships (Tang, 2019). From a discourse perspective, intersubjectivity is implicit in the communicative process between authors and readers. Authors use discourse as a medium to construct communicative relationships with readers, but due to temporal and spatial limitations, communication between authors and readers is often one-way and lacks dynamic frequency, making it difficult to form interactive relationships. To achieve empathy, authors is required to have the ability to preset target readers and adopt targeted empathetic discourse construction strategies. And readers, as the receiver and interpreters, are required to have discourse comprehension abilities and good empathetic abilities. Research on the combination of empathy and discourse mainly focuses on communication. Wu Fei believes that to achieve

empathetic communication, emphasis should be placed on foundation of empathy—love (Wu, 2019). This “love” is essentially a common emotional connection that allows the audience to empathize and understand. Tang Runhua took the example of the “Belt and Road” initiative to analyze three key dimensions of empathetic communication: motivation and role, content selection, and discourse style (Tang, 2019). At the level of discourse style, empathetic abilities include the ability to activate the potential empathy of others, namely infectiousness. Therefore, to promote empathetic discourse communication, expression should be closer, more vivid, and richer, as well as more rationally powerful and more emotionally appealing. How to integrate these characteristics into discourse requires specific empathetic discourse strategies. Based on the above research, empathetic discourse can be defined as discourse that can activate potential empathetic abilities of others, evoke their emotional and cognitive empathy, and enable them to understand the feelings and experiences of the relevant characters (authors, interviewees, characters in novel, etc.). For better analysis, this paper focuses on the empathetic relationship between discourse authors and readers.

This type of discourse has subjectivity and dynamism, serving as a medium for specific readers and authors to achieve empathetic effects. Its construction strategy is a means of control. Taking journalism as an example, “the prominent change of news discourse is not that it is becoming more emotional but more diverse in emotional styles” (Tang, 2019). Diverse emotional styles are manifestation of respecting individuals’ subjectivity of and aims to activate readers’ empathetic responses. This diversity is manifested in different reader groups, with the continuity of empathetic effects as a representation. The empathetic effect of the same discourse will vary in the readers group. The greater the overlap between the readers and the target readers preset by the author when creating the discourse, the more likely the readers are to empathize with the author.

The dynamism is manifested in discourse information, contextual information, and cognitive interaction. From the perspective of discourse and cognitive correlation, it is first necessary for the author’s cognitive environment to align (or at least overlap) with that of the readers. Additionally, it is necessary for discourse information and context to be fully coordinated to achieve coherence of meaning, so that readers can verify contextual assumptions and achieve maximum contextual effects with minimal cognitive effort during dynamic inference (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). Otherwise, it is difficult to achieve empathy. Furthermore, dynamism is also demonstrated in discourse selection. Empathetic discourse is not constant because the cognitive environment of individuals is constantly changing due to various external stimuli. Certain concepts, buzzwords, phrases, etc., have a shorter lifespan. Within a certain time, they are helpful

for most specific readers to empathize. Over time, however, the number of readers resonate with these empathetic discourses decreases, and the empathetic effects gradually weakens. For example: Epic, Swag, YOLO (You Only Live Once), LOL (Laugh Out Loud), FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), BFF (Best Friends Forever), Totes (Totally), etc. With subjectivity and dynamism, discourse constructors need to clarify the target readers and understand their cognitive patterns and discursive habitus. Vague and generalized target reader groups will increase the difficulty of discourse selection and construction strategies, as well as the uncertainty of empathetic effects. Alien discursive habitus can also lead to contradictions and conflicts in discourse strategies. Therefore, it is important to focus on the choice of discourse that aligns with the target readers' cognitive experience and expectations, and to find appropriate construction strategies within a stable and continuous context.

### 3. The “Socio-cognitive” Model of Empathetic Discourse

The “Socio-cognitive Discourse Analysis” of empathetic discourse, also known as the “Discourse-cognition-society triangle” theory, was proposed by van Dijk. This theory addresses the neglect of the cognition in traditional discourse analysis by integrating cognition, discourse, and society into a triangular relationship. It defines discourse as “the form of social interaction, representation and reproduction of social cognition” (van Dijk, 2014). To explain the characteristics of discourse coherence and macrostructure, van Dijk believes it is necessary to draw on achievements from cognitive psychology, focusing on the expression of knowledge, the relationship between language and context, memory types, and their construction features (van Dijk, 1980).

The “Socio-cognitive Discourse Analysis” model consists of three levels: mental representation, discourse order, and social order. Starting from these three levels and integrating empathetic discourse characteristics, a “Socio-cognitive” construction model of empathetic discourse can be established in reverse. As shown in Figure 1, both mental representation and social order act on discourse order to construct discourse using language as representation. Mental representation belongs to the social-psychological dimension, where the speaker constructs subjective representations and forms a psychological concept of communicative activities. Construction and interpretation of the discourses require combining individual experience and contextual psychological representations, linking individuals with society. Therefore, when analyzing discourse, personal schema knowledge and social schema knowledge must first be activated to facilitate subsequent analysis of discourse structure and meaning (Xin & Liu, 2017). At the mental representation level of empathetic discourse construction, it is necessary to establish a correlation between context and knowledge. Knowledge is internalized in the form of “schemas” in brain, and is

activated by information stimuli in related contexts. Such “schema” is a “knowledge structure that associates and integrates memory (van Dijk, 1983)”. The premise of correlating context and knowledge is to identify the target audience of the discourse and understand the shared schema knowledge of the target audience, ensuring that the discourse constructor and the audience's cognitive schema match, thus constructing a corresponding context. Themes, discourse, and other related elements are all regulated by the context, forming a correlation with discourse construction. For example, if a WeChat official account column is based on the principle of “popular science for elementary school students”, then the discourse constructor should identify the target audience of as elementary school students, and construct the context around theme of science and pupils' schema knowledge. This also limits the selection of topics and discourse expression. In this case, if obscure and professional topics are adopted, and academic discourse is employed, the relevance between context and the target audiences' knowledge is weakened, and the readers will not be able to understand the original meaning of text and will be hard to empathize.

Discourse order belongs to the cognition dimension, focusing on language expression, such as citation and pronoun, as well as local meaning analysis. In the construction of empathetic discourse, empathetic discourse strategies are formed through the selection of specific words, sentences, and even passages, combined with the implicit meaning of discourse. According to the dynamism of empathetic discourse, it can be divided into stable empathetic discourse paradigms and dynamic target discourse habits. Empathetic discourse paradigms include: inclusive pronouns “we” and emotional language, etc. These discourses prone not to influence by individual differences and cognitions, thus they are relatively stable. Target discursive habitus are divided according to the audiences, with the target audiences as the core, focusing on the present common cognitive schema and discursive habitus. For example, in 2021, a popular Chinese Internet buzzword “the clown is actually me myself” can be considered a discursive habitus of young netizens back then. If the target audience is young netizens, using such language in a relevant context can help to narrow the cognitive distance with readers and promote empathy.

The social order analysis of text emphasizes denaturalizing the widely accepted ideologies, exploring the discourse constructor's implicit attitudes and values. In the empathetic discourse construction model, naturalization is used to incorporate the author's attitudes and values, while the author's ideology is tried to be concealed. By using naturalized discourse, the author's ideology is made similar to those of the target audience, in order to blend in target audience. In addition, using naturalized discourse also helps to balance the power between the author and the audience, convey information to readers in an equal manner through non-imperative

language, increase the readers' acceptance of the author and provide ideological conditions for empathy.

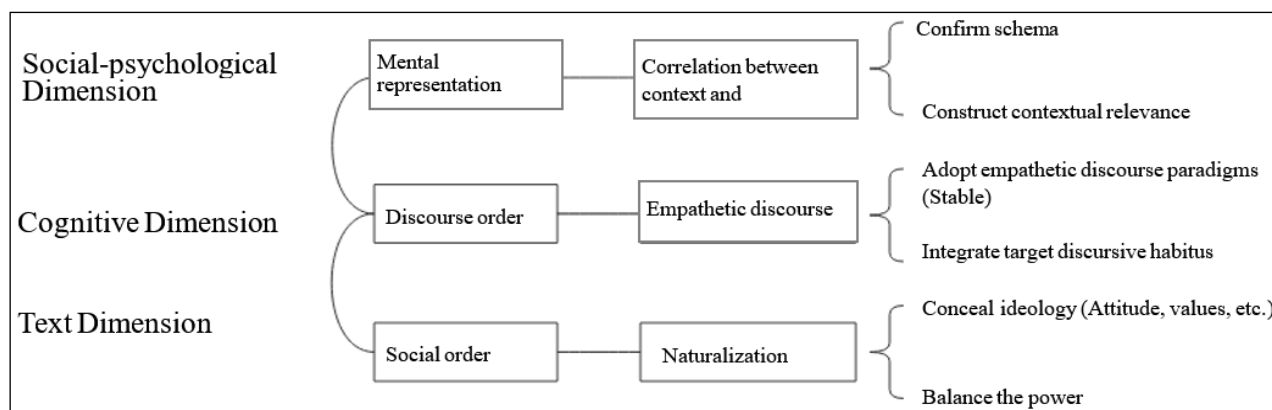


Figure 1: "Socio-cognitive" construction model of empathetic discourse

#### 4. Empathetic Discourse Construction in the "Night Thoughts" Column in China Youth Daily

The "Socio-cognitive" construction model of empathetic discourse is used to analyze the empathetic discourse construction strategies in the "Night Thoughts" Column in China Youth Daily. According to a credibility survey of major newspapers in China, China Youth Daily has been ranked in the top three for ten consecutive years and has significant influence and authority. The WeChat official account of China Youth Daily aims to serve the youth. The "Night Thoughts" Column is published approximately every two to three days, all in the form of independent single-picture articles, which is of great importance. The column often publishes articles at night to reflect on the youth's life with deep thinking and educational value. It often receives over 100,000 readings. A search on Sina Weibo suggests that comments such as "well written", "True", and "hit the spot" reflect the resonance of netizens and demonstrate the empathy of the discourse. As of December 31, 2021, there was a total of 208 articles (excluding comic posts), with 534,166 words. A mixed research method was used. At the quantitative analysis level, corpus tools were utilized to improve retrieval efficiency and accuracy. The online corpus tool Sketch Engine was used to divide and build corpus, as well as to obtain topic words, which were high-frequency words in the corpus to grasp the topic information. Word cloud software was used to provide visual displays. At the qualitative analysis level, representative examples were selected by locating paragraphs where key words appeared, and empathetic characteristics were specifically analyzed.

##### 4.1 Relevant Mental Representation

Context includes the psychological patterns of discourse members towards communicative context, as well as the subjective construction or definition of communicative context by discourse members. Discourse members with similar cultural backgrounds often share similar psychological patterns. Therefore, if the author and the target readers share a similar cultural background, it is easier to determine the readers' schema

knowledge in order to establish the association between knowledge and context, laying the foundation for the construction of empathetic discourse. The China Youth Daily aims to serve the young people and "Night Thoughts" column is targeting the young audiences. Content of "Night Thoughts" column relies heavily on the "景夜思 (Jingyesi)" official account. The authentication information of the "景夜思 (Jingyesi)" is a young university teacher who focuses on sharing reflections and experiences of college students and young professionals, which aligns with the above target readers. Young university teachers, as both young people and individuals closely related to young students, have a stronger cultural association and cognitive schema overlap. Therefore, authors of this kind are more likely to understand the schema knowledge of young people and construct relevant contexts.

In context construction, all the articles begin with a brief 100 words introduction "Xiao Nian says", set the context and explicitly and indicate the relevance to the target readers' cognition. The introduction concludes with "Recommended for you, Jing Ye Si (静夜思: a quiet night's thoughts)", followed by the main body. The author takes on the role of "Xiao Nian" while the readers take on the role "Jing Ye Si", creating a companion's discourse relationship in the same context where the readers listen to their companion's stories telling. In topic selection, the relevance is reflected in catering to the social hot topics that are widely concerned by young people, demonstrating both timeliness and close cognition of young people. Among the collected language materials, keywords such as "hot search", "in recent days" and "recently" appeared 78 times. "Hot search" refers to the trending searches on Sina Weibo. It is the topic that netizens widely focus on and search for during a certain period of time. In some studied relevant discourses, the introductory part of often uses with phrases like "Recently, a certain event trended on hot search", indicating the topic is new and popular, forming relevant context and intertextuality with other discourses

under the hot topic quickly. Meanwhile, phrases like “actually” and “in the author’s opinion” are used to demonstrate thoughtfulness, suggesting the author is both a storyteller and a viewpoints sharer, which reflects the features of the “thinking at night” column, arousing empathy and embedding rationality. As the saying goes, “move them with emotions, enlighten them with reason.” This is particularly true for the young people whose minds are becoming mature. Without empathy strategies, it is difficult to activate readers’ cognitive schemas and evoke resonance. Without logical reasoning, it is hard to withstand scrutiny, to truly convince readers, to enable them to think critically, or to educate them. Although other discourses may not have hot and pop keywords such as “hot search” or “recently” they still related to the cognition of the hot topics at that time. For example, during graduation season, articles like “It’s normal that no one will teach you after graduation” and “After college entrance examination, the first thing I did was to open this TV series” were shared. These topics are placed within contexts related to social cognition, and the general cognitive schema of young people at specific periods are taken into account, laying the cognitive connections for empathetic discourse.

Statistics of noun frequency can help present the macroscopic theme characteristics. The top 20 high-

frequency nouns in the “Night Thoughts” column are shown in Table 1. It can be observed that the highest-frequency noun in the discourse of “Night Thoughts” is “生活 (Life)”, with a frequency of 737 and a rate of 1.38 per thousand words. The second highest is “孩子 (Child)”, with a frequency of 420 and a rate of 0.79 per thousand words, the third “工作 (Work)”, 402 and 0.75. These high-frequency words indicate that the theme discourse is mainly about the lives of contemporary young people. The noun “问题 (Problems)” indicates key issues arisen in youth life. Taking the discourse titled “I am So Confused in my Twenties” as an example, it reflects the uncertainty that many young people currently feel about their future lives and the confusion about personal development. It addresses the main issues in the cognitive schema of young people. Additionally, “父母 (Parents)” “孩子 (Child)” “婚姻 (Marriage)” “关系 (Relationships)” are all important elements in the young people’s lives and even keywords in a series of issues. Words such as “情绪 (Emotions)” “内心 (inner world)” and “压力 (pressure)” indicate that the discourse delves into the psychological state of contemporary youth through the problems in order to a achieve an emotional connection between the author and the readers.

**Table 1: Top 20 High-Frequency Nouns in the “Night Thoughts”**

No.	Noun	Word Frequency	Word Frequency (per thousand words)
1	生活 (Life)	737	1.38
2	孩子 (Child)	420	0.79
3	工作 (Work)	402	0.75
4	父母 (Parents)	376	0.70
5	人生 (Life)	370	0.69
6	问题 (Problems)	305	0.57
7	情绪 (Emotions)	303	0.57
8	关系 (Relationships)	296	0.55
9	朋友 (Friends)	261	0.49
10	世界 (World)	259	0.48
11	时间 (Time)	247	0.46
12	婚姻 (Marriage)	223	0.42
13	妈妈 (Mother)	219	0.41
14	家庭 (Family)	218	0.41
15	网友 (Netizens)	214	0.40
16	年轻人 (Young People)	213	0.40
17	故事 (Story)	205	0.38
18	社会 (Society)	202	0.38
19	老师 (Teacher)	192	0.36
20	爱情 (Love)	183	0.34

#### 4.2 Close Discourse Order

In the following passage, the narrative perspective shifts from “Xiao Nian” to contributor. The passage is about “why parents always argue during the Spring Festival”. The article recommendation ends “This morning, my father-in-law and mother-in-law had a

small argument”, telling a personal and intimate story to leave the reader with an impression of closeness—Been there, done that, which brings the readers closer to the narrator. From the first-person perspective, the article records “parents arguing” “searching for reasons” and sharing reflections, occasionally interspersed with the

narrator's own childhood experiences of witnessing parents arguing. These real experiences evoke deep memories in the reader, constantly approaching their cognition through narration, making the reader to recall similar experiences and mix their own emotional experiences into the narrative. At the same time, the narrator's thinking is supported by scientific evidence, such as "Current psychological research shows that families with constant conflict but no divorce have a greater impact on children than the divorced ones do". By combining rational analysis with emotional experiences, the persuasive power of empathic discourse is enhanced, thus achieving a transition towards educational value.

Proximity is also reflected in the usage of pronouns. According to statistics, as shown in Figure 2, the pronoun "我 (I)" has the highest frequency, indicating the narrator's identity as an experiences sharer. "你 (you)" comes next, aiming to provide advice. It aligns with the educational purpose of promoting growth in "China Youth Daily". Third-person pronouns like "他 (he)", "她 (she)" and "他们 (they)" have a greater distance, aiming to record narratives that describe others' behavior and situations. The frequency of "我们 (we)" is relatively high, catering to the need for discourse empathy. For example, the article "Parents' New Year Arguments" mainly adopts first person approach "I" when describing personal experiences. On one hand, this meets the needs of the first-person perspective, and on the other hand, it highlights a one-on-one communication

mode with the reader. By sharing "my" experiences, the narrator paves the way for empathy. In the analysis, "我们 (we)" and "你 (you)" are used to reinforce features of conversations. The pronoun "我们 (we)" shows inclusiveness. For example, in the sentence "Our parents often think about staying at whose family during the Chinese New Year", "We" invites the reader into the narrative context, trying to involve them in recalling and thinking their parents' behavior. At this point, the narrator's parents and the readers' parents are no longer different individuals. Their cognition relies on the similarity and even commonality of parents, jointly the same prototype parents, establishing a narrative affinity between the narrator and the reader. This cognitive proximity develops into identity recognition and eventually achieves empathy. The pronoun "you" indicates the readers' role as an information recipient. Although it can still support communicative contexts, its inclusiveness is weaker compared to "we". In discourse, "You" is often used for assumptions and suggestions. For example, in the sentence "You can try to help your parents share some issues.", the reader is placed into the role of discourse, listening to the narrator's friendly advice. This embeds the educational purpose into the process of thinking and analysis. The frequency of the pronoun "你 (you)" is the highest among all the discourses, indicating the founding purpose of "China Youth Daily" in guiding personal growth. The mixed-usage of "we" and "you" reflects the interaction between empathy and education in the discourse at the strategic level.

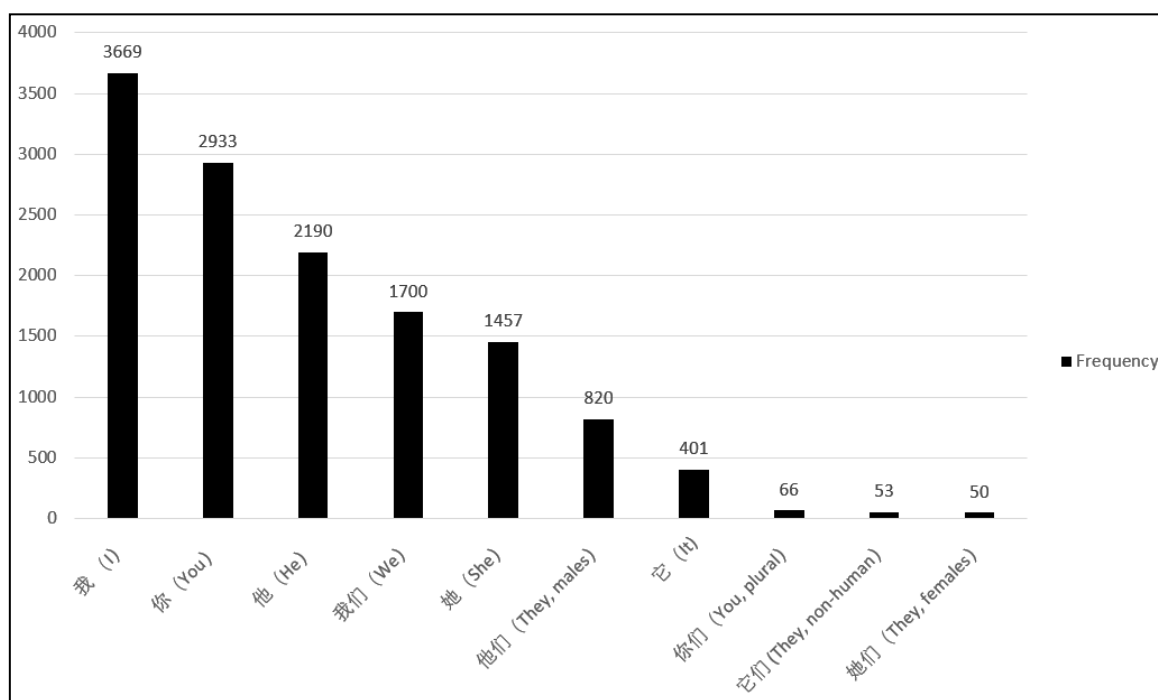


Figure 2: The Frequency of Pronoun in the discourse of "Night Thoughts"

Apart from pronouns, the discourse uses of a large number of emotional words that appeals to the

readers' emotions and evoke empathy. From the frequency table of emotional words and the word cloud

(see Table 2 below), negative emotional words include “anxious”, “fragile”, “depress”, “lonely”, “misfortune” and “regret”, etc. These high-frequency negative emotional words reflect the author’s concern for the negative mental state of the young people, and the fact that they face setbacks and has their negative feelings towards these setbacks. This establishes empathy with the target readers and then shares the author’s own experiences and thoughts to further empathize. For example, in the article “Why are Students at Top Universities (universities in the 985 Project) Still Anxious?”, “anxious” is the dominant word. The narrator admits that they also feel “anxious” when they see the strong constantly striving and promoting, and that they can easily negate themselves. By experiencing “anxious” from the same perspective as the readers, the narrator recognizes this struggle, but does not stop at “anxious”. After establishing a bond of empathy with the readers, the discourse provides examples like “Lei Jiayin accepts his mediocrity” to demonstrate the connection between accepting mediocrity and finding happiness. The expectation is to encourage the readers to accept

mediocrity and pursue happiness together with the author. The self-other empathy in the discourse (I empathizing with others) is the foundation of other-self empathy (others empathizing with I). Only when the constructor of the discourse actively empathizes with the target readers, acknowledges their experiences and feelings, can they gain empathy from the readers. Through the above examples, it can also be found that “Night Thoughts” discourse takes negative emotions as a starting point for self-other empathy and other-to-self empathy, fully understands the reasons behind the target readers’ emotions, and then integrates positive emotions to convey positive effects through other-self sympathy. The overall distribution of emotional words also reflects this trend. The word “happy” ranks the first, followed by positive emotional words such as “perfect”, “joy”, “successful” and “wonderful”. Negative emotional words like “anxious”, “depressed”, “lonely” and “regret” appeared less. Therefore, the focus of the discourse lies in positive emotions to convey positive values, while negative emotions only serve as a part of self-other empathy to arouse other-self empathy.

**Table 2: High-frequency Emotional Words in “Night Thoughts” (Top 19)**

No.	Words	Word Frequency	Word Frequency (per thousand words)
1	幸福 (Happy)	108	0.48
2	重要 (Important)	90	0.40
3	完美 (Perfect)	62	0.28
4	焦虑 (Anxious)	59	0.26
5	不同 (Different)	56	0.25
6	快乐 (Joy)	53	0.24
7	简单 (Simple)	50	0.22
8	脆弱 (Fragile)	47	0.21
9	尊重 (Respect)	44	0.20
10	成功 (Successful)	43	0.19
11	自由 (Free)	40	0.18
12	最好 (The best)	38	0.17
13	根本 (Fundamental)	34	0.15
14	优秀 (Excellent)	32	0.14
15	美好 (Wonderful)	30	0.13
16	平凡 (Ordinary)	30	0.13
17	伤害 (Harm)	29	0.13
18	抑郁 (Depressed)	27	0.12
19	孤独 (Lonely/alone)	26	0.12

At the syntactic level, communicative sentences such as interrogative sentences and buzzwords are adopted, as they are the discursive habitus of young people and help to narrow the cognitive distance with the readers. Interrogative sentences are not only narrator’s own question for thinking and analysis but also target readers’ difficult questions from the bottom of the heart, helping them express their doubts. For examples, in the sentences “Why should I take the postgraduate entrance examination?” and “Should I pursue further postgraduate

entrance examination or do an internship?”, the narrator shares the recent problems, which are not only issues that the narrator has been thinking repeatedly but also common questions that many young people seek after. These common problems represent the narrators’ and target readers’ similar experiences, and their empathy effect is based on these similar experiences. Meanwhile, internet slang aligns with the discursive habitus of young readers. Internet language is “a linguistic functional variant gradually formed by netizens using the modern

common language of the Han ethnicity through textual communication online”(Sun, Zhao & Duan, 2017). Internet slang is a high-frequency subset of internet language at a certain period. Through keyword matching retrieval, it was found that “Night Thoughts” extensively used internet slang that appeared from 2020 to 2021, such as “后浪 (hòu làng, the younger generation)”, “打工人 (dǎ gōng rén, laborer)”, “内卷 (nèi juǎn, involution)”, “凡尔赛 (Versailles, showing off)”, “甩锅 (shuǎi guō, shifting the blame)”, “社死 (shè sǐ, social death)”, and “yyds (the abbreviation of 永远的神, meaning forever the best)”. These internet slangs interact with the social hot topics that young people are concerned about, strengthen the contextual relevance. Taking “后浪 (the younger generation)” as an example, it links to the current discussion across society about the opportunities and upward mobility of the new generation, and closely aligns with the cognition of young people with enhancing freshness and better acceptability in discourse.

Close discourse order accommodates the interaction between words and sentences, even the interaction with the context. Inclusive pronouns and interrogative sentences jointly construct communicative contexts. Popular phrases are used to adapt to the target readers’ discursive habitus to enhance the comprehensibility and acceptance of the discourse. Emotional words further enhance the empathy effect, continuously reduce the communication and cognitive distance between the narrators and the readers. The embedding second-person pronouns makes the discourse educational and avoids deviating from empathy. These discourse strategies are intertwined and complementary, and jointly affect the target readers.

### 4.3 Naturalized Social Order

Social order reflects the discourse power and ideology. “Night Thoughts” integrates equal and natural discourse relations into discourse construction, obscuring ideology and promoting the unity of empathy and education. The discourse power relations refer to the relationship between discourse participants, that is, the speaker and the listener. At the level of discourse, it is the relationship between the discourse constructor and the target readers, which can be divided into vertical and horizontal types. Vertical discourse power relations are differentiated. The author assumes unequal discourse power relations with the readers, tending to use unequal vocabulary, grammar, etc., to patronize the readers. For example, obscure academic vocabulary is chosen to distance the readers. The purpose is not only to ensure the professionalism of the discourse, but also possibly to demonstrate authority, contrasting the readers’ lack of knowledge, and form an unequal power structure. Such discourse may have more professionalism but less empathy, making it difficult for readers to understand, and empathy is nowhere to be discussed. Horizontal discourse power relations are equal discourse power. The author communicates with the readers as if placing

author and the readers on the same level. For example, “Night Thoughts” extensively uses inclusive pronouns. The author regards the readers as part of the same group, enhances the sense of belonging and atmosphere through discourse construction of sharing and communicating. By incorporating popular discursive habitus favored by young people, the discourse is natural and not obscure. By avoiding imperative discourse and using suggestive discourse based on rational analysis, the discourse achieves educational purposes and equal discourse power. In such discourse power relations, ideology is also obscured. In the article of “Netizen Hotly Discussing Lang Lang’s Wife’s Pregnancy Photos”, the author believes that “many people are anxious about their appearance and figure, just like the author herself”, so she discusses the connotation of “loving oneself” by telling a story of a psychiatrist helping traumatized children and Adler’s story of transforming inferiority into strength. There is no direct manifestation of her values or coercive demand for readers to accept her viewpoint, but in the process of manifesting “loving oneself”, she obscures her opposition to “appearance perfectionism”, subtly evokes the empathy and resolves “appearance anxiety”.

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that mental representation, discourse order, and social order are not isolated in the discourse construction strategies. They interact and jointly influence discourse generation. Mental representation drives the themes and contexts. The match of the author’s and the target readers’ cognitive schema is conducive to the selection of topics, the integration of discursive habitus of the target readers’ and empathy between the reader and the author. The author’s preset relations of discourse power will, reversely, influence the discourse strategies within the discourse order, thus affecting the overall context and comprehensibility. By integrating the empathy of these three dimensions, discourse empathy effect can be maximized.

## 5. CONCLUSION

New media discourse, characterized by its rich content and diverse forms, should strive to enhance its appeal and impact by effectively harnessing empathy. Empathetic discourse, while educating, must acknowledge the intertwining influences of individual psychological experiences and broader political, societal, and cultural dynamics (Guo, 2019). Constructing such discourse involves understanding the social and cultural cognition of target audiences, deriving cognitive schemata from topical issues, and embedding emotional connections that resonate with readers.

Our study has found that the “Night Thoughts” column on China Youth Daily’s WeChat official account exemplifies empathetic discourse by combining empathy with rationality and aligning context with reader cognition. Through strategies such as relevant mental representation and close discourse orders, it reduces the



distance between authors and readers. By embedding values education within a naturalized social order, and merging emotion with thought, the column becomes more relatable and accepted by Chinese youth. This approach fosters a stronger emotional bond, guiding readers through introspection and serving as a model for creating empathetic discourse on new media platforms.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is supported by China Center for Language Planning and Policy Studies – Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press “World Languages and Cultural Studies” Fund [grant number: WYZL2023GD0020].

## REFERENCES

- Beckett, C., & Deuze, M. (2016). On the role of emotion in the future of journalism. *Social Media + Society*, 3.
- Ciaramicoli, A. (2017). *The empathic edge: It's not stress that's holding you back, it's a lack of empathy* (G. Mo, Trans.). Beijing United Publishing Co., Ltd.
- Forceville, C. (2009). Metaphor in pictures and multimodal representations. In R. W. Gibbs, Jr. (Ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought* (pp. 462-482). Cambridge University Press.
- Gao, Y. (2019). Re-understanding the position and role of new media in the formation of college students' values. [*Chuanmei Guan*], (4), 91-95.
- Gibbs, R. W. (2012). Are 'deliberate' metaphors really deliberate? A question of human consciousness and action. *Metaphor and Symbol*, 27(2), 85-108.
- Guo, B. (2019). The practice of network public opinion guidance in the age of integrated communication and the implementation of Marxism journalism perspective—Reflections based on empathy theory. *Modern Communication (Journal of Communication University of China)*, 41(8), 56-59.
- Kuang, W. B. (2012). What Exactly is New Media? [*Xinwen yu Xiezuo*], (7).
- Maalej, Z. (2015). Figurative language in anger expressions in Tunisian Arabic: An extended view of embodiment. *Metaphor and Symbol*, 30(1), 1-22.
- Rocci, A., Zampa, M., & Mazzali-Lurati, S. (2018). Argumentation as an object of interest and as a social and cultural resource. In F. H. van Eemeren & B. Garssen (Eds.), *Argumentation in Actual Practice: Topical studies about argumentative discourse in context* (pp. 9-34). John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Rogers, C. (1951). Patient-centered therapy: Current practices, implications, and theory. *American Catholic Sociological Review*, 6, 564.
- Sperber, D., & Wilson, D. (1986). *Relevance: Communication and cognition*. Blackwell and Oxford.
- Sun, L., Zhao, J., & Duan, J. (2017). *Internet communication and internet language*. Southwest Normal University Press.
- Tang, R. H. (2019). Promoting people-to-people bonds through empathic communication. *Journalism and Writing*, 7.
- Tang, R. H. (2019). Using empathetic communication to promote people-to-people connection. *Journalism and Writing*, (7).
- van Dijk, T. A. (1980). *Macrostructures*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- van Dijk, T. A. (2014). *Discourse and knowledge: A sociocognitive approach*. Cambridge University Press.
- van Dijk, T. A., & Kintsch, G. (1983). *Strategies of discourse comprehension*. Academic Press.
- Wu, F. (2019). The theoretical foundation and practical pathways for empathetic communication. *Journalism and Communication Research*, 26(5), 59-76+127.
- Xin, B., & Liu, C. (2017). Teun A. van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to discourse analysis. *Foreign Language Journal*, (5), 14-19.
- Yuan, X. J., Liu, C., & Liu, L. (2019). The psychological processing mechanism of empathy. *Journal of Psychological Techniques and Applications*, 11.