

A Genre Analysis of Rumor Refutal on Sina Weibo

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Abstract

In the digital era, social media platforms have accelerated the spread of both information and misinformation, making effective rumor refutation essential. This study conducts a genre analysis of rumor refutation posts on Sina Weibo by examining the practices of the authoritative account Chinese Internet Joint Rumor Refutal Platform. Analyzing 20 selected posts from three key sections: “Today’s Rumor Refutation,” “Today’s Science Popularization,” and “Today’s Tips”, the research deconstructs the move structure underlying these posts. The findings reveal that a systematic sequence of moves, including rumor identification, detailed description, factual refutation, and source citation, combined with the strategic use of linguistic, visual, and rhetorical resources, enhances the credibility and effectiveness of the refutations. Moreover, the interplay between these sections illustrates an interdiscursive approach that not only debunks misinformation but also promotes public media literacy and legal awareness. These insights contribute to our understanding of online communication strategies in combating digital misinformation.

Keywords

Rumor Refutation; Genre Analysis; Sina Weibo; Digital Misinformation; Authoritative Communication; Move Structure; Interdiscursivity; Media Literacy

1. Introduction

In today’s digital era, the rapid spread of information through social media has brought about significant social changes. However, alongside the benefits of instant communication, social media platforms have also become fertile grounds for the proliferation of rumors and misinformation. These rumors can range from benign misunderstandings to malicious falsehoods that have the potential to cause public panic, damage reputations, and mislead communities on critical issues such as health, safety, society and politics. The phenomenon of rumor spreading poses a substantial challenge to information integrity and public trust.

Rumor refutation has emerged as a crucial response to the spread of misinformation. Effective rumor refutation aims to debunk falsehoods and provide accurate information to the public, thereby mitigating the harmful effects of misinformation. Various strategies are employed in rumor refutation, including the use of authoritative

sources, clear and concise language, visual aids, and timely interventions. The effectiveness of these strategies can vary, making it important to analyze and understand the characteristics that contribute to successful rumor refutation.

This study focuses on examining the genre characteristics of rumor refutation on Sina Weibo, a prominent social media platform in China. Specifically, it investigates the practices of authoritative rumor refutation account called Chinese Internet Joint Rumour Refutal Platform on Sina Weibo. This account, often managed by government agencies, news organizations, or other credible entities, play a vital role in countering misinformation and restoring public trust in the information ecosystem. By analyzing the posts from these authoritative rumor refutation accounts, this research aims to identify the linguistic and stylistic features that make these posts effective. It will explore the types of evidence and arguments used, the rhetorical strategies employed, and the interaction between these refutation posts and their audience. The goal is to uncover the key elements that contribute to the success of authoritative rumor refutation efforts on Sina Weibo.

In summary, this research addresses the critical issue of rumor and misinformation on social media, with a particular focus on the genre of rumor refutation as practiced by authoritative accounts on Sina Weibo. It mainly elaborates the structure and rhetorical features of the unexplored genre of rumor refutation on Sina Weibo. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions: (1) what are the distinctive features of rumor refutation posts in terms of communicative purposes and move structure, (2) what are the rhetorical strategies used to realize the moves, particularly in terms of the use of linguistic and visual resources, and (3) what the implications of the latest rumor refutation posts in Sina Weibo. Through a detailed analysis of these refutation posts, the study seeks to provide insights into effective communication strategies for combating misinformation, contributing to the broader understanding of how to maintain information integrity in the digital age.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Rumor refutation in linguistics

In recent years, the rise of social media platforms has transformed how information is disseminated and consumed, leading to an increased focus on combating misinformation and rumors. The field of linguistics has explored various aspects of rumor refutation, seeking to understand the strategies and linguistic features that make refutations effective.

One area of research has concentrated on the role of language in constructing authoritative and credible refutation messages. Studies have examined how linguistic choices, such as the use of factual evidence and expert opinions, contribute to the perceived credibility of a message (Lewandowsky, Ecker, & Cook, 2017). Clear and concise language is often highlighted as a crucial element in ensuring that refutations are easily understood by a wide audience (Nyhan & Reifler, 2015).

Another focus has been on the linguistic indicators embedded in rumor refutations. Zhao & Fu (2024) investigate linguistic indicators that can predict the authenticity of online health rumors, focusing on emotional, exaggerated, personalized, unprofessional, and linkage language. This study finds that sentiment words, continuous punctuation, extreme numbers and adverbs, typographical errors, and hyperlinks are significant in identifying rumors. The research suggests that these linguistic cues can help individuals and organizations better assess the credibility of online health information.

Visual elements also play a significant role in online rumor refutation. The use of images, infographics, and other visual aids can enhance the effectiveness of refutation by making complex information more accessible and memorable (Xiao et al., 2020). Studies have shown that the combination of visual and textual information can significantly improve the retention of accurate information (Chan, Jones, & Jamieson, 2017).

2.2. Genre analysis

A genre is chiefly identified through its communicative purpose (Askehave & Swales, 2001) and Bhatia (2004) regards it as a “recognizable communicative event”. Swales (1990) also claims that genre is with typical structure, style, content and intended audience.

Research on genre analysis, both domestically and internationally, highlights distinct characteristics. The NR school, ESP school, and SFL school, recognized as the three most influential schools in this field, have established a robust theoretical foundation for subsequent genre studies. Western linguists have explored genres across various contexts, ranging from academic and professional settings to everyday practices. Maryam & Lotfollah (2013) conducts a genre analysis of Persian wedding invitations. It identifies seven key components that structure these invitations, reflecting both the communicative purpose and the sociocultural context of Persian weddings. When analyzing a genre, researchers usually determine the communicative goal and then collect genre instances, analyze the move structure and salient linguistic features, and finally, link discursive practices to contextual factors (Bhatia, 2004; Swales, 1990). Based on the move structure analysis, Cotos et al. (2017) think that a move can be divided into several alternative steps that convey more specific functional meanings.

Despite these advancements, several gaps and limitations remain in the linguistic research on online rumor refutation. While numerous studies have examined the effectiveness of specific linguistic features, there is a lack of comprehensive analysis regarding the overall structure and genre characteristics of rumor refutation posts. Understanding the genre as a whole, including its communicative purposes and move structures, can provide deeper insights into the mechanisms of effective rumor refutation.

This study addresses these gaps by conducting a genre analysis of rumor refutation

on Sina Weibo, a leading social media platform in China. In move structure analysis, moves are semantic and functional units applied together to achieve the overall communicative purpose of a genre (Biber et al., 2007). By analyzing posts from authoritative accounts such as Chinese Internet Joint Rumour Refutation Platform, this research aims to identify the linguistic and stylistic features that contribute to successful rumor refutation. It explores the communicative purposes, move structures, and rhetorical strategies employed in these posts, offering insights into how they engage with their audience and counter misinformation effectively.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection

The primary source for this study is the official account called Chinese Internet Joint Rumour Refutation Platform on Sina Weibo, which publishes authoritative information to refute rumors. This platform collects rumors reported by the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission disseminating refutations via its official Weibo account. For this study, 20 rumor refutation posts were selected from June and July by searching for the keyword “Today’s Rumor Refutation” within the dedicated column on their Weibo account.

3.2. Data analysis

The framework of this study mainly draws upon Swales’ (1990) genre model and Bhatia’s (2014) notion of interdiscursivity. In the Swalesian model, a genre is analyzed at three levels, namely, communicative purpose, move structure, and rhetorical strategy in a relation of realization (Feng, 2019). The first level, a genre is defined as “a recognizable communicative event characterized by a set of communicative purpose(s) identified and mutually understood by members of the professional or academic community in which it regularly occurs” (Bhatia, 2013, 49).

Based on this, the first step is to determine the shared communicative purposes of the rumor refutation posts. At the second level, the communicative purposes are realized by texts with conventionalized internal structures. Building upon this, Bhatia (2013, 2016) emphasizes analyzing the structural components or “moves” within a text, where each move serves a distinct communicative function. This analysis involves identifying which moves are obligatory and which are optional, as well as exploring their sequence and how they may overlap or intertwine to serve multiple functions.

The third aspect of genre analysis involves examining how linguistic choices, visual elements, and other semiotic resources are used to realize the communicative purposes and moves of a genre. This study will perform a qualitative discourse analysis, examining the language and imagery used in the posts to refute rumors effectively.

4. Results

In terms of the genre model put forward by Swales' (1990), the shared communicative purpose of rumor refutation posts on Sina Weibo is to correct misinformation and restore public trust. The slogan of the account is "Publish authoritative debunking information to enhance netizens' media literacy and create a clean cyberspace". These posts aim to provide accurate information and counteract the spread of rumors by presenting authoritative evidence and clarifications. Additional purposes may include promoting media literacy and encouraging users to verify information before sharing.

In addition, the communicative purposes are realized by texts with conventionalized internal structures (Feng, 2019). Based on the 20 pieces of rumor refutation information collected from Chinese Internet Joint Rumour Refutal Platform, the entire refutation content can be divided into three sections: "Today's Rumor Refutation," "Today's Science Popularization," and "Today's Tips." "Today's Rumor Refutation" section primarily includes 1-2 official clarifications about recent events or topics that have gained significant attention online. "Today's Science Popularization" section focuses on providing scientific and reasonable explanations for misconceptions that may exist in people's daily lives. The third section, "Today's Tips," offers advice based on recent laws and regulations issued by the state to help improve the media literacy of internet users. The following analysis will focus on the given rumor refutation of the three sections by using Swales' (1990) move analysis, breaking it down into distinct moves that each serve a communicative function and elaborating the rhetorical strategies used to realize the moves, particularly in terms of the use of linguistic and visual resources. Besides, there is also an interdiscursive relationship within these three sections.

4.1. Section 1: Today's Rumor Refutation

By analyzing 20 collected rumor reports, it can be concluded that the Today's Rumor Refutation section primarily consists of four moves, as shown in Table 1. Each of these four steps is essential and cannot be omitted.

Table 1. Move analysis of *Today's Rumor Refutation*.

No.	Move
1	Identification of the Rumor
2	Description of the Rumor's Origin and Content
3	Refutation of the Rumor
4	Source Citation

First, Move 1 refers to the “Identification of the Rumor,” where each rumor is specifically named at the beginning of the report in blue font. For example, one starts with “Rumor: A plane crashed in the mountains of Chongqing?” This approach clearly introduces the rumor being addressed and succinctly presents the misinformation that the section will refute, setting the stage for further analysis and correction. It ensures the netizen knows the specific topic under discussion.

Next, the second step is the “Description of the Rumor’s Origin and Content.” In this step, both text and images are often used to explain the rumor. On the one hand, the textual elements describe how the rumor was spread and provide details about its content. On the other hand, corresponding screenshots allow netizen to visually see the platforms or interfaces where the rumor was disseminated. In addition, it also uses red, stamp-like markings placed over the screenshots of the rumor and includes a striking word “Rumor” and an official certification mark from the Chinese Internet Joint Rumour Refutation Platform as well as the source of the rumor. Additionally, unnecessary information in the screenshots is often obscured with large text or blocks to prevent the disclosure of private details. This approach helps to gain the trust of the netizen. This move involves describing the platform and visual elements used to propagate the rumor, offering insight into why the misinformation might have gained traction. It contextualizes the rumor by detailing its presentation and claims.

The third step is the “Refutation of the Rumor,” where a brief and authoritative statement is used to deny the rumor. This is the core refutation move, where the falsehood is directly countered with factual information. The use of authoritative verification reinforces the credibility of the refutation. For example, “After verification, there was no crash in Chongqing, and the network information was a rumor”. The final step is “Source Citation.” This part is typically presented in parentheses, such as (Source: “Chongqing Refute Rumors” wechat public account), (Source: Guangxi Internet illegal and bad information report, “Nanning Refute Rumors” wechat public account), (source: “Tibet Refute” wechat public account). This move cites the source of the verification, enhancing the legitimacy of the information provided and encouraging trust in the correction.

4.2. Section 2: Today’s Science Popularization

The second section is called Today’s Science Popularization. Unlike the first section, which focuses on refuting rumors, this part addresses misconceptions about common knowledge or daily life issues. The aim is to use debunking to educate the public. This section can be divided into five moves, where Move 3 and Move 4 are not mandatory, while Move 1 and Move 2 are essential steps.

Table 2. Move analysis of *Today’s Science Popularization*.

No.	Move
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No.	Move
1	Identification of the Misconception
2	Presentation of Scientific Explanation
3	Identification of Symptoms and Causes
4	Advice
5	Source Citation

First, the first step is “Identification of the Misconception.” This is similar to the first section, using bold blue font to highlight the misconception or misunderstanding. This step clearly introduces the misconception and points out the misunderstanding that the section aims to clarify.

The second step is “Presentation of Scientific Explanation,” which is the core part of Today's Science Popularization. This step uses scientific knowledge to explain common misconceptions. It typically involves refuting the misconception presented in Move 1 with scientific explanations, supported by data or expert quotes. This move involves presenting factual information to debunk the rumor, using logical reasoning and scientific knowledge. It explains why the misconception is incorrect and offers a clear, authoritative alternative explanation.

For example, one refutes the misconception that “You can't eat melon while you're on a diet” by presenting a series of caloric data on melons. Another article on the describes the phenomenon of the misconception and then refutes it with a scientific and authoritative explanation.

The third step is “Identification of Symptoms and Causes,” which is not a mandatory step. The moves may not necessarily occur in a fixed order and may be mixed without clear boundaries (Bhatia, 2013). For instance, there is a misconception that “Air conditioning can blow out the misunderstanding of facial paralysis” to further explain what facial paralysis is, what symptoms it has, and what causes it, additional clarification has been provided in this section. However, for other posts, there is no detailed explanation of the symptoms or the causes of the phenomena, so this step is not necessary. It is a detailed elaboration for specific cases.

The fourth step called “Advice” is also not necessary. For example, Today's Science Popularization section provides corresponding suggestions on how to improve early facial paralysis, such as taking relevant oral liquid. However, some posts do not offer specific or detailed advice, they only provide a certain scientific explanation for existing misconceptions. For instance, the misconception “The blood lipid

test sheet has an upward arrow, which is hyperlipidemia” is explained, clarifying the various health conditions that may arise, but no practical advice or improvement measures are proposed for different health conditions. Some important sentences in the main text are also bolded and highlighted in red, allowing netizens to see the scientific explanation more clearly. To make the explanation more reasonable and scientifically based, the Today’s Science Popularization section also needs to have “source citation”, by attributing the information to a credible source such as (“Popularization of science in China” wechat public account), this move enhances the legitimacy and trustworthiness of the explanation provided.

4.3. Section 3: Today’s Tips

In the rumor refutation column of Chinese Internet Joint Rumour Refutation Platform on Sina Weibo, the third section is called Today’s Tips. This section is not about refuting specific rumors but rather provides tips on the latest national laws and regulations, aiming to achieve a certain communicative purpose, namely “enhancing the literacy of internet users.” The content of these laws and regulations mainly comes from a series of laws and regulations formulated by the Central Cyberspace Administration and includes handling and regulations for some hot issues that people may encounter in their daily lives. In this section, the move structure can be divided into five moves (as can be seen in Table 3), where Moves 1 and 5 are mandatory, while Moves 2 to 4 are not absolute and may be presented in a different order.

Table 3. Move analysis of *Today’s Tips*.

No.	Move
1	Announcement
2	Event Overview
3	Compliance Measures
4	Advice
5	Source Citation

Firstly, Moves 1 and 5 are similar to the previous two sections, but the language of Move 1, “Announcement,” is more formal compared to the previous two sections, often incorporating some elements of timeliness in the title, such as specific dates. Move 2 is not mandatory. The “Event Overview” is usually brief, often just a sentence or a few words explaining the background of the laws and regulations. For

example, certain laws and regulations are stipulated in the context of the “618” online shopping promotion, or some new management regulations are formulated in the context of “Some retail pharmacies exchanging medicines and over-dispensing drugs.” These provide some background explanation for the laws and regulations to be presented, but they are not necessary.

In Move 3, this part mainly presents some compliance measures that citizens need to take. These statements are often the original text of the laws and regulations, detailing specific measures and responsibilities for compliance. They are authoritative and more formal, usually employing imperative sentences or modal verbs. Move 4, “Advice,” is often closely linked to Moves 3 and 2, providing suggestions to citizens regarding related events and laws and regulations. For instance, the Ministry of Education gives special reminders to students who are about to take the college entrance examination, and the post highlights them with bold red text. However, in general, Moves 3 and 4 are not mandatory steps. For example, there is one post that the entire Today’s Tips section is about reporting illegal and harmful online information nationwide, which falls entirely within the scope of Move 2, “Event Overview” , without involving corresponding measures or suggestions.

5. Discussion

This study examined the genre model and communicative purposes of rumor refutation posts in an official account called Chinese Internet Joint Rumour Refutation Platform on Sina Weibo, analyzing three distinct sections: “Today’s Rumor Refutation,” “Today’s Science Popularization,” and “Today’s Tips.” The analysis revealed a clear and consistent move structure that these posts follow to effectively dispel misinformation and educate the netizens. Each section serves a unique function in addressing rumors and misconceptions while collectively contributing to a larger communicative purpose of enhancing public trust and media literacy.

The analysis highlighted the structured approach of each section. “Today’s Rumor Refutation” follows a systematic process to debunk rumors through authoritative refutations, while “Today’s Science Popularization” provides clear, scientific explanations for common myths. “Today’s Tips” extends beyond rumor refutation to offer practical advice based on new laws and regulations. This structural organization ensures that the information is both accessible and trustworthy, allowing for an efficient dissemination of accurate information to the public.

In addition, it also can be noticed that there also exists interdiscursivity among these three sections, which illustrating the blending of multiple discursive practices to achieve a comprehensive communicative purpose. According to Bhatia (2014), interdiscursivity refers to the way different genres or discourses are integrated to create new meanings and fulfill complex communicative goals. In the context of rumor refutation posts on Sina Weibo, this concept is evident in how these sections work together to provide not only factual corrections but also educational content

and practical advice.

“Today’s Rumor Refutation” utilizes a straightforward approach to debunk rumors with evidence and authoritative sources, establishing a foundation of trust and reliability. This section primarily focuses on the genre of information dissemination, aiming to restore public confidence by addressing specific misinformation. Meanwhile, “Today’s Science Popularization” integrates educational discourse by offering scientific explanations for common misconception, thus enhancing public understanding and literacy. This section enriches the communicative purpose by extending beyond mere information to educate the audience on broader scientific principles.

“Today’s Tips” further exemplifies interdiscursivity by incorporating legal and advisory discourse. It provides citizens with actionable advice based on recent laws and regulations, promoting responsible behavior and legal awareness. This section combines elements of regulatory discourse with public service announcements, reflecting Bhatia’s idea that “the complexity of discursive practices lies in their ability to embed and mix genres to address situational demands.” The interplay among these sections demonstrates how different discursive strategies can be woven together to create a multi-layered approach that not only corrects misinformation but also empowers and educates the audience.

In addition, the analysis of this study also has important implications for both linguistic research and the digital world. Academically, the analysis of rumor refutation posts on Sina Weibo enhances our understanding of how different discursive practices can be integrated to achieve complex communicative goals. This study highlights the importance of examining online communication through a multi-genre lens, offering insights into how digital platforms use language strategically to inform and educate the public. This approach encourages further exploration of how genres evolve and adapt to meet emerging communication needs. In the digital world, the study underscores the crucial role of strategic communication in combating misinformation and promoting media literacy. The structured approach used by Sina Weibo illustrates the potential of social media platforms to serve as trusted sources of information, emphasizing the need for comprehensive communication strategies that inform and educate users. By adopting these strategies, platforms can contribute to a more informed and responsible online community, ultimately enhancing the quality of public discourse.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the genre structure and communicative purposes of rumor refutation posts on Sina Weibo, focusing on three main sections: “Today’s Rumor Refutation,” “Today’s Science Popularization,” and “Today’s Tips.” Through a detailed genre analysis, this study identified the structured approach each section employed to address misinformation, educate the public, and provide practical ad-

vice. The findings highlight the platform's commitment to enhancing public trust, media literacy, and legal awareness through a strategic blend of information dissemination, education, and advisory discourse.

The interdiscursivity among these sections, as conceptualized by Bhatia (2014), underscores their ability to integrate multiple discursive practices to fulfill complex communicative goals. This integration not only enhances the effectiveness of rumor refutation efforts but also empowers the netizens by equipping them with the knowledge and tools to navigate the digital information landscape critically.

Despite these strengths, the study also has room for improvement. Firstly, the analysis focused on a specific set of posts from Sina Weibo, which may not fully represent the diversity of strategies employed across different platforms or in varying contexts. Future research could expand the scope to include a broader range of social media platforms and explore how cultural and contextual factors influence rumor refutation strategies. Secondly, while the study provides insights into the structure and rhetorical strategies of these posts, it does not extensively examine their reception and impact on the netizens. Further research could investigate how these posts influence public perceptions and behaviors regarding misinformation.

In conclusion, the rumor refutation posts on Sina Weibo illustrate the potential of strategic communication in combating misinformation and fostering a more informed and responsible digital society. By continually refining these strategies and addressing their limitations, platforms can play a pivotal role in enhancing public discourse and promoting a healthier digital ecosystem.

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