

Multimodal Metaphors of Youth Anxiety: A Conceptual Metaphor Analysis of Chinese Student Animation

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Abstract:

Anxiety among young people is a growing global concern, yet little research has examined how everyday anxiety is expressed through multimodal metaphors in youth-generated media. This study applies Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and Forceville's (2009, 2024) multimodal metaphor framework to analyze three Chinese students university graduation animated shorts retrieved from Bilibili.com that explore anxiety and the culturally salient notion of *neihao* (internal friction). Through frame-by-frame qualitative analysis, four dominant metaphorical patterns were identified: vertical sinking, spreading lines, internal devouring, and externalized evaluation. These metaphors rely heavily on audiovisual synchronization—e.g., downward visual movement paired with low-frequency sound—to create embodied sensations of pressure, entrapment, and cyclical rumination. The findings extend multimodal metaphor research to non-commercial, non-clinical student animation, provide a typology of anxiety metaphors in contemporary Chinese youth culture, and offer practical resources for mental health communication that resonate authentically with young audiences.

Keywords: multimodal metaphor; conceptual metaphor theory; youth anxiety; internal friction; student animation; Chinese social media

1. Introduction

Anxiety represents a significant global mental health challenge, with the World Health Organization identifying it as the most common mental disorder worldwide, and young adults consistently reporting the highest prevalence rates across diverse cultural contexts. While an extensive body of research has examined how metaphors conceptualize anxiety in clinical settings and Western media discourses (e.g., through source domains such as BATTLE, WAVE, or WEIGHT), surprisingly little attention has been paid to non-Western, youth-generated animated content—particularly short films produced by

university students as creative graduation projects. Such works offer a unique window into how young people represent their lived experiences of anxiety through multimodal resources, independent of commercial imperatives or clinical frameworks.

This study addresses this gap by analyzing Chinese student-produced animated short films disseminated on major domestic social media platforms (e.g., [Bilibili.com](https://www.bilibili.com)). These animations represent a rapidly growing yet underexplored form of expressive culture among Chinese youth, often addressing themes such as academic pressure, social evaluation, appearance concerns, and the locally salient discourse of “internal friction” (精神内耗). The central research questions are: (1) How is the concept of “anxiety” metaphorically constructed through the interplay of visual, auditory, and linguistic modes in these student animations? (2) What distinctive metaphorical patterns emerge that differentiate these non-commercial, non-clinical representations from biomedical or commercial framings of anxiety?

To answer these questions, the study adopts Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) as its cognitive-linguistic foundation, complemented by Forceville's (2009, 2024) framework for multimodal metaphor analysis. This integrated approach allows for the systematic identification and interpretation of cross-domain mappings that are realized not only through language but also through image composition, colour, sound, camera angles, and character movement. The dataset consists of three publicly available graduation animation shorts created by Chinese university students, purposively selected based on their thematic focus on anxiety-related experiences and their availability on open platforms. Each video is subjected to frame-by-frame qualitative analysis, with multimodal metaphors annotated, categorized, and subjected to cross-case comparison.

By turning to student-generated artistic works rather than professionally produced health communication videos, this study makes three contributions. First, it expands the empirical scope of multimodal metaphor research beyond commercial advertising, film, and clinical educational videos into the domain of non-commercial, non-clinical, youth-led artistic creation. Second, it provides a systematic typology of anxiety metaphors in contemporary Chinese youth animation, thereby enriching cross-cultural understandings of how abstract emotional states are embodied through culturally situated multimodal

resources. Third, the findings aim to inform mental health communication strategies by highlighting the metaphorical resources that resonate authentically with young audiences—resources often absent from official or biomedical discourses.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews relevant literature on conceptual metaphor theory, multimodal metaphor analysis, and existing studies of anxiety/depression metaphors in visual media. Section 3 describes the data collection and analytical procedures. Section 4 presents the findings, organized by metaphorical pattern. Section 5 discusses the implications of these patterns for both metaphor theory and mental health communication, and Section 6 concludes with limitations and future directions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Metaphor Theory

In everyday language, “metaphor” is often understood as a poetic rhetorical device or a literary figure of imagination. However, Conceptual Metaphor Theory fundamentally changes this view. It argues that metaphor not only helps people understand abstract concepts but, more importantly, shapes thinking at an unconscious level. In other words, the conceptual system and various abstract thoughts in the human mind are largely the result of metaphorical processes (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Take “argument is war” and “time is money” as examples. An argument is not literally an armed conflict, yet when people use words like “attack”, “defend”, and “counterattack” to talk about arguments, the abstract concept of “argument” acquires a comprehensible form and meaning in the conceptual system. This is the “metaphorical interpretation” process described by Conceptual Metaphor Theory: a concept that is difficult to grasp directly (the “target domain”) is associated through mapping (a cognitive processing mechanism) with another relatively concrete, intuitive concept (the “source domain”). The source domain activates correspondences with the target domain, thereby transforming the abstract target domain into an intelligible concept that enters the conceptual system. This conceptual construction process not only influences individuals’ understanding of specific things but may also indirectly shape the way they view the world through the formation of new concepts.

It is important to note that conceptual metaphors are not confined to everyday language or literary expression; they also deeply permeate the cognitive organization of one’s own emotions and bodily sensations. Take the experience of everyday anxiety as an example: anxiety is often vague, complex, and difficult to articulate directly. Yet individuals frequently use metaphors to describe this experience, such as “anxiety is like a wild beast churning in my chest” or “my head is clogged with a fog”. These metaphors are not arbitrary linguistic embellishments; they reflect the cognitive patterns through which anxiety is constructed in people’s conceptual systems. Therefore, applying Conceptual Metaphor Theory to the study of everyday anxiety has significant theoretical and practical value: it helps reveal the conceptual structure of the anxious person’s inner world, thereby offering actionable perspectives for mental health education, self-expression, and cognitive intervention.

2.2 Multimodal Metaphor

Conceptual Metaphor Theory initially rested primarily on linguistic evidence (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). However, a purely language-based account of “metaphorical thinking” has limitations. As the need for communicative means in society increases, metaphor is now recognized to exist not only in language but also in non-linguistic modalities such as image, sound, and action. Forceville (2009) proposed the concept of “multimodal metaphor”, defining “modality” as a symbolic system that can be interpreted through a concrete perceptual process. Metaphors that cannot be visualised through language alone can be combined with multiple media, turning originally abstract, thin metaphors into vivid, perceptible phenomena. In other words, a multimodal metaphor is one in which the source and target domains are presented by different semiotic modes.

For dynamic multimodal texts (e.g., films, animations), Forceville (2024) provided more specific identification criteria:

- (1) **Dual presentation:** the source and target domains belong to different modalities. For example, the source domain is presented by image (a rabbit being chased) and the target domain by soundtrack (dissonant, rapid music).
- (2) **Sequential presentation:** the source and target domains do not necessarily appear simultaneously; they can appear one after the other on the timeline, and the viewer establishes a mapping during viewing. For instance, the first half of an animation shows a “maze” and the second half shows the character

“repeatedly going back and forth”, together forming the metaphor “anxiety is a maze”.

(3) **Context dependence:** the activation of metaphorical meaning depends on the full narrative context and the viewer’s background knowledge.

Thus, intuitive visual perception can often convey perspectives and emotions that are inaccessible to purely linguistic metaphor. This feature offers a unique advantage for studying the inner world of anxious individuals. The present study adopts the above identification criteria to analyze how Chinese student graduation animations construct the abstract concept of “anxiety” through multiple modal resources such as image, sound, character movement, and camera motion. Specifically, it will identify the modal distribution of source and target domains in the animations and their temporal mappings, thereby revealing how anxiety experience is conceptualized in dynamic multimodal texts.

2.3 Anxiety and Metaphor: Research Gaps

Conceptual Metaphor Theory has been widely used to explore negative emotional experiences. In the domain of pain, Bullo and Hearn (2024) adopted a multimodal metaphor analytic framework to examine the visual resources (e.g., images, colours, materials) used by patients with endometriosis to construct pain metaphors; they found that core metaphors such as “pain is physical violence” help communicate internal sensory experiences that are otherwise difficult to express. In depression, Zhang and Luo (2026) analysed animated educational videos about depression on Chinese social media, identifying creative metaphors such as “depression is the Grim Reaper” and “depression is a black dog”, and argued that while these metaphors help destigmatise depression, they may also lead to over-medicalisation. In anxiety, Woodgate et al. (2021) used interviews and photovoice methods to explore the metaphorical expressions of anxiety among adolescents, extracting spatial, corporeal, and temporal metaphors such as “a shrinking world”, “the heavy backpack”, and “play, pause, rewind”.

Nevertheless, these studies have notable shortcomings. First, while multimodal metaphor research on pain and depression has begun to accumulate, analyses of anxiety—especially non-clinical, everyday anxiety—are extremely scarce. Woodgate et al. (2021) did involve anxiety, but their data relied primarily on linguistic interviews and static photographs; they did not systematically apply Forceville’s (2009) framework for multimodal

metaphor identification, nor did they examine anxiety metaphors in dynamic multimodal texts such as animations. Second, existing studies that focus on animated metaphors (e.g., Zhang & Luo, 2026) all target depression; none have specifically analysed how anxiety is conceptualised in animation. Moreover, the anxiety experiences represented in graduation animations by Chinese students remain a completely unexplored academic territory.

The present study aims to fill these gaps. Using Chinese student-produced graduation animations as analytical material and adopting Forceville’s (2009/2024) criteria for multimodal metaphor identification, it examines how the abstract concept of “anxiety” is constructed through multiple modal resources (image, sound, character movement, camera motion). The findings will reveal how everyday anxiety is conceptualised in dynamic multimodal texts and provide new analytical pathways for understanding the cognitive and expressive mechanisms of non-clinical anxiety.

2.4 Anxiety Expressions in the Chinese Youth Discourse of “Internal Friction” (Neihao)

Neihao (internal friction) refers to self-consumption caused by overthinking, self-doubt, and repeated deliberation. In recent years, the term “internal friction” has become widely popular on Chinese social media, especially among young people, to describe excessive mental, emotional, and decisional self-consumption. Simply put, “internal friction” can be understood as a kind of inner conflict directed toward anxiety. Similar to depression, internal friction manifests as a state of low action and mental exhaustion caused by overthinking, self-doubt, or repeated deliberation (Zhang Chunyu et al., 2023). Some researchers point out that the rise of internal friction discourse is closely related to a highly competitive educational environment, employment pressure, family expectations, and information overload in the digital age (Li Xin, 2022). Enveloped in a culture of “meritocracy”, Chinese youth experience varying degrees of pressure regarding academic performance, work, income, and even appearance. In essence, internal friction can be seen as an internalised form of everyday anxiety—pressure no longer originates primarily from external events but turns into an inner voice of incessant self-interrogation.

However, existing research has mostly described the phenomenon of internal friction from psychological or sociological perspectives, paying little attention to

how young people use metaphors—especially multimodal metaphors—to express this ineffable anxiety experience. Moreover, due to the relatively reserved expressive habits in Chinese culture, anxiety is often not voiced directly, but instead externalised through creative productions such as artwork. Therefore, analysing Chinese student animations about anxiety can bring us closer to the core of the anxious person’s inner world. The graduation animations examined in this study, as an outlet for Chinese youth’s self-expression, provide a unique visual material for understanding this localised anxiety discourse.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

This study focuses on animated shorts created by Chinese students that thematise anxiety/internal friction. The videos were sourced from the Bilibili platform, China’s largest youth culture community and original video sharing website, often likened to the Chinese equivalent of YouTube. The search was carried out in April 2025.

Because the terms “anxiety” and “internal friction” appear in different titles with varying wording, a multi-keyword search strategy was employed to maximise coverage. The specific keywords used included: “焦虑动画” (anxiety animation), “内耗动画” (internal friction animation), “心理动画毕业设计短片” (psychological animation graduation short film), “精神焦虑短片” (mental anxiety short film), “心理内耗动画” (psychological internal friction animation), “毕业设计焦虑” (graduation project anxiety), “学生动画焦虑” (student animation anxiety). After each search, the results were browsed for relevance (top 50–100), and the recommended lists were checked for additional content.

Through this search, 23 potentially relevant works were initially identified. After viewing the titles, tags, descriptions, and full shorts, works that were not student productions, non-original, off-topic, or shorter than 1 minute were excluded. Finally, three animated shorts that matched the theme of “anxiety/internal friction” were selected for analysis. tion]).

3.2 Inclusion & Exclusion Criteria

To ensure the representativeness and validity of the analysed objects, the following inclusion criteria were established:

- (1) The author is a current Chinese university student or recent graduate (including bachelor’s, master’s, or doctoral level), and the work is credited to an individual or a group.
- (2) The work’s core theme is psychological states such as “anxiety”, “internal friction”, or “emotional distress”, not merely a sub-plot.
- (3) The work is an animated short (2D, 3D, stop-motion, etc.), with a duration of at least 1 minute and a basic narrative structure or coherent visual expression.
- (4) The work contains two or more modalities (e.g., image, sound, text, movement) and is amenable to multimodal metaphor analysis.

Exclusion criteria:

- (1) Content that is edited from existing footage without original animation.
- (2) Purely instructional or popular science videos, lecture recordings, or commercial works not created by students.
- (3) Themes that clearly deviate from anxiety/internal friction (e.g., horror or comedy works that only mention psychological states in passing).
- (4) Poor video quality or missing audio that prevents effective analysis.

Based on the above criteria, three works were finally selected from the 23 candidates:

- Work A: *Guāngguài Shìyù* (A Bizarre Vision for Healing), a bachelor’s graduation project from the School of Design, Jiangnan University, author “not” or “Monocrystalline Silicon Dream”, publicly released on Bilibili.
- Work B: *Dūshì de Yúxiǎng, Bù’ān de Jiāoxiǎngqǔ* (The Echoes of the City, the Symphony of Unease), a master’s graduation project from a Chinese university, author “Mu Ruhun”, publicly released on Bilibili.
- Work C: *Xiāngshēng* (Mutual Generation), a graduation project by a Chinese university student, author “Shanyu Cun de Tu Tou”, publicly released on Bilibili.
- Excluded example: *Wǒ hé Wǒ hé Wǒ* (Me and Me and Me) was excluded because, although it is a student graduation short, its theme is clinically defined anxiety disorder, including elements such as “medication” and “panic attacks”, which do not match the

focus of this study on everyday “internal friction” and anxiety among Chinese youth.

3.3 Analytical Procedure

The analysis of these videos consists of identifying multimodal metaphors of anxiety/internal friction and investigating how multimodal resources are used to achieve metaphorical expression. The procedure follows Forceville’s (2009, 2024) identification criteria and the characteristics of dynamic multimodal texts, conducting frame-by-frame or shot-by-shot analysis. The specific steps are:

Phase 1: Global structural understanding. Each animation is viewed repeatedly, and its macro-structural components are recorded. Referring to common frameworks for mental health educational videos (Devendorf et al., 2020), the analysis checks whether the work addresses experiences, manifestations, triggers, or coping strategies related to anxiety, but these are not used as exclusion criteria because student productions may prioritise emotional expression over knowledge transmission.

Phase 2: Multimodal metaphor identification and annotation. Following Forceville’s (2009, 2024) heuristic for multimodal metaphor identification and the characteristics of everyday emotional expression, the following sub-steps are taken:

- (1) **Candidate metaphor extraction.** Each potential multimodal metaphor is recorded in the format “A-ING is B-ING” (Forceville & Paling, 2021), e.g., “anxiety-being-is-black-fog-engulfing-being”, “internal-friction-being-is-repeated-tearing-happenin g”. No a priori categories are imposed.
- (2) **Modality attribution labelling.** For each candidate, we note which modality presents the source domain and which presents the target domain (image, sound, text, movement, camera motion, etc.), and whether they appear simultaneously or sequentially.
- (3) **Emotion type grouping.** Identified metaphors are grouped by the emotion type they express (e.g., “pressure/weight”, “trapped/stuck”, “self-tearing”, “numbness/emptiness”), without forcing a classification aligned with disease symptoms.
- (4) **Mapping pattern summary.** For each group, we summarise the regularities of cross-domain mapping (e.g., what kinds of source domains are used to express which kinds of anxiety experiences) and the preferred modal combinations (e.g., low-pitched background music + slow or repetitive action for anxiety).
- (5) **Reliability check.** A second analyst

independently analyses about 30% of one animation and compares the metaphor identification results. Disagreements are discussed until consensus is reached. If no second analyst is available, a self-audit method is used: re-analyse the same segment two weeks after the first analysis and compare the results.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

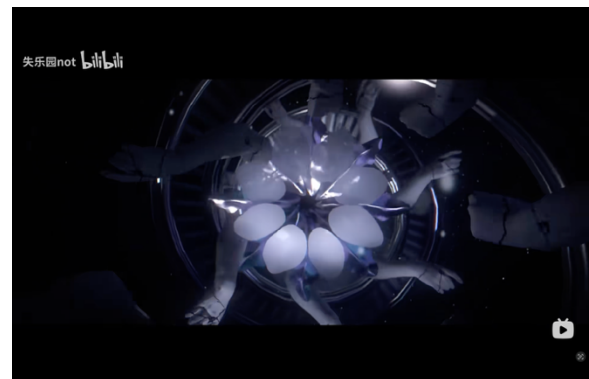
Animations are publicly available; screenshots and transcriptions were used minimally. Personal identifiers were removed.

4. Findings

Based on a frame-by-frame multimodal analysis of the three graduation animations *A Bizarre Vision for Healing*, *The Echoes of the City*, *the Symphony of Unease*, and *Mutual Generation*, this study identified four repeatedly occurring metaphorical patterns, corresponding to different experiential dimensions of anxiety/internal friction: vertical sinking (oppression and the abyss), spreading lines (heaviness and loss of rhythmic control), internal devouring, and externalised evaluation. Each is discussed in turn.

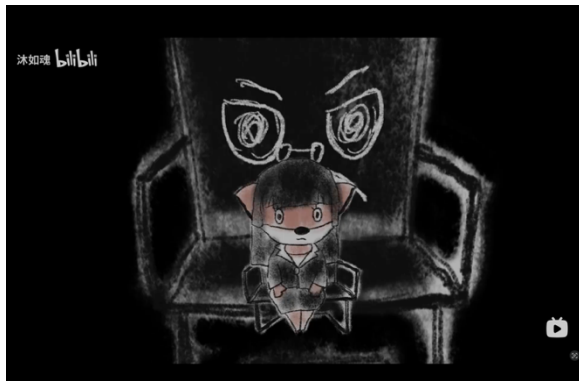
4.1 Vertical Sinking: Anxiety as the Gravity of the Abyss

In all three works, anxiety/internal friction is most commonly presented as a visual image of endless vertical falling – a balloon representing thoughts pulled into the depths by invisible hands, a character surrounded by a larger shadow and gradually shrinking until disappearing into the shadow’s centre, or a character walking into an endless maze. These visual representations jointly metaphorise a sense of oppression, heading toward an abyss from which there is no escape.



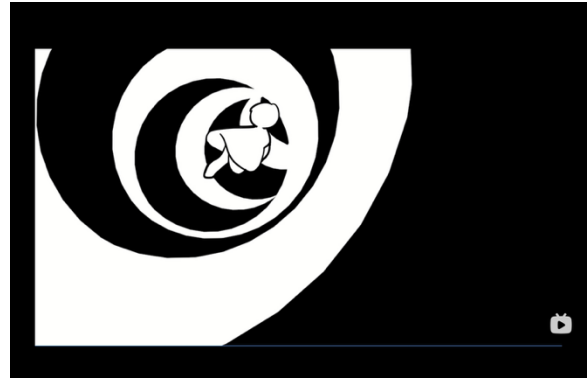
• Figure1_whiteBalloon_sinking.png

In *A Bizarre Vision for Healing* [Figure 1], a white balloon representing the protagonist's thoughts drifts in the darkness, then is dragged into an abyss surrounded by thick, silver lines. The balloon mutates and blooms into eerie blue-black-purple dried flowers while the camera pushes deeper. The soundtrack consists of persistent low-frequency drum beats that gradually build tension; then many arms suddenly reach out of the abyss, spreading from around the frame as if to pull the viewer in. Here, the source domain "physical abyss" is presented through visual displacement and deformation, mapping onto the target domain "anxiety experience" – a sense of losing control and helplessness. The descending musical scale and low-frequency resonance reinforce the bodily perception of "being swallowed by the abyss", along with a profound helplessness of wanting to escape yet being gradually consumed.



- Figure2_chair_shrinking.jpg

In *The Echoes of the City, the Symphony of Unease* [Figure 2], vertical sinking is not presented through the character's own movement but from the subjective perspective of the character sitting on a chair. In a dark environment, an oversized old chair that fills the entire screen gradually envelops the character, who becomes smaller and smaller until disappearing completely into the centre of the chair's shadow – a process that metaphorises a weightless sensation of being endlessly pulled downward by external forces. Notably, the soundtrack remains calm throughout, as if everything were happening normally, without any sign of abnormality. This contrast between "normal" sound and "abnormal" vision creates a strong irony, metaphorising a suppressed panic and inescapable external oppression during the sinking process.



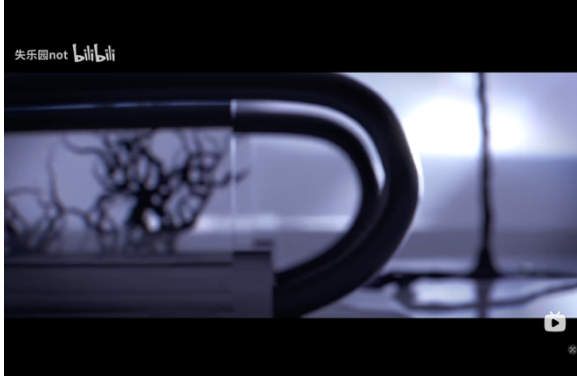
- Figure3_shadow_maze.png

In *Mutual Generation* [Figure 3], vertical sinking is presented more slowly and subtly: the protagonist's shadow is stretched extremely long and, instead of being projected onto the ground, "walks down" into the depths of a black-and-white maze. Accompanied by a repeated low string note, it creates a bodily feeling of "slowly being dragged into darkness".

These findings are consistent with Tay's (2014) corpus-based study of Chinese anxiety metaphors, which found that anxiety is often conceptualised as "downward movement in space" or "falling into an abyss". The present animation data further show that such spatial metaphors in dynamic multimodal texts rely heavily on audiovisual synchrony – the visual trajectory of sinking combined with descending or low-frequency sounds constructs a bodily schema of oppression. Notably, the contrastive configuration of "calm music vs. mutant visuals" in *The Echoes of the City* reveals another dimension of the sinking experience: sometimes the most suffocating aspect is not intense panic but the silent, "normalised" consumption.

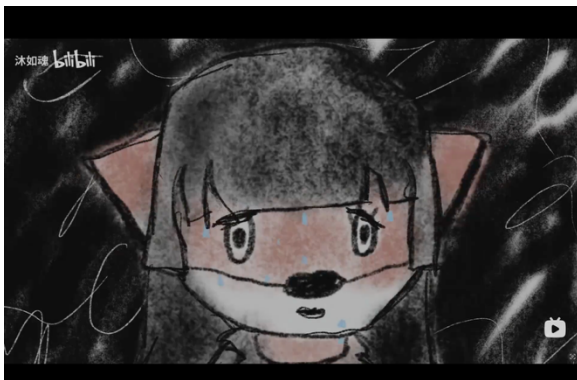
4.2 Spreading Lines: Anxiety as Tangling Vines/lines

The second type of metaphor presents anxiety as black-and-white lines that grow from the edges of the frame or from within the character's body, spreading like varicose veins or flying threads. These lines usually expand as the musical tempo accelerates, conveying a growing sense of losing control and being bound by heaviness.



- Figure4_ varicose veins _growing.jpg

This metaphor appears in all three works, most typically in *A Bizarre Vision for Healing* [Figure 4]. In that film, anxiety first appears in a quiet, music-free background: an organism that looks like both a vine and a blood vessel begins to expand infinitely, splitting into dense black threads that gradually fill the entire experimental chamber and even the walls. Like plant roots, the threads spread in all directions, mapping onto the subjective experience of “being bound, unable to move” during an anxiety episode. Notably, the expansion starts in silence; only after the lines have filled the screen does a sharp sound effect intervene – a “silent, creeping loss of control” that intensifies the unpredictability and invasiveness of anxiety.



- Figure5_ tangling _lines.jpg

The Echoes of the City [Figure 5] adopts a more direct representation: the protagonist is shown sweating against a background filled with fine white lines, visually presenting a state of being entangled. The soundtrack features a persistent, extremely

low-volume “rustling” sound like countless tiny insects crawling – closer to the experience of chronic anxiety: hard to notice, yet constantly consuming energy.

The core of such metaphors is “growth” and “entanglement”. Fahlenbrach (2017) pointed out that, in moving images, the spread of lines and the acceleration of rhythm are often used to depict the “critical point of loss of control” of emotions. The present animations further reveal that the combination of black-and-white negative forms and rhythmic soundtrack effectively constructs “heaviness” as a quality of internal friction. Moreover, the two different sound configurations – “expansion in a quiet background” in *A Bizarre Vision* versus “continuous low noise” in *The Echoes of the City* – present two temporalities of anxiety episodes: sudden invasion versus chronic consumption.

4.3 Internal Devouring: Anxiety as an Active Consumer

The third type of metaphor presents anxiety as an active act of devouring – not passive sinking, but being swallowed one by one by some living being or personified force. This metaphorises the process by which an individual’s thoughts, safe space, and even sense of self are gradually eaten away by anxiety/internal friction. Kövecses (2005), discussing cross-cultural variation in emotion metaphors, noted that fear and anxiety are often conceptualised as “inner enemies” or “devouring monsters”, for which the present animations provide concrete multimodal examples.



- Figure6_ wrapped _ballons.jpg

In *A Bizarre Vision for Healing* [Figure 6], devouring appears as a step-by-step elimination of thoughts.

White balloons representing the protagonist's thoughts originally float freely in the frame; then they are individually wrapped, squeezed, and made to disappear by vine-like black lines. Each time a balloon is devoured, a short "swallowing" sound effect (like a low drum hit plus a breath sound) appears in the soundtrack, while the number of balloons decreases and the blank space is replaced by darkness. Here, the source domain "biological consumption" – presented visually through the disappearance of balloons and aurally through the swallowing sound – maps onto the target domain "anxiety experience" as a sense of "thoughts being killed one by one, the mind gradually becoming empty". Importantly, the devouring is not instantaneous but gradual, simulating the process of "one worry after another occupying the mind" in internal friction. This "step-by-step elimination" aligns closely with Nolen-Hoeksema's (2000) description of rumination – i.e., individuals repeatedly dwell on negative thoughts, cannot cut them off, and consequently experience persistent depletion of psychological resources. Charteris-Black (2012) found that "being swallowed" images are often used to express the overwhelming control of emotion over the self; the present study further shows that in anxiety, this "devouring" emphasises "elimination one by one" rather than a single event, highlighting the sustained character of internal friction.



- Figure6_huge_cat.jpg

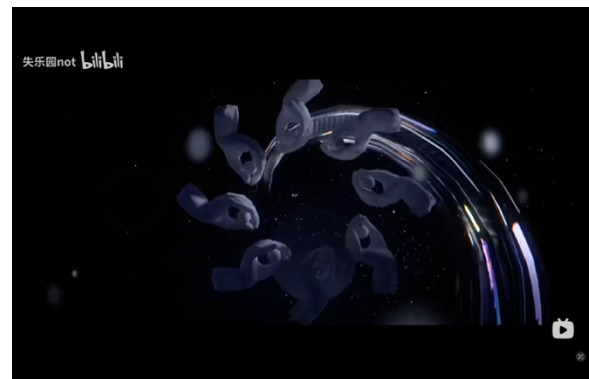
Mutual Generation presents a more biologically shaped devouring image [Figure 7]: the protagonist's shadow gradually expands in the black-and-white maze, finally transforming into a huge black cat that opens its mouth wide and pounces on the protagonist from the side of the frame. Unlike *A Bizarre Vision*, the devouring here is much slower – the shadow's

transformation passes through multiple intermediate stages (lengthening → expanding → growing fangs → opening and closing), and the soundtrack consists of low, sustained strings with no obvious climax, creating a fatalistic sense that "it is bound to happen". Here, the source domain "predation" – presented through the gradual morphological change of the shadow and the encroachment of space – maps onto a sense of self-annihilation as "being devoured by inner darkness", along with a helplessness of knowing the danger yet being unable to escape. This echoes Kövecses' (2005) argument that when emotions are personified as autonomous monsters, the relationship between the individual and the emotion changes from "having" to "being had".

In sum, "internal devouring" and "vertical sinking" together constitute the spatial metaphors of anxiety: the former emphasises the disappearance of boundaries through active consumption, the latter emphasises depth-fall through gravitational pull. They can be seen as two different facets of anxiety experience, corresponding to "passive loss of control" and "active encroachment" in internal friction, respectively.

4.4 Externalised Evaluation and Counter-attack: Anxiety as Self-Esteem Held by Others

The fourth type of metaphor presents anxiety as the transfer of control over one's self-worth to the outside world – the gaze, words, or invisible hands of others become the evaluating subject, while the anxious person passively endures and may subsequently try to fight back. This metaphorises the psychological processes of "excessive concern with others' evaluations", "self-attack", and "attempts to break free" that characterise social anxiety and internal friction.



- Figure8_greyHands_whiteBalls.png

In *A Bizarre Vision for Healing*, this metaphor is presented through two consecutive scenes. The first scene [Figure 8] shows countless nameless grey hands, each holding a small white ball. According to the visual narrative logic, these small balls can be interpreted as the anxious person's "self-evaluation" or "sense of worth" – they no longer belong to the self but are held by others (the nameless hands). The shot is taken from a high angle, and the balls look similar to each other, implying standardisation of evaluation and loss of individuality. The soundtrack at this moment is a slow, oppressive low-pitched drone without melody, reinforcing the suffocation of "being held".



- Figure9_blackHands_lips_lightwave.png

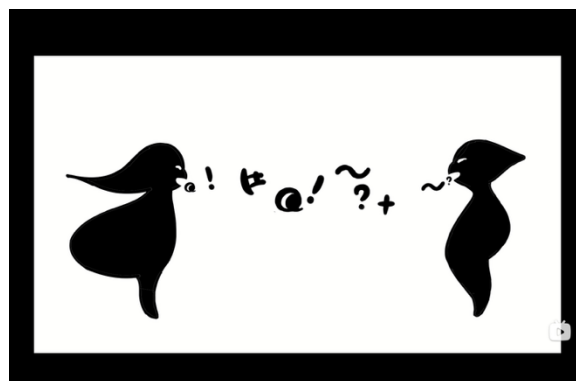
The second scene [Figure 9] shows a pair of black hands trapped inside a white halo, surrounded by countless slightly open lips, as if whispering or accusing. These lips have no faces, symbolising that "others' verbal judgments" are anonymous and omnipresent. The trapped hands first tremble and curl up, showing helplessness and self-doubt; then they clench into fists and emit a wave of light that shatters the surrounding lips. The appearance of the light wave is accompanied by a sudden, glass-breaking sound effect, and the music shifts from a suppressed low bass to short, forceful string staccato. Here, the source domain "physical restraint and counter-attack" – through the visual of trapped hands, surrounding lips, and the light-wave shattering – maps onto the psychological transition in anxiety/internal friction from "being crushed by external evaluation" to "attempting to fight back". Notably, the counter-attack does not permanently eliminate the

lips; they quickly reform, suggesting that the resistance may be cyclical and incomplete.



- Figure10_briefcase_blurred black.png

In *The Echoes of the City*, this metaphor appears in a more static form [Figure 10]: a briefcase stands alone at the back of a crowd, facing the camera. The crowd is a blurred black silhouette, while the briefcase is clearly illuminated, symbolising the "instrumentalised" existence of the individual in society – expected to fulfil a function, not to be a person with emotions. There is no counter-attack here, only passive "standing still", mapping onto the numbing state of "erasing the self to meet external expectations".



- Figure11_shadows_quarrel.png

Mutual Generation, by contrast, internalises the conflict into a quarrel between two shadows [Figure 11]. The two shadows have no faces, only outlines; they point fingers at each other, simulating the constant tug-of-war between the "self-criticising" voice and the "criticised self" inside the anxious person. This contrasts with the outward-directed resistance in *A Bizarre Vision* (the fist shattering the

lips) – one is internal division, the other is outward resistance.

These findings resonate with research on social anxiety and self-objectification. Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) objectification theory holds that when individuals are chronically exposed to evaluative environments, they internalise external evaluations into self-monitoring, leading to a loss of self-worth. The present animations visually present this “evaluation held by others” metaphor and capture the dynamic process from helplessness to resistance. Moreover, Leary (2012) emphasises that excessive concern with others' opinions is a core maintaining factor of anxiety; the “lips are shattered but quickly regroup” treatment in the animation aptly reveals the tenacity of this anxiety – external judgment cannot be eliminated once and for all.

In summary, this chapter has revealed the multimodal metaphorical construction of anxiety/internal friction in the three animations through four dimensions: spatial sinking, line tangling, internal devouring, and externalised evaluation.

4.5 Summary

This chapter conducted a frame-by-frame multimodal metaphor analysis of the three graduation animations *A Bizarre Vision for Healing*, *The Echoes of the City*, *the Symphony of Unease*, and *Mutual Generation*, and identified four recurring metaphorical patterns corresponding to different experiential dimensions of anxiety/internal friction.

First, the **vertical sinking** metaphor, through the synergy of visual displacement, deformation, and descending/low-frequency sound, constructs a sense of “loss of control and helplessness” in anxiety. The contrastive configuration of “calm music vs. mutant visuals” in *The Echoes of the City* reveals the most hidden yet most suffocating dimension of the sinking experience – silent consumption that is normalised.

Second, the **spreading lines** metaphor, through the combination of black-and-white negative forms and rhythmical soundtrack, presents two temporalities of anxiety: sudden invasion (the quiet expansion in *A Bizarre Vision*) and chronic consumption (the continuous low-level rustle in *The Echoes of the City*). The two sound configurations correspond to different rhythms of internal friction.

Third, the **internal devouring** metaphor personifies anxiety as an actively devouring monster. Through

the step-by-step disappearance of balloons (*A Bizarre Vision*) or the shadow's transformation into a devouring creature (*Mutual Generation*), it simulates the ruminative process of “thoughts being killed one by one”. Unlike vertical sinking, anxiety here is no longer a physical gravity but a biological invasion.

Fourth, the **externalised evaluation and counter-attack** metaphor reveals the psychological predicament of having one's self-worth controlled by others. From “held small balls” to “hands trapped among lips” to “a light-wave shattering the lips”, the three works collectively present a dynamic process from helplessness to resistance and then to cyclical resistance, echoing core mechanisms of social anxiety and self-objectification.

All four metaphors share three features: (1) they rely on audiovisual synergy to enhance bodily perception; (2) they concretise abstract anxiety experiences through the loss of spatial boundaries; (3) they capture the “persistence” and “cyclicity” of internal friction, rather than a one-time outburst. These findings provide multimodal evidence for understanding how anxiety/internal friction is conceptualised in Chinese student graduation animations, and lay a foundation for discussing the potential of animation as an emotional medium.

5. Discussion

5.1 Main Findings

Through a frame-by-frame multimodal metaphor analysis of three Chinese student graduation animations thematising anxiety, this study identified four core metaphors of anxiety/internal friction: vertical sinking, spreading lines, internal devouring, and externalised evaluation. These metaphors do not appear in isolation; together they reveal four key features of anxiety/internal friction.

First, the **vertical sinking** metaphor (e.g., a balloon dragged into an abyss, a character surrounded and shrinking into a chair) presents anxiety as an irresistible centripetal force, where the individual falls passively and cannot escape. In contrast, the **internal devouring** metaphor (e.g., balloons swallowed one by one, a shadow transforming into a black cat that attacks) endows anxiety with active, biological aggression – anxiety is no longer a physical gravity but a will-driven consumer. Together they constitute the spatial experience of anxiety: the former emphasises “being pulled into depth” and loss

of control, the latter “being eaten at the boundary” and annihilation.

Second, the **spreading lines** metaphor (e.g., black-and-white vines growing from the body or walls) reveals two temporal rhythms of anxiety: sudden invasion (quiet expansion) and chronic consumption (continuous low-level noise). This suggests that internal friction is not a single pattern but can be fast or slow, visible or invisible.

Finally, the **externalised evaluation** metaphor (e.g., self-worth held by others, a hand shattering lips that quickly reform) translates the core psychological mechanism of anxiety – excessive concern with others’ evaluation – into a visual, resistible narrative. The “counter-attack cycle” (lips shattered then quickly regrouped) captures the tenacious nature of internal friction: the more one tries to escape, the deeper one sinks.

Overall, these findings show that in dynamic multimodal texts, anxiety/internal friction is no longer a vague “emotional feeling”; it is concretised through audiovisual resources into spatial falling, boundary consumption, bodily entanglement, and the transfer and struggle of evaluative power. These metaphors not only serve emotional expression but also construct the anxious person’s cognitive framework of their situation.

5.2 Dialogue with Literature

The findings are consistent with Tay’s (2014) corpus-based study of Chinese anxiety metaphors, which found that anxiety is often conceptualised as “downward spatial movement” or “falling into an abyss”. However, while Tay’s study is based on linguistic data, the present study shows that these spatial metaphors are significantly intensified through audiovisual synchrony – the downward visual trajectory combined with low-frequency sounds creates a stronger bodily perception. This supports Forceville’s (2009) claim that multimodal metaphors can activate embodied experiences more directly than purely linguistic ones.

Compared to Bullo & Hearn’s (2024) study of pain metaphors, the present study finds that anxiety metaphors focus more on “internal devouring” and “externalised evaluation” rather than “physical violence”. This may reflect the difference in the nature of the two experiences: pain is closer to physical injury, while anxiety is closer to the loss of psychological boundaries. Moreover, Zhang & Luo’s

(2026) study of depression animations found that externalising metaphors (e.g., the black dog) help destigmatise depression, whereas the “hand shattering lips” in the present study presents a cyclical resistance – a difference that may be rooted in the different sense of “controllability” between depression and anxiety.

Notably, the contrastive configuration of “calm music vs. mutant visuals” in *The Echoes of the City* has rarely been discussed in the existing literature. This suggests that multimodal metaphors of anxiety do not necessarily rely on dramatic audiovisual synchrony; sometimes the mismatch between “normality” and “abnormality” can produce a more enduring suffocation.

5.3 Theoretical Contributions

The theoretical contributions of this study are threefold. First, it extends the application of Conceptual Metaphor Theory from linguistic texts to student animation, a dynamic multimodal domain, and validates the applicability of Forceville’s multimodal metaphor identification criteria to non-commercial, non-popular-science creations. Second, it proposes “externalised evaluation and counter-attack” as a new metaphor type, supplementing the dimension of “self-worth controlled by others” which has received little attention in existing emotion metaphor research. Third, by comparing the temporalities of the four metaphor types (sudden invasion vs. chronic consumption vs. cyclical repetition), it reveals the multiple temporal rhythms of internal friction, offering a new analytical framework for understanding the dynamic process of everyday anxiety.

5.4 Practical Implications

In mental health education, the four types of metaphors identified in this study (sinking, tangling, devouring, externalised evaluation) can serve as communication tools to help young people express their anxiety experiences more precisely. For example, counsellors could ask clients to draw “what shape is your anxiety?” or “is it sinking or devouring?” to facilitate emotional externalisation. For animation creators, the analytical framework provides a reference for how to effectively convey abstract emotions through audiovisual resources. Moreover, for social media platforms, student

animations as visual carriers of “internal friction” discourse can serve as a window for the public to understand young people’s psychological struggles.

5.5 Limitations

- Small sample size (3 animations) from one platform.
- Interpretation relies on researcher judgment; no audience reception study.
- Future studies should include multiple platforms, larger samples, and audience feedback.

5.6 Future Directions

[Future research could expand the sample by including more platforms (e.g., Xinpianchang, Zcool) and works from different academic levels, and conduct comparative analyses. Audience interviews or questionnaire surveys could be used to test the actual communicative effectiveness of the identified multimodal metaphors. Furthermore, the “counter-attack cycle” phenomenon (lips shattered then quickly reforming) deserves further exploration – does it reflect a resilience characteristic of internal friction? A longitudinal study tracking the psychological changes of creators after producing their anxiety animations could also be valuable.

6. Conclusion

Using Conceptual Metaphor Theory and multimodal metaphor analysis as a framework, this study conducted a frame-by-frame analysis of three Chinese student graduation animations to reveal how anxiety/internal friction is conceptualised in multimodal texts. By identifying four recurring metaphors – vertical sinking, spreading lines, internal devouring, and externalised evaluation – the study found that:

- (1) Anxiety/internal friction is often concretised as the loss of spatial boundaries (sinking, being devoured), bodily entanglement, and the holding of self-worth by others.
- (2) Audiovisual synergy (e.g., descending scales synchronised with sinking images, accelerating tempo synchronised with spreading lines) is a key mechanism for constructing these metaphors.
- (3) Internal friction has multiple temporalities – sudden invasion, chronic consumption, and cyclical repetition – and the “calm music under mutant visuals” configuration reveals a dimension of suffocation that is easily overlooked.

Theoretically, this study enriches the application of Conceptual Metaphor Theory to dynamic multimodal texts; practically, it provides an operational typology of metaphor for mental health education and animation creation. It should be noted that the sample is limited, and future research with larger samples and audience studies is needed. We call on more researchers to pay attention to student creations – these “marginal but sincere” materials often come closer to the original face of everyday anxiety than professional popular science videos.

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