

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents a wide-ranging description of the study. It consists of the background, formulation of the problem, operational definitions, aim of the study, and significance of the study.

A. Background

Writing a thesis is one of the requirements in higher education that demands students' critical thinking skills to conduct research and convey ideas academically. It is a complex and meticulous learning process necessitating proficiency in multiple areas such as research skills, structured and coherent argumentation (Kim et al., 2025). For students learning English as a second language (ESL) and foreign language (EFL), this requirement is often more challenging due to linguistic barriers (Nazari et al., 2019; Ochoa & Neil, 2025). As a result, the thesis writing process often causes not only technical difficulties but also emotional stress related to feelings of worry about writing performance, which in this case is referred to as academic anxiety.

In today's digital age, students are increasingly expressing their concerns about their academic experiences, including academic anxiety, through various social media platforms. In the context of this study, TikTok has emerged as a highly relevant platform because it allows students to express their feelings of anxiety and academic pressure through short videos, while also promoting awareness of their mental well-being (Ramsden & Talbot, 2025). Unlike YouTube, which generally requires longer and more structured content, or Instagram, which tends to emphasize curated visual displays, TikTok allows for the production of short, spontaneous videos that can be created and shared with minimal preparation. This characteristic is supported by a comparative study between platforms, which shows that TikTok's interface is designed to prioritize clarity and efficiency, allowing users to engage in content creation without complex technical or narrative demands (Stanková, 2020). Furthermore, TikTok's advantage lies not only in its technical

aspects, but also in its algorithmic design, which contributes to shaping the way emotions are expressed and circulated. TikTok's algorithm encourages easily replicable audiovisual patterns and collective emotional experiences, distinguishing it from other platforms that rely more on social network structures (Pham & Nguyen, 2024).

In this context, TikTok becomes a relevant space to analyze through a multimodal lens, as students' expressions of anxiety are conveyed not only verbally, but also through various visual and emotional modes integrated into the platform. Specifically, TikTok provides a multimodal space that allows users to express themselves through a combination of visual, auditory, textual, and performative modes in short video formats (Grzenkiewicz & Wildfeuer, 2025). Through this multimodal feature, students express academic anxiety on TikTok to fulfill their need for social support and as a form of escapism from the pressures they face in their daily academic lives (Falgoust et al., 2022; Omar & Dequan, 2020). Therefore, students gain validation and empathy from other users, which ultimately helps reduce feelings of isolation. Furthermore, the 'For You' algorithm on TikTok allows content related to academic anxiety, to be easily found by other users who have similar experiences and interests, thereby encouraging a sense of solidarity and mutual understanding among users (Marengo et al., 2022). Through features such as captions, background sounds, visual filters, and background music, users can creatively represent their emotions, thoughts, and personal experiences. In line with this Bhandari and Bimo (2022) emphasize that TikTok's design and algorithmic features also shape the way individuals construct meaning and express themselves in their daily interactions on the platform. Therefore, TikTok transforms the expression of academic anxiety from an internal, individual experience into a collective multimodal communication practice, where emotions are represented, negotiated, and shared through a combination of various semiotic modes.

There are previous studies that have been carried out on academic anxiety include the research by Sabti et al. (2024) which aims to observe the effect of three components of writing anxiety, which are somatic anxiety, cognitive anxiety, and

avoidance behavior on the behavior of Iraqi EFL students which resulted that all three components of writing anxiety had an effect on the students, with the avoidance behavior anxiety being the most dominant component.

Next, the research conducted by Zahra et al. (2024) aims to assess how gender stereotypes are perceived in short videos or reels on social media through a multimodal lens. It resulted that most reels depict women as weak, stupid, materialistic, and not deserving of respect, while men are mostly depicted as oppressed or manipulated. Thus, the research by Shobari et al. (2025) seeks to understand the factors that lead to academic anxiety among the students during the thesis writing process, as well as the symptoms that occur as a result of this anxiety. The results indicate that thesis writing anxiety is triggered by fear, unrealistic expectations, low self-confidence, limited skills, academic pressure, and poor communication with supervisors, while its most common symptoms include physical disorders and avoidance behaviours. Based on the previous studies, most of the studies on academic anxiety has been limited to conventional classroom settings, while existing MDA studies on social media rarely address academic anxiety. Therefore, this study fills the gap by examining how university students represent their academic anxiety on TikTok, using Systemic Functional-Multimodal Discourse Analysis (SF-MDA) to analyse verbal and visual modes. This research contributes a new perspective on how the university students express and cope with academic anxiety through digital and multimodal practices on social media.

B. Formulation of the Problem

According to the background of the problem described above, the problem formulation that will be used by the researcher is “How is academic anxiety discursively constructed and represented in a TikTok video through a multimodal lens?”

C. Operational Definitions

To avoid ambiguity, the key concepts in this research are defined as follows:

1. Academic Anxiety

Academic anxiety is a feeling of worry, fear, or tension associated with academic activities such as studying, doing homework, taking exams, writing, or giving presentations in an educational setting.

2. TikTok Post

A short-form video content uploaded by students with a hashtag #thesisanxiety on TikTok or the post that contain expressions, either explicit or implicit, of their struggles, emotions, or reflections related to academic anxiety. This post will include verbal elements (screen-text/captions), and visual elements such as facial expressions, gaze directions, gestures, and visual symbols.

3. Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) is an analytical approach used to understand how meaning is constructed through more than one mode of communication, such as text, images, gestures, facial expressions, and other visual elements. This approach emphasizes that communication occurs through various semiotic resources that work simultaneously to convey meaning. In this study, Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) is used to examine how students express academic anxiety through various modes of communication in TikTok content.

D. Aim of the Study

Based on the background and problem formulation above, the purpose of this research is to identify the representations of academic anxiety in students' TikTok post using a multimodal analysis lens.

E. Significances of the Study

1. Theoretical Significance

Theoretically, this research contributes to expanding studies on academic anxiety by applying the Systemic Functional–Multimodal Discourse Analysis (SF-MDA) approach in digital contexts. Previous studies on academic anxiety have primarily relied on interviews or questionnaires to explore students' experiences, focusing mainly on psychological perspectives and verbal data such as interview transcripts. As a result, limited attention has been given to how academic anxiety is expressed through multimodal resources in digital spaces. Therefore, this research offers a new perspective by exploring how academic anxiety is expressed through verbal and visual elements on social media, particularly TikTok. This approach enriches the literature by demonstrating how emotional experiences can be constructed and interpreted through multimodal discourse in online environments.

2. Practical Significance

Practically, this research will suggest insights for lecturers, teachers, and higher education institutions about the importance of paying attention to the emotional aspects of students in the academic process. The findings of this research will help to propose more supportive learning strategies and provide more constructive feedback.

3. Empirical Significance

Empirically, this topic has not been widely researched in the context of digital posts. Documentation of the representation of anxiety through social media posts can be a useful source of empirical data that opens up possibilities for further research, whether to broaden the understanding of academic anxiety, multimodality, or the use of social media in education.