

Emotional Deconstruction and Cultural Analysis of The Viral Spread Of "Cat Meme" Videos from A Subculture Perspective

-- Take The Tiktok Platform as An Example

Hanying Wang^{1,*}

¹Department of Journalism Studies, Shandong University of Finance and Economics, Shandong, Jinan, China

*Corresponding author: why13963188586@163.com

Abstract. This article explores the viral transmission mechanism of a phenomenon-level cat meme across the entire network. The article found that cat meme realized standardized production through template creation, and formed a "low variation, high replication" communication chain relying on TikTok and other platforms. Users can complete secondary creation only by replacing words. Combining the theory of memes and emotional communication, it is revealed that cat memes are essentially emotional carriers that integrate cultural genes and subcultural symbols-standardized templates ensure the breadth of dissemination, and emotional resonance deepens the depth of dissemination. Its dissemination is driven by a dual emotional drive: the surface cute pet image triggers the "cute aggression" in psychology, while the deep level achieves collective emotional release through humorous expression. The research further reflects on the alienation of emotional labor in the algorithm era, which provides a theoretical mirror for understanding the subculture communication on the Internet.

Keywords: Cat meme; Meme propagation; Emotional labor; Emotional resonance; Subcultural Resistance.

1. Research Background and Significance

In the era of social media, cat memes have virally swept across the internet, becoming a unique cultural phenomenon. A cat meme video is a short video that combines funny cat scenes with internet meme culture. "Meme" is an "imported product", and the meme theory was proposed by British scientist Richard Dawkins in "The Selfish Gene". He referred to the cultural genes spread through imitation as memes, which refer to "thoughts, behaviors, or styles spread between people in the same cultural atmosphere" similar to "memes". So, a "cat meme" can be understood as a "meme" of a cat.

Youth subculture, as an important component of online culture, carries the multiple needs of young people for emotional release and resonance in high-pressure social environments. As early as 2007, the Keyboard Cat video became popular on YouTube, becoming an early classic meme, and the embryonic form of the Internet culture marked "Cat+Funny" was slowly formed. The "cat meme" video combines the cute emoji images of cute pets with interesting plot stories, and quickly spreads on various social media platforms through emerging subculture symbols. In this paper, the "cat meme" video is regarded as a typical representative of the Internet subculture. Combining memetics theory and emotional communication theory, it reveals the emotional mechanism of "cat meme" video viral communication and actively reflects on the alienation of emotional labor in the algorithm era.

In theory, "cat meme" is considered to be a typical example of an Internet subculture. Its viral communication mechanism combines the dual logic of meme diffusion and emotional resonance. New media breaks the boundaries of time and space, strengthens user stickiness through subcultural symbol reconstruction and secondary creation, and forms a unique mode of cultural factor reorganization. In practice, this study reveals the emotional driving mechanisms and cultural connotations behind viral transmission, providing a new perspective for analyzing the expression of humor in new media, and reflecting on the phenomenon of emotional labor alienation in the algorithm era, helping to deconstruct the identity construction and emotional expression strategies of Generation Z.

2. Journals Reviewed

The viral spread of "cat meme" videos is closely related to factors such as social network structure, user interaction, and platform algorithms. Research has shown that the structural characteristics of social networks and user interaction dynamics provide the foundation for the viral spread of meme culture. For example, Ian G (2018) found through Twitter data analysis that social network structure and user interaction play a key role in spreading memes. [1] On TikTok, the interactive ritual chain has strengthened emotional resonance and identity display, becoming the core mechanism of the diffusion of stem culture. In addition, the algorithm recommendation of the platform has also played an important role in disseminating "cat meme videos" by training algorithms to achieve circle-breaking propagation. Wang Xuan and Ye's research on the TikTok platform pointed out that the algorithm recommendation mechanism promoted "cat meme" to show three styles: duration fragmentation (within 15 seconds), high emotional density (1.2 emotional trigger points per second), and interaction ritual (fixed opening stem).[2]

In addition, the reason why "cat meme" videos can resonate widely is largely rooted in the emotional value and cultural significance they contain. Hou Yanjie, in combination with Bakhtin's carnival theory, believes that the "co-production" function of TikTok has essentially built a digital carnival square, and users can achieve the pleasure of class subversion by imitating the cat voice dubbing of authoritative accounts (such as "Meow~").[3] From the perspective of emotional deconstruction, "cat memes" deconstruct serious or heavy topics through humor, ridicule, and other means, allowing people to obtain emotional release and psychological comfort in entertainment. This emotional expression not only meets the individual's need for emotional release but also promotes emotional resonance and identity recognition at the group level.

At the cultural level, "cat meme", as an important component of youth subculture, reflects the values, social mentality, challenges and reconstruction of mainstream culture among contemporary youth. It has to some extent undermined the authority of mainstream ideology while providing a platform for young people to express themselves and build their identities. Bi Wenjia and Fan Keyi's investigation of self mockery on social media further reveals that this seemingly negative subculture practice is essentially an emotional release strategy for young people to cope with the pressure of digital survival, intertextual with the common black humor in "cat memes". [4]

As an emerging subculture, its rapid spread contains rich emotional connotations and cultural significance. Through the synergistic effects of social networks, user interaction, and platform algorithms, the "cat meme" video not only meets people's needs in terms of entertainment but also triggers thinking and challenges to mainstream ideology at the cultural level. Although previous studies have explored "cat meme" videos, most of them focus on dissemination mechanisms and cultural impacts. Future research should expand the research perspective and explore the cultural value and social impact of these videos. This study will focus on phenomenon attribution and explore the emotional labor and diverse cultures behind the dissemination of "cat meme" videos, providing a more comprehensive and profound theoretical basis for understanding cultural dissemination and subculture development in the digital age.

3. Meme Theory and Emotional Communication in "Cat Memes"

3.1. Memetics: "Cultural Gene" of Viral Transmission

Dawkins believes that the key to the generation and survival of memes lies in the continuous imitation, replication, and dissemination of users. Memes, as carriers of individual consciousness expression and group emotional resonance, are passed down from generation to generation through replication, transmission, communication, and other means. The faster and wider the spread, the more rapidly new forms of "secondary creation" will also spread and replicate. Among them, the famous anchor of TikTok Treasure Appreciation "Tingquan Treasure Appreciation" had a funny expression when communicating with the audience. The netizen transferred the expression to the kitten

expression package named "Fresh Brother" to express the meaning of doubt and questioning, and realized the second "coding" of the symbol, which was hot on the network.

If a successful meme can spread on the internet, its dissemination process must retain its key core, and both content and form must be preserved. The "cat meme" video retains the form of various material splicing and combination, creating multi-context, multi-level, and diversified content expression by changing the copy. The more vivid, humorous, and widely applicable the materials are, the more popular they are, and the easier it is to form a viral phenomenon and gain recognition from the audience.



Figure 1. Comparison of "Fresh Brother" and "Tingquan Cat"

3.2. Emotional awakening: emotional resonance as a driving force for communication

The systematic study by Qin Yuhan and Song Linlin proposed three core dimensions of communication elements: visual meme intensity, emotional arousal, and openness to participation. [5] Among them, "emotional arousal" refers to the psychological or physiological response to external stimuli (just like being "awakened"). Different emotions are divided into high arousal and low arousal categories. Jonah Berger, assistant professor of marketing at the University of Pennsylvania, found through experiments that student samples influenced by highly arousal emotions such as anxiety and being amused are more inclined to share with others. The crazy addiction of users to "cat memes" has completed a collective carnival of "cute" culture, and the emotional energy hidden behind this carnival behavior has become an important part of the dissemination driver program.

As a powerful social bond, the "cat meme" connects several netizens with similar social experiences, providing a place of belonging for lonely souls. Research has shown that the more positive the content, the more likely it is to become viral, and content with higher emotional content is more likely to cause viral transmission. [6] The positive image of cats replaces users themselves, not only creating a "safe house" for creators but also building a "safe house" for millions of netizens who share the same experience. The joys, sorrows, and joys of life can be told through the dramatic performance and exaggerated expression of kittens. Roast is no longer labeled as "affectation", and there is no longer cynicism to vent. The concise text and fixed images blur the boundaries between people, bringing them closer together and encouraging users to open up and seek resonance.

The core of comedy is tragedy, and the core of tragedy is life. When the positive and lovely entertainment emotion and the negative roast state are intertwined, the diversified emotional energy converges and interweaves based on memes, and a strong communication driving force erupts in the platform. Relaxing and happy days can naturally be calmly talked about, while painful and difficult-to-express emotional knots cannot be casually expressed. The disseminators and recipients can view each other equally, through the narrative logic of "everything can be transformed into a cat". Whether it is ancient sages or modern people, they can use various symbols of "cat meme" to express their joys and sorrows in a relaxed and humorous tone. This powerful force that strikes deep into their hearts drives the profound dissemination of videos.

4. Exploring the Reasons for the Spread of "Cat Meme" Videos

4.1. Meme replication: the standardized production chain of cat meme

4.1.1. Low variability

The "cat meme" videos are mostly based on image symbols. The video copy has a high degree of similarity, such as "when my middle-aged boss personally tried to edit the cat meme", "the process of falling in love and killing with the noodle master", "April Fool's Day in the past vs. April Fool's Day now", etc. The video copy highlights the process description of the content event, basically setting the scene around the theme content of the edited work and the content is composed of these emoticons that can enrich and extend semantics. Almost every symbol has a fixed expression and action as the "meme ontology".

4.1.2. High replication

High replication is also one of the characteristics of the rapid propagation of "cat meme" on TikTok. Memes can replicate and spread quickly and accurately in a short time, which not only shows a strong production and creation ability in the personal experience narrative from the micro perspective but also provides positive feedback from the macro perspective on the reflection of the current situation in all walks of life.

Among them, a TikTok blogger with the account ID "nail making cat meme" used "cat meme" as the carrier to operate her nail shop daily as sharing content. Although this account is the "mini" account of the nail salon's official account, its 24.6 million followers far exceed the main account's 1.8 million followers, a 13-fold increase in followers. The videos on the homepage have a consistent cover: a background image of the studio environment+text such as "Today's appointment is with one/two people+customer identity tags+exaggerated style description", such as "Today's appointment is with a couple putting together their nails". These highly unified homepage displays, combined with the standardized template of "Cat Meme" to generate content, have successfully attracted traffic to nail art studios and met the needs of rapid account creation and online promotion.

In addition, media content production is also influenced by the preferences of the online generation, and efforts are being made to explore the transformation path of new media development, build a new communication relationship with Generation Z, and major mainstream media actively connect to short video platforms to break through barriers, too.

4.2. Emotional Mobilization: From Individual Expression to Collective Resonance

When the lively and agile kitten on the screen dances in front of the camera, the ripples in human pupils are not only dopamine but also a wonderful psychological attack and defense battle - this contradictory tension, known as "cute aggression" in the field of psychology, is like the distorted projection of modern society's need for healing. But deep within this frenzy of cute pets, there is a more realistic and critical undercurrent surging. The "cat meme" video presents two different dimensions of expression, "cuteness" and "parody," in a humorous performance style. In this humorous expression, users have completed the deconstruction and subversion of cultural genes and mainstream values.

The Z-generation network natives who have experienced rapid development from 2G to 5G play multiple roles in the online society. They are not only media audiences, but also producers who constantly change the form of social discourse. They erase their faces and labels, put on the cloak of small animals that are "soft, cute, and harmless", and open up their scars in a mocking and funny tone. In their character performances, they break down various constraints and disputes and open up a stress relief outlet for people who have shared experiences to vent their emotions. Young people in the era of algorithms are using the unique narrative of "cat memes" to dispel systemic oppression, and constructing the softest resistance theater with subcultural symbols. At the junction of cat paws and screens, cute and playful aesthetics are no longer simply emotional comfort, but have become a new rhetorical weapon for digital natives to resist alienated labor.

This cultural practice essentially constructs a dual metaphor: the surface is emotional consumption driven by the healing economy, while the deep layer is a symptom of domesticated resistance instincts seeking to break through. When the behavior of "cloud-sucking cats" evolves from private healing to public discourse, those cats and dogs who interpret various aspects of life are the survival wisdom of contemporary youth who compromise and resist under the high-pressure discipline of society.

5. Conclusion and Reflection

"Cat meme" is a complex formed by the blending of subcultural symbols and modern memes. It takes cultural genes and subcultural symbols as the carrier, forms a deep communication chain of emotional resonance with the help of the TikTok platform, carries out rapid fission transmission at a very low cost, and realizes the dual construction of communication breadth and depth. Zhao Linlin proposed a digital emotional labor alienation model and found and pointed out that "cat meme" producers are facing the commercialization dilemma of the "cute pet persona". Research data shows that the average daily emotional performance time of top pet account operators exceeds 6 hours, forming a vicious cycle of "emotional overdraft content homogenization audience loss". [7] This makes people start to think about whether collective emotional resonance will eventually become an emotional commodity of industrial production when "cuteness" is quantified as a traffic code

In the digital era, the Internet is called "the distribution center of ideological and cultural information and the amplifier of public opinion". The "cat meme" transcends the barriers of social circles in the deconstruction and reconstruction of emotional symbols. It spreads and infects the general public through circle-based communication, from individual expression to group resonance. It is no longer limited to the original context but rather serves as a mirror reflecting the risks and challenges that different perspectives, groups, and circles have experienced or are currently experiencing. This is of great significance for promoting the integration and development of the online society, discovering and solving real social problems.

References

- [1] Ian, G. (2018) The Limitations of Steven Pinker's Optimism. *Nature*, 554, 420-422.
<https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-018-02148-1>
- [2] Wang Xuan, Ye. The Style Change of Meme Culture Driven by Platforms: Taking "Cat Meme" Short Video as an Example [J]. *China Media Technology*, 2024,(10):22-26. DOI:10.19483/j.cnki.11-4653/n.2024.10.004.
- [3] Hou Yanjie. Research on "Cat Meme" Video Creation from the Perspective of Bakhtin's Carnival Theory [J]. *Literature and Art Weekly*, 2024, (16): 77-79
- [4] Bi Wenjia, Fan Keyi. Exploring the phenomenon of self mockery among young people on the internet from the perspective of social media [J]. *All Media Exploration*, 2025, (02): 127-129
- [5] Qin Yuhan, Song Linlin. Research on the propagation elements of network memes from the perspective of meme theory [J]. *New Media Research*, 2023, 9 (11): 97-101. DOI: 10.16604/j.cnki. issn2096-0360.2023.11.20
- [6] Berger J , Milkman K L .What Makes Online Content Viral[J].*Journal of marketing research*, 2012, 49(2):p.192-205.
- [7] Zhao Linlin. Emotional Labor Alienation and Its Governance in the Digital Age [J/OL]. *Journal of Hefei University of Technology (Social Sciences Edition)*, 1-11 [25-04-16]<http://kns.cnki.net/kcms/detail/34.1170.C.20241217.0953.002.html>.
- [8] Li Qinxuan, Liu Zelin The Social Landscape under the Cat Meme Trend: Empathy Interaction between Social Currency New Window and Meme Culture [J]. *Sustainable Development*, 2024, 14 (8): 1918-1927 <https://doi.org/10.12677/sd.2024.148221>
- [9] Li Yuli The Generation, Dissemination, and Mobilization of Emojis from the Perspective of Meme Theory [D]. Chongqing University, 2017