I Sang, Therefore I am! Uses and Gratifications of Self-Mocking Memes and the Effects on Psychological Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

Sang (喪) culture is a youth subculture that has emerged in recent China. Through the lens of self-mocking memes, this exploratory study attempts to understand the psychological mechanisms and social meanings behind sang culture. A survey research of Chinese college students (N=506) were conducted to examine the uses and gratifications of self-mocking memes on social media. Six gratifications were identified. Two individual traits – the need for humor and narcissism – were found partially related to self-mocking meme usage. By considering self-mockery as an alternative form of self-presentation, this study challenged the pervasive self-enhancement hypothesis. On China’s social media, self-mocking memes were used as both a self-protection strategy (intra-personal) and a social strategy (interpersonal). This study found a mixed effect of self-mocking meme usage on Chinese youths’ psychological well-being: it was positively related to the harmonious interpersonal relationship while negatively related to self-acceptance.

KEYWORDS

Memes, Narcissism, Need for humor, Psychological Well-being, Sang culture, Self-mockery, Uses and gratifications

INTRODUCTION

Studies on self-presentation have long been dominated by self-enhancement hypothesis (e.g. Goffman, 1959; 1967). Under such hypothesis, social media tend to be viewed as a platform where people selectively present self-enhancing impressions to others. In recent years, however, an increasing number of Chinese millennials are mocking and rejecting mainstream visions of success and embracing a culture known as “sang” (喪, meaning “dejected, dispirited”) (Zeng, 2017; Wei, 2017; Yang, 2018). Contrasting with Chinese leaders’ promotion of “positive energy”, Chinese millennials are more willing to present the gloomy side of their lives on social media. Since 2016, the internet memes that have become icons of sang culture include self-loathing BoJack Horseman, Sad Frog (a spin-off of Pepe the Frog), “Lazy Egg”, “Ge You Slouch” and so on (Zeng, 2017; Wei, 2017). Combining playful images and texts together, these memes often go viral easily and are widely used for self-mockery on social media.

So far, there has been no consensus about the origin of this subculture and how to define it. Some have counted the popularity of internet memes mentioned above as its origin while others think it could

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be dated to the buzzword meme “diaosi” (losers, 戳屌丝) which has flooded the Chinese internet since 2012 (Szablewicz, 2014). To a foreign ear, the diaosi meme could be understood as a Chinese version of “we are the 99%”, a meme popular in the Occupy Wall Street Movement (Szablewicz, 2014). On China’s social media, the young generation often use diaosi meme to mock themselves as “losers”.

Interpretations of sang culture have also been very divergent. When Chinese millennials are celebrating sang culture as a type of black humor and a way of emotional release, the state media People’s Daily condemns it as “spiritual opium” and cautions young Chinese to “take the right path” (He, 2017). Financial Times defines “sang culture” as “the millennial self-mocking, semi-ironic embrace of giving up” (Yang, 2018) and views it as “a quiet revolution” of Chinese young generation in face of soaring house prices, fierce competition in job market and rising expectations from their parents. Such view is consistent with other comments which treat sang culture as a reaction to and a symptom of China’s profound transformation in the past years (Zeng, 2017; Chen & Munroe, 2017). For them, to be sang is not to be in a state of complete despair; instead, it signifies Chinese millennials’ disillusionment with the apparent lack of upward social mobility. By using playful memes such as diaosi or BoJack Horseman, Chinese youths are imaging and articulating alternative common identities which pose a challenge to the mainstream visions of success.

It should be noted that sang culture is a broad phenomenon that could be studied from various perspectives. In this study, we choose to focus on self-mocking memes for three reasons. First, they challenge the dominant view of self-enhancement hypothesis and suggest an alternative form of self-presentation. Second, their dynamic and participatory character drives us to shift our focus from “memes as content” to “memes as a practice”. Here, internet memes refer to the dispersion of items, such as buzzwords, photos, emojis, and videos from person to person by means of copying or imitation through the internet (Shifman, 2011; 2013). Following scholars like Shifman (2013), we emphasize internet memes as dynamic entities and treat them as building blocks of participatory cultures in digital media rather than as isolated, discrete units. Third, self-mocking memes serve as a vantage point to understand the psychological mechanisms and social meanings behind sang culture. By so doing, we can not only get a glimpse of Chinese millennials’ “structure of feeling” (Williams, 1965) but also add a psychological lens to observe China’s transformation in the past years.

Recent studies on internet memes have been primarily concerned with the content of such memes (Rea, 2013; Szablewicz, 2014), either their rhetorical components or political implications. Although memes are viewed as a kind of user-generated contents in these studies, the perspective of users has been largely ignored. In our view, studying the content alone cannot adequately capture their dynamics or fully explain their production and circulation on China’s social media. Empirical studies are needed to explore what motivates Chinese youths to use self-mocking memes. Besides, a wide variety of individual traits may also affect the creation and sharing of user-generated contents; two that have often been examined in previous studies are sense of humor and level of narcissism (Poon & Leung, 2011; Leung 2009; Leung 2013). There has been no study, to our knowledge, that examines how need for humor are related to user-generated contents. Measuring the tendency to generate and seek out humor, need for humor is an individual trait that encompasses, but transcends, an individual’s sense of humor (Cline, et al., 2003; 2011). As Crawford (2013) has pointed out, Chinese youths’ passion for creating and sharing humorous memes demonstrates their widespread desire to create and enjoy humor. Considering the playful manner of self-mocking memes, we assume that need for humor serves as a better contributing factor in predicting self-mocking meme usage.

Meanwhile, given that humor could be used to release stress, reduce interpersonal conflict and facilitate relationships (Martin et al., 2003; Dyck & Holtzman, 2013; Maiolino & Kuiper, 2014), using self-mocking memes is also assumed to contribute to individuals’ psychological well-being. Often based on the self-enhancement hypothesis, a large number of studies have showed how social media usage could lead to social comparison and the so-called “Facebook envy” (Chou & Edge, 2012; Chen & Lee, 2013; Vogel et al., 2015). But what is the case if people employ self-mockery as
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