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Finding Meaning in Nonsensical Chinese Memes

Abstract

Since the beginning of the information era, digital media has created a reservoir of memes, which have evolved into multiple genres that display diverse characteristics. One genre, referred to as “nonsensical memes” in this paper, is especially interesting because compared to other memes, it does not convey an immediately perceivable message, but can get very popular among online communities. This seemingly paradoxical situation leads to a question: are nonsensical memes utterly meaningless, or do they actually contain a message that is just harder to decode? Exploring the causes of nonsensical memes and the role they play in the society may bring valuable insights to the understanding of memes as a way of communication, and represents a new way to draw inference about social developments. Existing literature on nonsensical memes, however, is limited, and research on the relationship between nonsensical memes and social developments is lacking even more seriously. Hence, this paper will focus on a handful of famous nonsensical memes in China, trying to (1) identify the purpose of using them and, if any, the message they try to convey, and (2) explore the how the social background contributed directly or indirectly to their creation. After examining a handful of Chinese nonsensical memes, it is found that nonsensical memes may be used to (1) foster an identity of a community through unique expressions, (2) mock detestable practices in the society, and (3) express disillusionment toward the high expectations of the society.

Introduction

The influence of digital media has never been greater. Under the expansion of participatory culture, where participants remix existing ideas into new ones, the golden age of memetic humor arrives. Given the synthetic nature of memetic expression, memes have evolved into different genres, and the style of meme-telling varies across different social media and cultures. A particular type of memes features expressions or behaviors that neither convey an immediately perceivable message nor exhibit a plausible purpose. For example, “Rick-rolling,” the popular action of tricking people to click into the music video “Never Gonna Give You Up” by Rick Astley, does not stand for a value or emit an idea, and hardly goes any further than merely making fun of people. The memes surrounding “Captain Obvious” (TravelPulse, 2016), which



restate self-evident observations, are also devoid of a theme at the first glance. This study will call this kind of memes “nonsensical memes” and will explore the various messages conveyed through these memes as well as their relationships with the social background from which they originated.

Literature Survey

The word “mimeme,” abbreviated as “meme,” was famously coined in the paper “Memes: the new replicators” by Richard Dawkins (2016), and refers to texts, images, expressions, or any idea that propagates from human mind to human mind. In the context of digital media, memes generally refer to humorous (or unhumorous) images and texts that get circulated by many

participants. Focusing on nonsensical memes in digital media, Katz and Shifman (2017) in their study offered a theoretical account for the ability of digital media to create memetic nonsense. The authors argue that visual texts on digital media are by nature polysemic, their meaning being indefinite, so when they are mixed, the new message has a strong potential to contain nonsense. As they are modified again and over again, the original meaning gets increasingly blurry, eventually resulting in nonsensical memes. In addition, Katz and Shifman grouped memetic nonsense found on digital media into 5 categories: linguistic silliness, embodied silliness, pastiche, dislocations, and interruptions, discovering that common in all 5 categories is the function of expressing affective meaning and consolidating social bonds. Besides, some studies have focused on particular instances: for example, Pentzold et al. (2022) studied the #Sharpiegate affair and found that distorted images with bold scribbles were used to attack Trump's "displayed unreasonableness." Specifically, such memes express irreverence to political absurdity by exhibiting mixed silliness and seriousness. Despite the abundance of research on nonsensical memes as a whole, research focusing on nonsensical memes in China is very rare, but studies incidental to this topic do exist: Szablewicz (2014) studied the "Diaosi" culture and concluded that memes were used by Chinese youth to express disillusionment toward the pressure of life, while also creating an identity among people who call themselves "losers."

Methodologies

This paper will be primarily a multi-case study that explores the messages conveyed through instances of memetic nonsense on Chinese media, considering them in relation to the social background from which they originated. It will also categorize each meme into one of the 5 categories of memetic nonsense outlined by Katz and Shifman and evaluate how it complies to diverges from the functions of nonsensical memes discussed in their work.

Definitions

Nonsensical Memes:

Memes that do not convey a well-defined message, such as a complaint or an expression of joy, are called nonsensical. The paper “Making sense? The structure and meanings of digital memetic nonsense” defines nonsensical memes as memes that do not seem to say anything about the world (Katz & Shifman, 2017) and groups them into 5 categories: linguistic silliness, embodied silliness, pastiche, dislocations, and interruptions, as defined below.

Linguistic silliness: the alteration of standard language into a playful, typically erroneous form, e.g. “the” to “teh” or “da”

Embodied silliness: the memetic expression through the use of human body, e.g.

Tebowing and Lying Down Game

Pastiche: verbal or visual texts that are taken out of context and used to express ideas that are different from their original meanings, e.g. *I’m The Goddamn Batman!*

Dislocations: the combination of settings and/or settings from distinct sources into one, e.g. *Strutting Leo* and the *Facebombing* practice

Interruptions: nonsensical memes used to obstruct the flow of digital conversations, e.g. *Has Anyone Really Been Far Even as Decided to Use Even Go Want to Do Look More Like*

Nonsensical Memes and Subcultures

According to the study by Katz and Shifman (2017), nonsensical memes primarily carry an affective meaning, rather than a referential meaning: one uses nonsensical memes not to express a concrete meaning, but to trigger a feeling demonstrating his affiliation to a community, with nonsensical memes acting as the collective knowledge of a community. For members of a community, nonsensical memes glue them together and strengthen the social bonds; for

outsiders, they set up comprehension obstacles preventing them from understanding the conversations within the community. Out of the 10 most popular 10 internet slangs of 2021 (Baidu Baike, n.d.), “YYDS,” which consists of the initials of the colloquial expression “Yong Yuan De Shen” (永远的神), meaning “God Forever,” is an exaggerated compliment first used in fandom subcultures to praise one’s idol eSports player or celebrity, but it went so popular that it broke out from its original sphere of influence. “YYDS” typifies the genre *linguistic silliness* of memetic nonsense, as it alters the original text into a form that is much less readable.

Considering that fandom subcultures are likely associated with a heightened feeling of privilege and superiority, it makes sense that its members would try to distinguish themselves from others. This could be done by “encrypting” expressions to make them only comprehensible to the insiders, and to achieve this goal, the introduction of nonsense is a great idea, just like when you want to create a secure password, you want it to be random and inscrutable. The expression “YYDS” is enigmatic as it abbreviates another term for no reason, so non-members of the community would have a hard time figuring out its meaning; when outsiders are blocked, the insiders feel more united and identified.

Additional research supports the use of nonsense as a means to establish identity. Song (2019) studied the meme “Tuyang Tusen Po,” which is the phonetic translation of “Too Young Too Simple” in Chinese, and found that the popularization of this meme is netizen-driven, rather than meme-driven: the majority of the usage of this meme is by a fixed group of people who demonstrate a particular geographic distribution that, however, does not depend on population density. This pattern is indicative of the existence of an online community of active users of this expression who sustained the majority of its popularity. Meanwhile, “Tuyang Tusen Po,” also being an instance of *linguistic silliness*, is nonsensical in that the combination of its Chinese

characters doesn't make sense – the only way to understand it is through its pronunciation. This nonsense could have been the tactic used by that group of netizens to make this meme their very own expression. Similarly, one of China's top 10 internet memes in 2017, “Mantis Shrimp, Let's Go,” originated as a slang word between players of a game (Baidu Baike, 2017). Though this



皮皮虾，我们走

(Mantis Shrimp, Let's Go)

meme, in contrast to the two previous memes, can be understood on the linguistic level, it is still nonsensical – the image of a person riding on a mantis shrimp is utterly whimsical – and would be categorized into *Pastiche* from Katz and Shifman's framework since it's not interpreted literally. The fact that it also comes from a gaming community confirms once more that memetic nonsense can function as an identification of a subculture and acts as the collective knowledge that is only known to insiders.

Nonsensical Memes as an Instrument of Sarcasm

As seen above, nonsensical memes can serve an affective meaning – that is, to show one's affiliation to a community, but there could be something more to that. Zhu (2019) finds that compared to the English culture, Chinese culture tends to create humor that bears a social mission, such as Zhao Benshao's comedies mocking the injustice committed by rich people. Do nonsensical memes in China carry social missions? To answer this question, it's helpful to first consider the social background behind the creation of certain memes that will be discussed next.

A phenomenal social development in China is the “Sang” (丧) culture, a culture defined by defeatism and despondency felt in front of the unattainable expectations from society (Tan & Cheng, 2020). Sang culture has occurred on NetEase Cloud Music, a major music streaming site in China. Some ill-intentioned users exploited the “sang” felt by others and deliberately composed gloomy stories and expressions under sad songs’ comment sections, trying to drag other viewers into a bad mood (Baidu Baike, 2020). This behavior spread contagiously, turning multiple comment sections into oceans of misery. The most influential comments include, “Born to be a human, I am sorry” (a line written by a Japanese poet), “Someone dies at 8 years old, but isn’t buried until 80 years old,” and “Those who are still up this late at night must be lonely.” As this detestable behavior went more popular, NetEase Music was given the sardonic nickname “NetEmo music” (KrASIA, 2020). Other memes, including nonsensical memes, were also on the way to attack this practice: the comment “My mom died when I was 6 years old” was reshaped into “My mom died a year before I was born,” and “I’m only 12 years old, but have been diagnosed with depression for 8 years” into “I’m only 12 years old, but have been diagnosed with depression for 20 years” (KrASIA, 2020). The recreated ones are logically inconsistent, because one’s mother cannot die one year before his birth, and one cannot be doing anything for a duration longer than his age. Evidently, nonsense is used to criticize the expressions that pretend to be melancholy, generate negativity on the internet, and damage the mental health of susceptible groups. By messing them up with logical inconsistencies, the gloominess it intended to release is collapsed into a playful joke, seriousness is combated with carefreeness, and the power of nonsense to fight against injustice is demonstrated to the fullest extent in this very case.

Another genre of textual nonsense that is relevant to the meme of “NetEmo” is coined “nonsensical literature.” Its Chinese term, “Fei Hua Wen Xue” (废话文学), refers to language

that tells self-evident conclusions and conveys meaningless information. Famous ones include “It’s the first time I see you ever since we met last time,” “With greater power comes greater power,” and “Compared to the last generation, the next generation is much younger” (Zhihu.com, 2021). Noticeable, the instance “If you are still awake this late at night, then you must be awake” appears to be a head-on reaction to the “NetEmo” comment “Those who are still up this late at night must be lonely.” Unlike the above examples that introduce a paradox, nonsensical literature obliterates the original message. By doing so, it conveys despise, dismissal, and belittlement to the original idea of that comment, silently responding to this insidious practice with the strongest disrespect. To sum up, the above 2 styles of memetic nonsense attack abominable practices by altering or destroying the original message, respectively. Interestingly, it’s difficult to find a match between these 2 styles and any one of the 5 categories outlined by Katz and Shifman; that is, nonsensical memes that play with logic could be a brand new category on their own.

Further, nonsensical literature may not be disparaging only the “NetEmo” phenomenon; it could also be a reaction to another influential social development in China: marketing accounts (营销号) – self-media accounts that publish articles that don’t communicate any useful information but solely elicit views through a clickbait title. While a formal description of marketing accounts is hard to find in the English literature, a website (Mobius, 2020) built to mock marketing accounts by randomly generating a marketing-account-styled article from a given keyword can help understand what they do. Below is an article generated from the keyword “meme,” its translation shown to the right. Clearly, the generated content tells exactly nothing. This practice, ubiquitous on China’s UC Browser, Weibo, Sohu, etc., infuriates millions of users and is one reason why the Cyberspace Administration of China’s turned down thousands

流行梗是怎么火起来的？专家回复：必须高度重视

众所周知，流行梗是最近非常火的一个词。那么流行梗到底是什么梗呢？相信大家对于流行梗都很熟悉，流行梗就是我们每天都会经常遇到的，但是流行梗是怎么回事呢？下面就让小编带大家了解一下流行梗是怎么回事吧。

流行梗最近能火，其实就是流行梗受到了大家的关注。大家可能会感到很惊讶，流行梗为什么是这样的？流行梗究竟为什么火起来了呢？但事实就是这样，小编也感到非常惊讶。

希望小编精心整理的这篇内容能够帮助到你，本期教学结束了，欢迎大家在评论区和小编一起讨论，畅所欲言。

◉ 预览 ◉ 复制 ◉ 复制正文

How are memes popularized? Expert replies: more attention on this issue is needed

As we all know, meme is a very popular word. So what actually is a meme? Everyone must be very familiar with memes; memes are what we encounter everyday, but how actually do they work? Now let the author explain what memes are to everyone.

Memes are recently popular, and it's simply because they receive people's attention. Someone may be surprised, why are memes like this? Why on earth do they become popular? But this is the truth; even the author is very surprised.

Hopefully, the content above, organized with effort, can help you. This is the end of the tutorial, and you are welcome to discuss whatever you'd like with the author.

of self-media accounts that do not output positive information (BBC, 2018). The title of a marketing account's article usually begins with "Shock!" and follows by the description of an event. Correspondingly, an instance from nonsensical literature, "Shock! Fourteen-year-old girl was ten years old 4 years ago" (Zhihu, 2021), looks like a direct imitation of the title described above. It captures people's attention by the word "Shock!" and then runs into a self-evident logical truism that mimics what a marketing account does. Utilizing the ability of laughter to humiliate or deride a subject (Vedantam et al., 2019), nonsensical literature converts marketing accounts' non-expression into laughable jokes to achieve the purpose of mockery.

Memetic Nonsense and Pressure from Life

As noted earlier, nonsensical memes may be countering the culture of Sang in China, but in some cases, they are actually used to express disappointment and grief toward life as well. Wiggins (2019) notes that memes are analogous to Dadaist expression in that both convey disillusionment toward the society, and summarizes the motivation behind meme-making as a simple drive: "the world is crazy but at least we can make memes". A highly similar idea is reiterated in Katz and Shifman's study: nonsensical memes subversively question the modern obligation to create meaning through every utterance. For people who are disillusioned by the unreachable expectations of the Chinese society (Tan & Cheng, 2020), engaging in nonsensical

memes is a way to temporarily free themselves from the pressure of life as well as express rejection of the mission of creating value. Tiktok, a popular short video platform, often features nonsensical expressions and behaviors, and since a major reason for using Tiktok is to escape from everyday pressure (Meng & Leung, 2021), the popularity of memetic nonsense on it could be understood. In 2018, the kid's show "Peppa Pig" suddenly went viral on Tiktok, where people followed the trend of buying Peppa Pig toys and painting its icon on their skin, asserting that Peppa Pig is a symbol of "gangsters" (Wildau, 2018), which is a kind of *embodied silliness* from Katz and Shifman's framework. This ridiculous movement where adults glorified a children's show went so aggressive that it got banned on Tiktok (Wildau, 2018). Peppa Pig wasn't any nonsensical meme; it was an outright protest against the expectation of meaningfulness. The society's request for every to contribute his effort and create value was confronted by a carnivalesque indulging in the absurd. Recall the earlier meme "Tuyang Tosen Po:" a calligraphy of this expression originally displayed in a classroom at Peking university was removed in the name of "lack of cultural meanings" (Song, 2019), which unveils a struggle between meaningfulness and meaninglessness, a tension between the mentality of meme users and the politically correct view on value generation imposed by the Chinese society. In both cases discussed above, the expression of one's negativity and the protest against the pressure of life in the modern Chinese society are substantiated through the engagement in absurdity in the form of nonsensical memes.

Discussion, Limitations, and Conclusion

Based on Katz and Shifman's study, the central meaning of nonsensical memes is affective – they signal one's affiliation to a community and strengthen the social bonds within it, and this view is confirmed by Chinese memes that demonstrate high community-specificity like

“YYDS” and “Tuyang Tosen Po.” This study starts from Katz and Shifman’s work, but it adds a more fine-grained layer of interpretation of the roles played by nonsensical memes: multiple cases suggest that nonsensical memes can well serve a social purpose in China. “Nonsensical literature,” for example, can be a response to the phenomenon of marketing account articles that waste people’s time, and can concurrently be attacking the “NetEmo” practice, which is impairing the mental health of NetEase Cloud Music users. While it bears a social mission, it still serves an affiliative meaning suggested by Katz and Shifman, as it is wildly circulated among the youth community and functions as a collective expression. Besides, as noted in Katz and Shifman’s work, nonsensical memes could be a protest against the constant expectation of meaningfulness from the society. Wasting hours and hours on nonsensical videos on Tiktok could be a deliberate violation of the model of a good citizen, and the obsession with Peppa Pig could be a conscious attempt to disappoint the society by acting crazy. In retrospect, the Captain Obvious meme from the introduction, “YYDS” meme, nonsensical literature, and all other nonsensical memes may altogether form an opposition against the expectation of creating value and the obligation of contributing to the society.

It should, however, be noted that this study only encompasses a tiny subset of the repertoire of nonsensical memes in China, so the conclusions about their messages and roles may be inaccurate or incomplete. Some examples are taken out from the empirical recollection by the author and not based on well-founded studies on nonsensical Chinese memes, partly due to Chinese censorship and partly due to the scarcity of relevant research, which could be a source of bias; the translation of memes from Chinese to English is done by the author and may slightly alter the meaning of the source, and additional verification may be needed. Therefore, one should be cautious when trying to use apply the conclusions to other situations or refer to examples

listed here. Though the findings in this study may not generalize to other forms of nonsensical memes or memes as a whole, future researchers certainly can obtain important insights for understanding the reasons and purposes of memetic nonsense outside of the scope spanned by this study. This study could also provide insights into studies examining how memetic expressions differ from the Chinese culture to other cultures.

Additionally, memes are analyzed primarily through their users' purpose and the message they are trying to transmit. What kind of humor lies behind them and how is humor created through them are not the focus of this study. The more fundamental questions such as why is nonsensical literature or the meme of Captain Obvious funny, which may need a psychological or potentially neurological answer, would be left for future researchers to tackle.

As a recapitulation, memetic nonsense on Chinese social media can act as the tokens used by subcultures to identify themselves, function as an instrument for mocking and criticizing unjust behaviors in the society, and enable people to release their negativity and resist the high expectations of value creation from the Chinese society.

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Appendix: selected translation of nonsensical literature examples from
<https://www.zhihu.com/question/482233311>, as of September 27, 2021

Number (index on web page)	Original Text (Chinese)	Translation
1	死者没受伤吧？	Is the victim injured?
3	谁能想到当我还是一个孩子的时候，我还只是一个孩子。	Who can imagine that when I was still a child, I was still a child.
7	据我所知，我一无所知。	Based on what I know, I don't know anything.
8	每次我不知道该说什么的时候就不知道该说什么。	Every time I don't know what to say, I don't know what to say.
10	如果我没猜错的话，那我一定是猜对了。	If I didn't guess it wrong, then I must have guessed it right.
11	希望下次见到你是在下次。	I hope the next time I see you is the next time.
12	你说的这话，抛开内容来说，我十分赞同。	What you just said, apart from its content, I totally agree.
13	但凡你这话有点道理，也不至于一点道理没有。	As long as your words are making the slightest sense, they wouldn't make completely no sense.
15	现在的年轻人啊和老一辈人比起来真的年轻。	Compared to the last generation, the next generation is much younger.
22	股票的规律找到了，不是涨就是跌。	I've figured out the patterns of the stock market: it's either rising or falling.
28	每呼吸一分钟，就过去了 60 秒。	Every minute you breathe, 60 seconds have passed.
34	能力越大，能力就越大。	With greater power comes greater power.