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# The MBTI, cultural creation and self-conceptions: A case study of a subcultural meme on Chinese social media

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**Abstract**

The Myers–Briggs Type Indicator, or MBTI, has recently gained popularity among Chinese millennials and Gen Zs. Framing the MBTI has a cultural item or meme, we explore it and the subculture that has emerged around it on Chinese social media. We rely on a symbolic interactionist conception of cultural creation to show how the MBTI became known (K), useable (U), functional (F), appropriate (A), and triggered (T) on social media platforms, and how it circulates within a network of young Chinese social media users. Our analysis highlights the memetic spread of MBTI among Chinese millennials and Gen Zs in terms of a contemporary Chinese social media subculture that facilitates and supports the development and expression of non-traditional self-conceptions and identities. Using the MBTI not only provides opportunities for desirable presentations of self, but also simplifies definitions of self and other and thus helps streamline interactions among youths.

*Keywords*: Chinese youth culture, MBTI, meme, social media, symbolic interaction, subculture.

## 1. Introduction

In a country with over one billion internet and social media users, over 300 million of whom are young people (CNNIC, 2024), China boasts a massive social mediasphere that has become an important part of many young people's everyday lives (Fu 2022). Recent research on social media platforms such as Bilibili, Douyin, QQ, WeChat, Weibo, Xiaohongshu, and Zhihu has found a plethora of digitally-mediated subcultures and identities connected to a range of lived experiences and issues (e.g., J. Sun 2023; Tan and Cheng 2020; Zidani 2018). The variety and verve of these subcultural phenomena may be explained by the idea that China today is "a drastically transforming society full of diversified yet often conflicting values" (Cheung and Liu 2015:409). And while scholars have been studying the significance of these subcultures

for Chinese culture and society (e.g., Clark 2012), little has been done to describe the process through which subcultural information is memetically diffused within and across networks of social media users.

In this study, we explore the memetic aspects of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (hereafter, MBTI) personality model among Chinese social media users since the spring of 2022 and the subculture surrounding its use. Although the MBTI was originally developed in 1940s the US as a self-diagnostic tool rooted in Jungian psychology (Myers et al. 1998), it has become a subcultural tool that young people across China and Asia more generally have begun using to identify themselves and others (Park 2024; Ren 2024). Information about MBTI can be found across the Chinese social mediasphere. However, our particular interest is not so much in the broad subculture surrounding MBTI use or the individual youths who use it, but in the processes through which the MBTI, as a unique cultural item, emerged and spread to become part of a subculture that shapes young people's self-conceptions and behaviors. We therefore frame MBTI as a subcultural meme (Chick 1999; Dawkins 1976) that facilitates the social expression of meaningful self-conceptions and identities. We bring together research on digital subcultures, social media, and a symbolic interactionist conception of culture to show MBTI's movement across Chinese social media and its influence on youths. Our analysis thus provides an interactionist and micro-cultural understanding of what the MBTI is and what purposes it serves on Chinese social media.

## 2. Chinese social media subcultures

The concept of subculture "is pivotal" to an understanding of Chinese youths' collective interests, practices, and identities in the 21st century because it highlights their "creative efforts at self-styling and distinction from the adult moral order" (Tang 2013: 531). Contemporary Chinese social media subcultures provide young people with meaningful symbols through which they can anchor their self-conceptions and form meaningful connections with others, while also distinguishing themselves from more conventional identities based on nationality, ethnicity, or politics. It is key to highlight at the outset that by "subcultures" we do not refer to groups of individuals, but to the webs of meaning that support social life. There are a variety of digitally-mediated subcultures apparent in China today. First are oppositional subcultures that support engagement in ideological struggles against dominant socio-cultural or political-economic forces, such as through hacking or open information advocacy (Chen and Wei 2010; Gu 2018). Second are subcultures that support collective inaction ("doing nothing") and/or the cynical reinterpretation of everyday life among individuals with similar feelings of alienation from mainstream society. Recent examples include the "Buddha-like" (Shu 2021), diao si (P. Yang et al. 2015), sang (Tan and Cheng, 2020), and tang ping (Z. Zhang and Li 2023; Zheng et al., 2023) subcultures, each of which offers strategies for individuals dealing with the strain experienced in regards to rising inequalities and changing social values. Third are subcultures predicated on shared consumer and lifestyle habits, most often around media genres, texts, and idols (e.g., J. Sun 2019; Wang 2020; Zou 2022). These studies do not conceive subcultures in terms of resistance or problem-solving, but rather as akin to distinctive taste or consumer cultures (e.g., Wang 2020). Yet even adherents of those subcultures are viewed as problematic by conventional Chinese culture, which worries over the ingress of a global culture "underpinned by... hedonism, consumerism and individualism. [As a result,] young people... are considered [by older adults] to be self-centered and spoiled"

(Cheung and Liu 2015:410).

Our interactionist approach frames subcultures as webs or structures of meaning that enable connective forms of identification and action. Subcultures not automatically imply deviance or resistance, but rather "the shared understandings and behaviors of groups in particular settings" (Fine and Kleinman 1979:2). However, we do not focus on subcultural groups that are relatively cohesive or bounded (Andersen 2023; Cheung and Liu 2015), but on networks of users that are relatively heterogeneous, with flexible modes of affiliation, commitment, and self-presentation. Our study focuses on a youth-driven social media network where the MBTI carries shared significance as an identification and self-surveillance technology. The "boundaries" between this network subculture and conventional culture are not discernable by radical styles (Muggleton 2000), but by people's active use of MBTI-relevant symbols in their interactions. In short, the subculture is predicated on a "symbolic repertoire of membership and reference affiliations... that can be endlessly modified and renewed in the imagery and narratives of [social media] culture" (Chaney 1997:149).

## 3. The MBTI: from self-diagnostic tool to subcultural meme

Research suggests that contemporary Chinese youths' subcultural imaginaries are typically less informed by ideology or politics and more by trends that circulate via social media (Wang and Kuntz 2023). Some of these trends are indigenous to Chinese culture and society, while others derive from Western sources but are reinterpreted with/in East Asian sensibilities and contexts (Drissel 2009; Yuan 2020). The MBTI is an example of an imported Western symbol that Chinese millennials and Gen Zs now as an important tool for both social and personal identification (Lu 2023). The MBTI is a personality typology model originally developed in the US in the 1940s by Katharine Cook Briggs and her daughter Isabel Briggs Myers—neither of whom had any formal training in psychology—based on their interpretations of Carl Jung's psychoanalytical theories (Stein and Swan 2019). During the Covid-19 pandemic, the MBTI started trending on social media in East Asia as young people in lockdown had ample time to worry about themselves and their uncertain futures (C. Yang 2023; Lee 2022). At its core, the MBTI objectifies self-conceptions and identities in a universalistic language, predicated on the belief that all individuals have unique personalities comprised of enduring individual traits, drives, values, and emotions that directly shape behaviors. The model facilitates the classification of self into 16 distinct personality types based on four indicators, each with opposing binary values that are measured across a scale: Extraversion (E) vs Introversion (I), Sensing (S) vs Intuition (N), Thinking (T) vs Feeling (F), and Judging (J) vs Perceiving (P) (see table 1). Many social and personality psychologists have dismissed the MBTI as pseudoscientific, yet it has continued to be used in the self-discovery, business, and education industries (e.g., Beebe 2016; Furnham et al. 2007; Rushton et al. 2007).

As of February 2024, the #MBTI hashtag had been used more than 4.12 billion times on Weibo and the number of unique discussions threads on the topic of MBTI was approaching 1 million (Weibo 2024). User-profile information on the Baidu Index (2024), which measures keyword searches on Chinese internet and social media platforms, showed that MBTI's main users and followers were aged 20-29 ( 46%), followed by those under 19 ( 24%) and then those aged 30-39 ( 18%). Chinese youths learn about the MBTI through online sources such as the 16 Personalities website, which offers a free approximation of the official paid test. Site visitors can complete an online survey, where they provide close-ended responses on a seven-

point Likert-scale to statements such as "you regularly make new friends" and "you spend a lot of your free time exploring various random topics that pique your interest." After answering 130 questions, respondents receive a report that defines their personality by combining one letter from each indicator to produce a four-letter code, such as "ESTJ" for a person whose personality is allegedly rooted in Extraversion, Sensing, Thinking, and Judging.

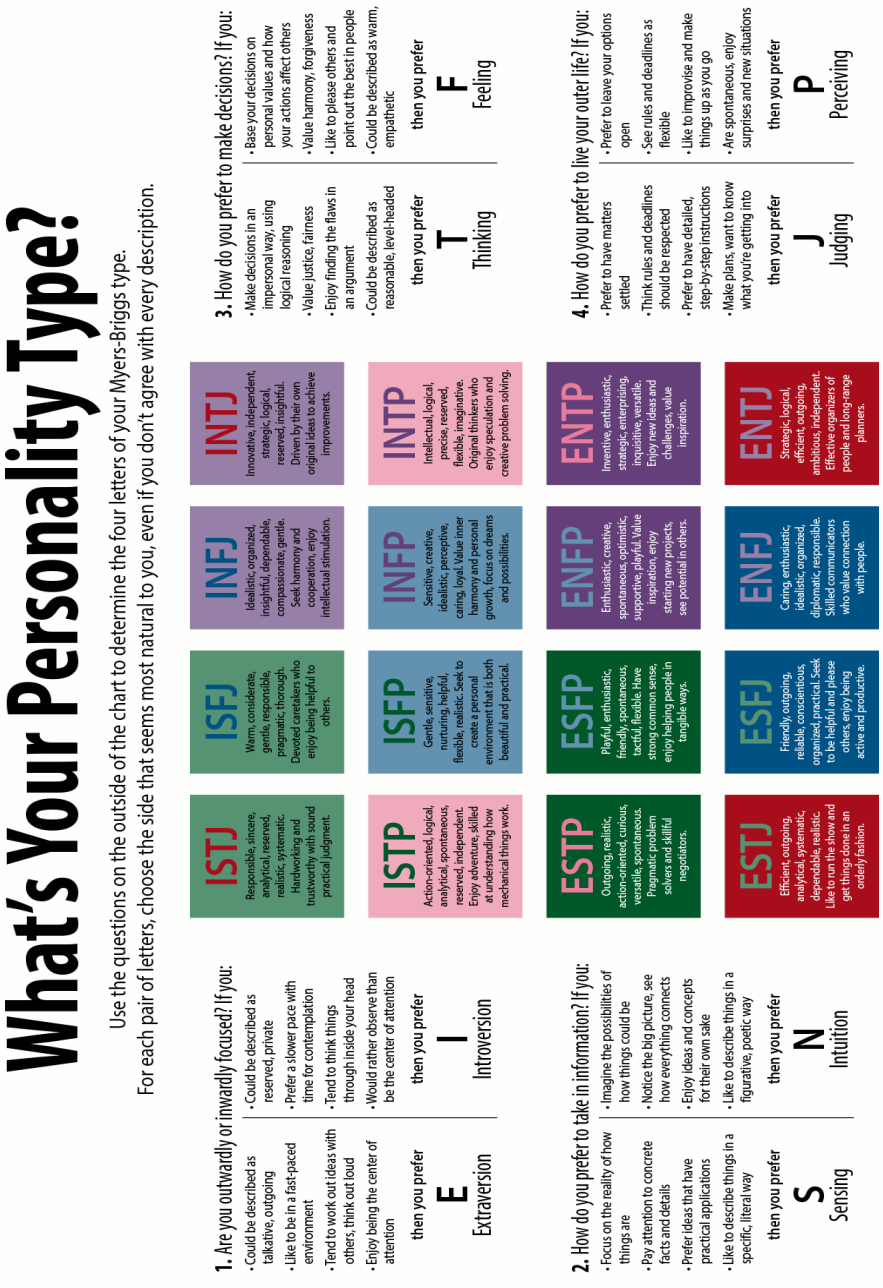


Table 1: MBTI types and descriptions

source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MyersBriggsTypes.png

The MBTI plays upon desires for a stable understanding of self and other that is rooted both in individual uniqueness and contemporary global discourse. Moore (2005) has argued that, because many Chinese millennials and Gen Zs grew up in relatively more affluent households than their parents did and with better access to diverse sources of information via social media, they consider individuality to be a much more important personal quality than their parents. This has given rise to subcultural practices primarily concerned with self-expression and identity exhibition (Sima and Pugsley 2010; Q. Zhang and E 2012) that rub against China's conventional political culture, which continues to promote identity homogeneity and conformity (Han 2013). Writing on the recent growth of the MBTI in neighboring Korea, Park (2024) offers two key insights that are particularly germane to an understanding of the MBTI's appeal for East Asian youths vis-à-vis subcultural identity. First, and in line with our opening comments on China being a society in transition, the MBTI is "not so much diagnostic as therapeutic, not about exploring people's personalities but about making people feel better" (Paul 2004; quoted in Park 2024:41) by offering "a neat image of distinct and compartmentalized selves that each individual can care for" (Park 2024:51). This point aligns with subcultures' problem-solving functions (Williams 2016). Second, the MBTI has a normative dimension insomuch as it functions as a moral technology of the self. Its emphasis on objectified personality types allows believers "to view themselves in terms of individuating traits, characteristics, and limitations, and to manage and organize their feelings, thoughts, and behavior[s]... which contributes to their being more productive, content, and balanced" (Park 2024:42). As such, the MBTI offers a framework within which one's self-conceptions are stabilized in a modern and (pseudo-)scientific manner that can justify almost any set of values, beliefs, or behaviors through the sixteen various personality types.

Recent research on Chinese society has argued that "the MBTI provides a simple and effective social code that enables young people to quickly determine the per¬sonality type of others and then better interact with them. This common 'language' promotes mutual understanding and recognition." (Ren 2024:3). Goby (2006) explained how in Singapore (a predominantly Chinese society), preferences for using social media to interact with others were allegedly shaped by one's personality or MBTI identity rather than any situational factors. For example, IFs (Introverts who were more emotional or Feeling) preferred digitally-mediated interactions more than ETs (Extroverts who were more logical or Thinking). Her research further suggested that societies have dominant personality types, with ISTJ being common in Chinese society due to the common concern for "maintenance of face and harmony, and a keen sense of shame" (ibid.:12). From this psychological perspective, the MBTI reduces the complexity of selfhood by conveniently packaging it as a set of 16 four-letter codes. More important for us, however, is how such the MBTI and its 16 codes became subcultural symbols that have penetrated quickly and deeply into Chinese social media. Our study thus rearticulates the MBTI as a cultural meme (Dawkins 1976; Lynch 1997) that facilitates the social construction and expression of meaningful selves, rather than as a psychological test that uncovers individuals' innate personalities.

Richard Dawkins (1976) introduced the concept of "meme" to describe a unit of culture—analogous to a gene in biology—such as a behavior or idea that is transmitted through interaction among people in a group or network. Although many scholars have used the meme to refer to objects (particularly social media content), memes are more theoretically analogous to symbols insomuch as both carry meanings that are significant for members of social groups (Hewitt 2003). Memes, like symbols, survive, evolve, and adapt across social situations

through verbal, written, or paralinguistic action. Subcultural scholars have studied culture-bearing units such as clothing, slang, and icons (though without using the term "meme" explicitly) and how they are transmitted among members of a group or network (e.g., Aly 2016; Miller 2004). Since the early 2000s, there has been increasing interest in digitally transmitted memes through images, videos, soundbites, or texts that are modified, copied, and circulated as part of larger cultural phenomena (Shifman 2014). Those that fit well within specific socio-cultural contexts are able diffuse with incredible speed via social media, gaining influence through various communication modes (Davison 2012) while others fade away. Some memes are appropriated from mainstream cultural sources, while others emerge within subcultural networks before becoming ubiquitous generational or pop-cultural symbols (Miltner 2018). The MBTI is representative of such memetic diffusion.

Recent interactionist scholarship has argued that the study of memetic processes must progress beyond a focus on the cultural topics that memes represent by framing them more micro-analytically as "semiotic resources" that people use in everyday life (Ying and Blommaert 2020). These semiotic resources are memetic in the sense that, without symbolic interaction, they would not be reproduced. To focus on the MBTI as a memetic element in a social media subculture in China, we expand Fine's conception of idioculture and cultural creation (Fine and Fang 2019). Fine originally defined an idioculture as a "system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer and employ as the basis of further interaction" (Fine 1979:734). Fine's research on small groups' idiocultures was developed across a variety of local contexts and has recently been proposed as relevant beyond face-to-face group contexts (see Fine and Hallett 2022, ch. 7). However, that work has relied primarily upon local groups and an emphasis on their collective and functional dimensions. As research on contemporary social media demonstrates, symbolic interaction and culture are facilitated as much by loose, connective logics among dispersed networks as by the collective logics of small groups (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Williams 2006). For this reason, we prefer the concept of subculture over idioculture because it allows for a more distributed understanding of cultural transmission.

Fine has further argued that any unit of culture must be known (K), useable (U), functional (F), appropriate (A), and triggered (T) to/by members of a group, which he expressed linearly as K→U→F→A→T and which we refer to as the KUFAT model. Drawing from Fine (1979; 1987) and taking the MBTI as an example: Known refers to an a priori assumption that lay knowledge of the MBTI must be possessed by one or more members of a subcultural network in order for it to be used. Useable means that subcultural members must be able to use the MBTI and its components in interaction (i.e., there are no rules or norms that would prevent its use). Functional means that the MBTI should serve some purpose for those who use it, whether instrumentally or expressively. Appropriate means the MBTI should support an established status system of its users and not undermine their interpersonal relations or network. Finally, there must be overt actions or behaviors that Trigger the use of the MBTI in situations. Together, these five elements enable the MBTI to diffuse memetically across social media platforms, becoming a useful component of the subcultural networks that make use of it. After describing the methods we employed for this project, we analyze the MBTI as a subcultural meme using each part of the KUFAT model by drawing on data from Chinese social media. We close by discussing the relevance of the KUFAT model for studying contemporary social media subcultures and networks.

## 4. Methods

We utilized qualitative methods to study the MBTI as a subcultural meme, employing several digital approaches including participant observation, in-depth interviews, and content analysis. The decision to conduct this study was spontaneous. In the spring of 2022, Si (co-author) suddenly noticed a significant increase in MBTI-related information on her various Chinese social media accounts, which sparked her curiosity and attention. She decided at that time to begin documenting publicly displayed comments and discussions related to MBTI from a number of different Chinese social media platforms, including Weibo (a microblogging platform akin to Twitter), Xiaohongshu (aka Little Red Book, a blend of social media and e-commerce site), Zhihu (China's largest question-and-answer platform, similar to Quora), Bilibili (a video-sharing site popular for its youth-oriented content such as anime and gaming), Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok), as well as QQ and WeChat (versatile messaging and social networking apps).

Si conducted online participant observation in MBTI-related networks and groups from April 2022 to November 2023. She interacted with content and other users on the above-mentioned social media platforms during this period, where MBTI-related content circulated widely and multimodally. On WeChat, for example, members of Si's friends network began using MBTI codes in their status updates, personal narratives, photos and memes and discussing their and others' MBTI types in group chats. On Weibo, Douyin, and Bilibili, she searched for and followed MBTI-related topics and hashtags, finding text and video posts, as well as discussions under those posts. The Zhihu platform contained lengthier and more-in-depth discussions, which she was able to follow as well as archive. Through such participant observation, she gained an understanding of the general content and interactive practices surrounding the MBTI.

Si recorded observational notes in a field diary, which provided inspiration and framing for subsequent semi-structured online interviews (Musante and DeWalt 2010). She interviewed 20 participants, including 13 females and 7 males aged between 18 and 31. She based her selection of participants on two considerations: to talk to individuals who actively displayed MBTI codes in social media posts; and to include representative of all 16 personality types. She established rapport and then contacted the initial two interviewees during participant observation. Subsequently, she used a snowball sampling method through these two individuals to obtain access to the 18 other interviewees. Each interview lasted around one hour. She also continued to archive publicly-available data from the social media platforms Zhihu, Xiaohongshu, and Bilibili. She searched for MBTI as a keyword on these platforms and obtained the top 50 discussions and comments on Zhihu, the top 100 posts and comments on Xiaohongshu, and the top 50 videos and comments on Bilibili, all sorted by relevance, which she used to supplement participant observation and interviews.

In August 2023, Si began collaborating with Patrick (co-author), who looked through data samples and suggested that they focus analytic attention on the MBTI itself as a unit of an online subculture—i.e., to analyze the MBTI as a meme and what it signified in various social-media contexts using symbolic interactionist theory and qualitative content analysis techniques (Kuckartz and Radiker 2022). Together, we reviewed theory and methods regarding cultural units or memes from media studies (Davison 2012; Shifman 2014) as well as from cultural sociology and symbolic interactionism (Chick 1999; Fine 1979) and decided to combine these, seeking to understand social media content as units of a subculture. After or-

ganizing the field notes, interview transcripts, and social media data into text and translating much of it into English, we analyzed them thematically and abductively. Si used thematic analysis to identify, organize, and analyze patterns within the data (Braun and Clarke 2022). After multiple iterations, she arrived at self-labeling, social interaction, intergenerational relationships, entertainment, and identity hierarchies as important themes. Meanwhile, Patrick analyzed the data abductively by following Fine's KUFAT model. He identified and organized examples of the MBTI as known, usable, functional, appropriate, and triggered. We then discussed the relationships between the themes and the KUFAT model and settled on examples that best represented both in our analysis. Thus, in the following analysis we present our findings according to the KUFAT model, using examples that emphasize significant themes from the thematic coding.

Although the social media content we present was publicly available, the boundaries between public and private on social media is fuzzy since users do not typically expect that their social media content will be analyzed or presented by researchers (Beninger 2017). In order to maintain the confidentiality of interviewees' and social-media posters' identities, we use pseudonymized initials for the former and only the name of the social media platforms from whence content came for the latter.

## 5. The MBTI as a known unit of culture

To understand the MBTI's contemporary significance on Chinese social media networks, we begin with how it became a known cultural item. MBTI research on Chinese education goes back at least as far as the early 1990s (e.g., Yao 1993), while Chinese businesses have used the MBTI to screen job applicants since at least the 2000s (Lu 2023). Thus, we know that the term has existed within China's latent culture for many years, and it is likely that millennials and Gen Zs had encountered it either directly or indirectly via school or work. Weibo users established a super topic[2] on the MBTI on Aug 16, 2018 (M. Zhang 2023) and the term was searched regularly but infrequently on internet and social media up until April 2022, when it suddenly spiked. Yet such information alone is too vague to explain its increased use. In February 2022, however, American-born 19-year-old Eileen Gu (Chinese name, Gu Ailing) had an outstanding performance at the Beijing Winter Olympics, competing for China and garnering extremely high attention across Chinese media. In an early-April Chinese language interview with GQ Magazine, she discussed her personality by referencing the MBTI, which generated widespread interest in the personality test and may be a primary reason for the #MBTI spike (Daxue Consulting 2022). It was during this period that Si began receiving various push notifications and advertisements related to MBTI on her social media accounts such as "Want to know your true personality?" and "#Gu Ailing's MBTI is INTJ#." News articles with titles such as "What is the MBTI that's flooding the screens? Is it reliable?" (Huanqiu.com 2022) and "The MBTI personality test that is sweeping social networks: is it science or pseudoscience?" (Wen 2022) began circulating. The Chinese government quickly weighed in as well. On April 14, 2022, The People's Daily (the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party) started a Weibo discussion entitled "Experts Warn Against Blindly Trusting MBTI Test Results" and reposted an article from The Science and Technology Daily entitled "The Widely Popular MBTI Test Is Not Pseudoscience, But Taking It Seriously Puts You at a Disadvantage" (People's Daily 2022). Such media attention further increased the known-ness of MTBI in China, as is visible in data from Baidu's internet search index from

May 2020 – May 2024 (see Figure 1).


Figure 1: Frequency of use of #MBTI on Baidu's internet search index, May 2020-May 2024 (Baidu Index 2024).

Established brands began marketing the MBTI soon thereafter. From July-August 2022, Starbucks China collaborated with the Myers-Briggs company to launch an "interactive personality test" offering 10 new personality test questions and recommending specific drink products based on results (see Figure 2). For instance, a Frappuccino was said to be most suitable for EF personality types (whom Starbucks called "social geniuses"), while IF personality types were advised to drink Cloud Oolong Tea. Interviewees suggested that the combined influences of "new" and "interesting" social media content, friends' recommendations, and commercial promotions were key reasons for them learning about the MBTI. All these events explain the increase in references to MBTI and highlight the roles that media information, algorithms, and interpersonal connections played in affording the MBTI as a known cultural item among millennials and Gen Zs.


Figure 2: Starbucks and Myers-Briggs' advertisement for MBTI.

## 6. The MBTI as a useable unit of culture

For the MBTI to spread, it also had to be usable. Both Dawkins (1976) and Fine (1987) argued that cultural items survive only when people spread their practical significance and value to others. China has a long tradition of astrological culture, including the Chinese Zodiac, the five natural elements, and practices such as feng shui that focus on harmonizing individuals with their surrounding environment (Smith 1992). These elements of culture have traditionally influenced various everyday practices, including self-definitions, personal behaviors, and interpersonal relationships (Q. Sun 2012). On social media, however, many youths framed astrological culture as "metaphysical" with a strong element of determinism mixed in, which did not adequately support the individual agency they embraced as part of a contemporary Chinese "me culture" (Sima and Pugsley 2010). As on social media poster wrote, "the older generation looks at Chinese metaphysics (Five Elements), the previous generation looks at astrology (Zodiac signs), and the current generation looks at MBTI" [post on Zhihu, Mar 29, 2023]. The MBTI was more Usable among millennials and Gen Zs because its "scientific" basis allowed for more accurate pinpointing of an individual's core traits and characteristics compared to the zodiac (Xiao 2023). As another user on Zhihu wrote, "MBTI itself has a theoretical basis. [...] Leaving aside other aspects, MBTI's accuracy and impact are genuinely high, easily outperforming many other personality tests of the same type. So, its rise to prominence isn't surprising..." [post on Zhihu, Apr 12, 2022]. Methods and modes of interaction increased the MBTI's practical Usableness as well. The 16 Personalities website offered the test in Chinese as well as 48 other languages. The website presented results graphically along a set of sliding scales that allowed straightforward interpretation of results. It also provided a specific identity label that the user could connect with, such as "The Architect" for INTJ (see Figure 3) or "The Adventurer" for ISFP, and featured exemplars of famous global figures who allegedly shared the same personality type as the test-taker so that users could draw connections between themselves and (assumedly) well-known others. The website then encouraged users to share their test results with others, which we observed regularly.

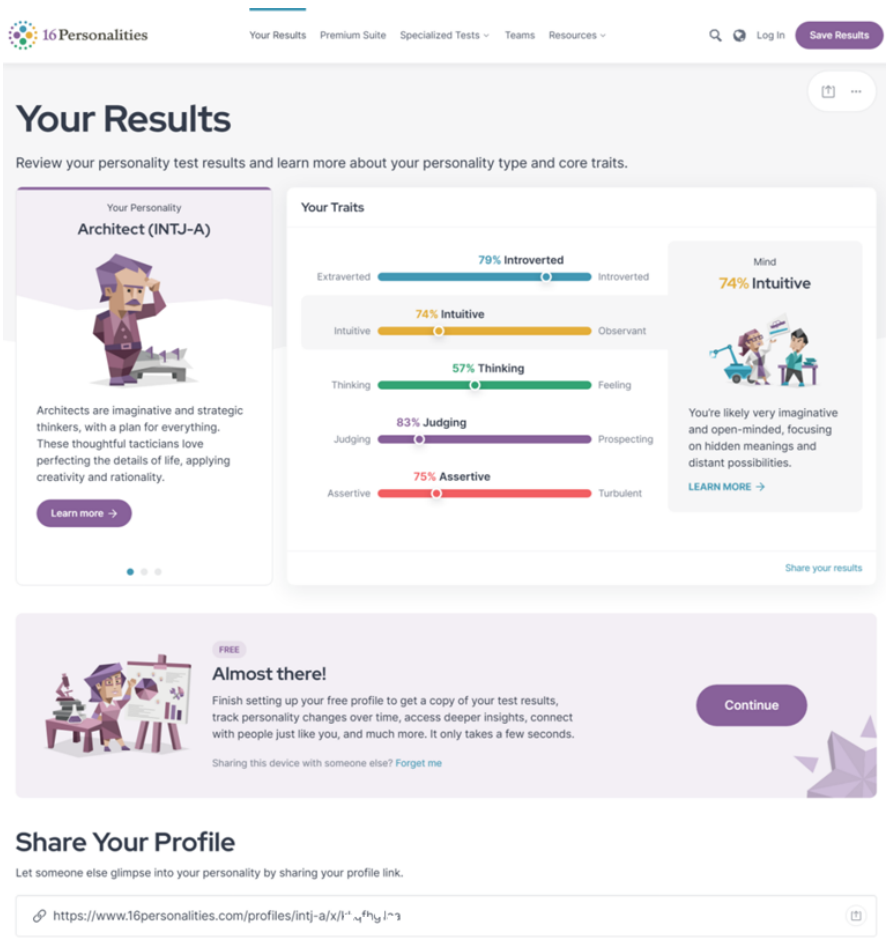


Figure 3: Personality test result from 16Personalities.com.

The four-letter personality codes simplified people's identities in formulaic ways. Users embedded the codes, in Latin script, within Chinese-language posts, profiles, and signatures (see figure 4). Typically, all four letters of the personality code were used.

> "I'm an ENTJ married to an INFP. It's so hard, I feel like exploding every day." [post on Xiaohongshu, Nov 7, 2023]

The four-letter personality codes were not always necessary. In some cases, only one or two letters sufficed, as the following post demonstrates: "I'm a 'P' person and always have deadlines. But I work really efficiently under pressure." [interview with LC, Dec 10, 2022]. The codes represented schemata or "mental shortcuts" (Patterson 2014) that provided succinct information about people to those with the appropriate subcultural knowledge. Most referred to intimate relationships, where individuals either celebrated or lamented the interactions between types of people. Other examples we observed related to work, school, family and consumer practices, suggesting the extent to which users found the MBTI to be usable in everyday life.


Figure 4: MBTI personality labels used in social media post and signatures.

## 7. The MBTI as a functional unit of culture

The third factor affecting the incorporation of the MBTI into Chinese millennials' and Gen Zs social media subculture was its perceived congruence with participants' needs and goals. Both culture and subculture have long been understood in terms of their function for social groups. Functional definitions of (sub)culture emphasize the needs they serve, whether providing strategies of action, interactional norms, definitions of selves and roles, means of social control and modes of identification. This is true not just of subcultures in the holistic sense, but of specific units of a subculture as well. A recent study stated that the "dominant way in which MBTI is explained, promoted, and used... does not simply treat personality types as inherent and enduring, but also as standardized and technologized [means] for better understanding and caring for one's own self" (Park 2024:38). We observed similar patterns in the social media and interview data, with users describing the MBTI in utilitarian terms. Posts such as "I see a lot of 'I people' and 'E people' and am curious about what I am" [interview with QIQ, Apr 15, 2023] and "discovering MBTI felt quite novel; I could use it as a tool to understand myself better" [post on Zhihu, Jul 20, 2022] were exemplary. They suggest that the MBTI functioned to expand or improve one's self-knowledge and self-concept. Equally important was the belief that, without knowledge of the MBTI, participants perceived themselves to be socially disadvantaged:

> "Classmates are talking about this, and without knowing the four letters, it seems impossible to chat with them. I can't understand many jokes, so I want to know my type." [interview with LWZ, Feb 19, 2022]

Like contemporary internet memes, the MBTI functioned memetically by conveying a wealth of information with just a few letters, significantly narrowing interpretive potential and thus bringing people's shared understandings closer together (Mullaney 2019). Each letter carried significant informational density, which participants drew upon to abbreviate content that would otherwise require more lengthy descriptions. In the statement, "I finally found out my crush's MBTI is INFJ" [post on Xiaohongshu Oct 17, 2023], use of the MBTI code eliminated the need for the poster to provide an extensive description of their crush, but was sufficient to spark a discussion on the type of person the crush was and their likely relationship with the user, even though nobody appeared to know either person in the face-to-face sense.

Many posts emphasized how the MBTI solved interpersonal problems, though the ways in which it did so were diverse and to some extent contradictory. In some cases, it solved

problems of feelings isolated or alienated, as represented in Figure 5 and in the following post: "As an INFJ, discovering that there were many others like me made me feel less peculiar, fostering a sense of belonging and empowering me to leverage my strength" [post on Zhihu, Jul 20, 2022]. In these examples, MBTI categories became resources for shared identification. In other cases, posters used the MBTI to identify themselves as different from other people, as represented in Figure 6 and the following post: "I didn't realize that being awkward in social situations was also a trait of INTPs. It's so strange, every time I speak in a group, everyone goes silent..." [interview with DW, May 2, 2023]. Yet, such knowledge did not typically result in self-blame. Instead, the MBTI removed individual stigma by creating a kind of scapegoat out of the personality categories themselves: "I thought there was something wrong with me, but it turns out it's just how INTPs are. That puts my mind at ease." [interview with JNG, May 4, 2023]


Figure 5: A meme about individuals collectively embracing their rare MBTI personality types


Figure 6: A meme highlighting the "natural" ways in which I and E personalities behave.

## 8. The MBTI as an appropriate unit of culture

In various descriptions of the KUFAT model, Fine has discussed the Appropriateness of a cultural item in relation to the status system of a group's interpersonal network. His primary example were the nicknames little-league baseball players assigned to one another based on factors such as an individual players' popularity or their skill or contributions to the team (Fine 1987). While the social-media networks of millennials and Gen Zs were very different from the local pre-adolescent groups that Fine studied, the appropriateness of a subcultural item remains an important analytical point. We found that the MBTI provided methods of establishing, justifying, and negotiating status identities and relations among network members. However, these processes were not equally appropriate within the social media networks we studied and thus differ from Fine's original conceptualization of the term.

Online sources such as 16 Personalities presented the MBTI as a non-hierarchical measure of personality, with no four-letter code being better or worse than the others. Test results were said to reflect an individual's personality tendencies (rather than inherent capacities or skills). This appealed to many participants initially because it provided them with new forms of self-knowledge and social identification that were not tied to traditional Chinese culture's "discriminatory and controlling" constraints related to status hierarchies (To 2013). Thus, people new to MBTI tended to immediately report their test results and to referr to their MBTI code in posts and interactions, as is visible in many of the data extracts previously discussed. However, neophyte members eventually learned through everyday interactions that certain MBTI types were more valued than others within the subculture. We observed this valuation process in users' creation of internal hierarchies and insider/outsider distinctions, as well as in their manipulation of MBTI results to work toward an idealized social self.

In terms of internal hierarchies, many posts and interviewees described people with NT-type personalities as capable, independent, and unaffected by emotions. This pair of personality dimensions was considered rare in Chinese society and thus was an attractive type (see Figure

7).[3] Yet counter-descriptions circulated as well, such as in memes where E-types (extroverts) became "noisy," N-types (intuiters) became "arrogant" or "full of useless ideas," and J-types (judgers) became "gloomy." These contradictory interpretations resulted in contestations over the "true" (i.e., scientific) meaning of personality types. One social media post with over 10,000 likes spelled out a pattern of discourse representative of what was called a "hierarchy of contempt":

> "Entitled I-types think that E-types are very noisy and brainless. Entitled N-types all believe that S-types are ordinary people with no deep thoughts, rigid thinking. Entitled T-types think that F-types are emotional and illogical. Entitled J-types and P-types look down on each other: the former believes the latter is lazy and deliberately underperforming, while the latter thinks the former imposes excessive pressure and stereotypes. The stereotype presents an overall trend of INTJ-P > > > ESFJ-P, and grouping shows a clear trend of NT > SJ." [post on Xiaohongshu, Jul 19, 2023]

The contents of the post, combined with the high number of likes, suggest that many participants believed such status hierarches to be an inappropriate application of the MBTI. Examples of such categorical labelling abounded in the data, through there was more negotiation regarding the validity of such labels when it came to self-definitions.

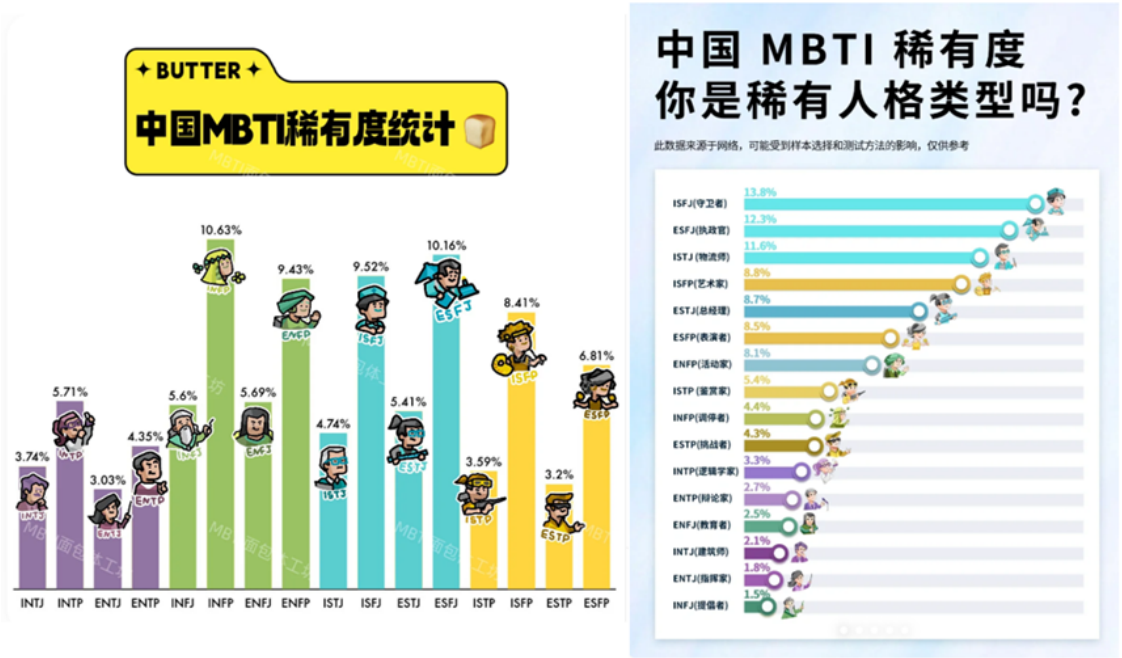


Figure 7: Two examples of user-generated MBTI type rarity rankings.

As noted previously, the subculture surrounding the MBTI's use on social media in part facilitated the development of personally meaningful definitions of self. Pragmatically, since MBTI results came from self-administered tests that individuals could retake repeatedly (or even skip altogether, as we never saw any demands for proof of a test result), and because MBTI theory itself emphasized that results were not fixed but were rather representative of

"tendencies," changes in one's personality type were some extent reasonable. Many members reported changes in their personality type after they became aware of the stereotypes associated with specific labels. There was a recognizable trend toward rarer personality types such as N-types, as one interviewee cheekily noted: "You'll find that many S people retake the test after a while and become N people, but you rarely see N people retake the test and report that they've become S." [interview with GF, Feb 21, 2023].

However, there were more appropriate uses of such distinctions, particular for maintaining subcultural boundaries. As one example, in social media posts members often assigned the SJ personality type to their parents, which they characterized by a lack of creativity but enjoyment in controlling others. The "pursuit of uniqueness" that characterized N-type members required a contrasting group to make that uniqueness stand out. Among their peers, the uniqueness of N-types tended to diminish due to its widespread adoption within the network. However, by designating their parents as S-types, youths were able to express their unique selves and strengthen their subcultural connections with peers simultaneously while expressing generation-based differences. In short, the MBTI appeared to be an appropriate subcultural item in terms of affording meaningful self-definitions and making insider-outsider distinctions, but was less or inappropriate when it came to promoting internal hierarchies that could lead to "status frustration" (Cohen 1955).

## 9. The MBTI as a triggered unit of culture

There are practically an infinite number of cultural items that could become known, usable, functional, and appropriate within the social media network of Chinese millennials and gen Zs. For the MBTI to gain significance as a unit of the subculture, there had to be Triggers—events or actions in which the MBTI was used in symbolic interaction. In the section on known culture, we discussed some examples by which the MBTI was introduced to the network. These included its mention in April 2022 by Eileen Gu during the height of her salience in mainstream Chinese media and the advertising collaboration between the Myers-Briggs company and Starbucks shortly thereafter. These were initial triggers facilitated by social media algorithms, which afforded additional triggers millions of times over across the country (see Figure 1), further building interest in the MBTI among young Chinese social media users. Individual users then created their own triggers through posts, hashtags, comments, retweets, and so on, further increasing the MBTI's subcultural known-ness and enabling it to successfully propagate. These triggers are visible in Figure 1, where we see a clear increase in the number of daily uses of the term "MBTI." The figures demonstrates that the MBTI circulated on social media much more frequently after April 2022 than before. Its triggers have shifted from mass-mediated and industrial events to everyday discussions about family, school, work, dating/matchmaking, and consumer-leisure. Sharing or guessing others' MBTI types to and their relationships with significant others became a form of online entertainment. It was even used in reference to non-human entities, as is seen in the following discussion of American universities.

> "Brown University really feels like an ENFP."
>
> "I believe Harvard and Stanford are the quintessential ENFJs."
>
> [posts on Xiaohongshu, Oct 27, 2023]

This finding extends those in other studies such as Cai's (2021), which noted that 95% of surveyed Chinese youths enjoyed using the MBTI to analyze characters in films, TV dramas, and literature. Such references keep the MBTI relevant among Chinese millennials and gen Zs and thus explain its survivable as a subcultural meme.

## 10. Conclusion

In this paper, we employed Dawkin's (1979) concept of cultural memes and Fine's (1979) model of cultural creation to examine the memetic dimensions of the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator or MBTI within Chinese social media subculture. We showed how the MBTI changed quickly in the spring of 2022 from being a latent component of Chinese culture to a highly salient topic that millennials and Gen Zs have used regularly since. We attributed the MBTI's integration into Chinese social media subculture to its alignment with youths' contemporary concerns with self and identity vis-à-vis those of older populations. While older generations tend to rely on metaphysical units of conventional Chinese culture such as astrological signs and zodiacs to understand themselves and their actions, today's highly educated urban youths are more likely to express confidence in scientific explanations instead (Clegg et al. 2019). Despite its dubious status in mainstream psychology, the MBTI nevertheless provides a means of dealing with individualism and self-expression by offering a hip, Western, rational understanding the self through a mixture of internal distinctions and collective insider-outsider differentiations ways (Jenkins 2008). While the MBTI was initially triggered by mass-media and culture industries, it has now evolved into a mundane unit of culture used in discussions about family, school, work, and dating.

Our study thus offers an updated application of Fine's theory of idioculture and its KUFAT model in three respects. First, Fine's formulation of units of culture as being known, usable, functional, appropriate, and triggered is built upon a pre-digital conception of culture created and diffused through small face-to-face groups. As with previous research (see Williams and Copes 2005), this study shows that units of culture can spread through digitally-mediated and geographically dispersed social networks comprised of relatively anonymous users. We argue that the KUFAT model is equally useful in the study of subcultural networks than of small groups. Second, our findings differ from Fine's in characterizing the appropriateness of a cultural unit. Fine offered a narrow, functionalist characterization of cultural items being appropriate only when they do not challenge status-quo social structures (Fine 1987). Contrary to supporting an established status system, our study reveals that Chinese millennials and Gen Zs held mixed and contentious views of the MBTI's status-bearing function. Many young people sought to differentiate themselves through their use of the MBTI, including by retaking personality tests to receive desired results, while others openly criticized other youths' support of a hierarchical understanding of MBTI types. We therefore suggest that the idea of appropriateness be used cautiously, and that additional data be used to further articulate its conceptual value. Third, Fine (1979; 1987) presented the KUFAT model linearly, with no explicit discussion of the connections between triggering events and known culture. However, when any (sub)cultural item is first created, it must trigger some symbolic meaning in order for it to survive; i.e., to become a known part of the (sub)culture. Further, situations in which a cultural item is triggered make that item known to neophyte or other network members who may not have previously encountered it. We therefore suggest that the KUFAT model may be better represented circularly than linearly (see Figure 8), with the

connection(s) between the triggering and the known-ness of a (sub)cultural item representing its memetic existence and trajectory.

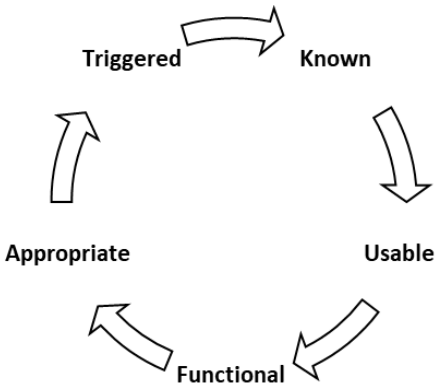


Figure 8: KUFAT as a circular rather than a linear model

As a subcultural meme, the MBTI offers a fresh set of contemporary forms self-conception and social identification for Chinese millennials and Gen Zs. Yet it is not unique. Rather, it continues a subcultural tradition of Chinese youths' pursuit of individual autonomy since at least the economic reforms of the 1970s (Liang and Simpson 2022; Sabet 2011). In the 1990s, the emergence of Generation Ku (conventionally translated as "cruel" but used as a subcultural slang term akin to "cool") demonstrated a shift towards greater individualism among Chinese youths compared to their parents (Moore 2005). Similarly, while the term linglei (which translates as "the other species") was a derogatory term in the 1990s placed on Chinese youths who embraced radically different values and lifestyle habits than their parents, by the end of the 2000s it had become a fashionable label embraced by young people to embrace such difference (Drissel 2012; Zhou 2006). The MBTI is perhaps the most recent subcultural meme that provides Chinese millennials and Gen Zs with a contemporary method to celebrate diversity (Low 2020) that locates and expresses self-conceptions in terms of both similarity and difference (Jenkins 2008)—the ying and yang of social identification.

## 11. Endnotes

1. The authors contributed equally to this study and their names are listed alphabetically.

2. A "super topic" is somewhat similar to a subreddit on the Reddit platform, or a "thread" in older internet forums. Said differently, super topics are ephemeral forms of online communities. They can have posted descriptions that introduce their topic to visitors, who can then join to create, follow, and share information on that topic, leaving whenever they lose interest in the topic.

3. Data on the rarity of MBTI types in China regularly circulated on social media during our research. However, most rankings lacked any reference to data sources. The methods used for sampling, data collection, and analysis, if present, were often ambiguous.

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