Good morning Vietnam! Memetic Formulas, Vernaculars, and a Cross-Platform Analysis of TikTok and Douyin

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Abstract
This research treats Douyin and TikTok as distinct platforms and conducts a cross-platform analysis between them. It found that the same event, #GoodMorningVietnam, could be portrayed and interpreted differently across platforms. To analyze content creation techniques, the research repurposed "video collages" in 4CAT to identify visual formulas. It discovered that users on both platforms employ the same visual formulas within #GoodMorningVietnam. However, one Douyin template remixes new elements into these visual formulas, transforming the original meaning of the meme. Guided by the "situation and suspense" theory, the research analyzed how meaning changes through repetition-with-variation. Beyond content, the research also examined the comment sections. Using matrix plots to identify textual formulas, it found that while the content and visual formulas are similar, the textual formulas differ, evoking distinct types of affective resonance across platforms. The research hypothesizes that these differences are tied to platform-specific vernaculars. The comments on the remixed Douyin template illustrate how textual formulas simultaneously create affective dissonance and affective affirmation, revealing the complexity of affective responses to memes. Finally, the research identified special affordances and vernaculars unique to Douyin. First, Douyin offers an exclusive emoji system, which may evoke expressions and resonances distinct from TikTok. Second, Douyin allows users to upload pictures and GIFs in the comment sections, offering greater 'space' for users affectively reverb with posts compared to TikTok. Lastly, the content and comments on Douyin reflect a unique vernacular where Douyin users spontaneously promote nationalism and patriotism through video memes, manifesting the concept of 'playful patriotism.'

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1   Introduction

TikTok introduces new features and possibilities for users to engage with the platform, while also offering unique opportunities for scholars to study its distinctive affordances and vernaculars. Specifically, TikTok and attention economy (Abidin 2021; Klug et al. 2021), TikTok users as "imitation publics" (Zulli and Zulli 2022), and TikTok and affective affirmation (Geboers and Pilipets 2024). Digital methods mainly provide two paths for scholars to study TikTok. One is to do a cross-platform analysis between TikTok and other social media platform to see the different affordances and vernaculars. Another is to seek how the specific features of TikTok can be repurposed for societal and cultural research (Rogers 2024). This research aim to extend these ideas through doing a cross-platform analysis between TikTok and Douyin.

2   Theoretical Framework

2.1   Secondary orality and memetic formulas

"Electronic technology has brought us into the age of "secondary orality"" (Ong, 1982). Secondary orality in digital media is intrinsically tied to the evanescence and ephemerality of digital technology. Venturini (2022), through his research on online conspiracy cultures, argues that online vernacular cultures exemplify secondary orality, as conspiracists must craft content that is both repeatable and memorable to face the fleeting nature and attention economy of social media. Ong (1982, p. 133) also highlights that secondary orality is deeply connected to the use of formulas, defined as "more or less exactly repeated set phrases or set expressions" (Ong, 1982, p. 26). Expanding on this idea, Hagen and Venturini (2023) explore the repetition-with-variation of internet memes—what they term "memecry"—through an investigation of memetic formulas. To analyze predominant textual formulas on 4chan/pol/, they developed a protocol to capture the textual patterns over temporal flows. While this protocol effectively identifies textual formulas on a predominantly text-based platform like 4chan, it has limitations. Memetic formulas are not confined to text; they can also be visual or aural (Zulli and Zulli 2022). Thus, while the protocol is well-suited for studying text-based platforms, it may be inadequate for TikTok, where content is primarily video-based. Consequently, this research also aims to repurpose digital methods to identify visual memetic formulas on TikTok and Douyin and compare them.

2.2   Parallel Universe: TikTok and Douyin

TikTok and Douyin are described as "two separate, short video parallel universes" (Kaye, Chen, and Zeng 2021). Although both platforms are created by ByteDance, they should be regarded as distinct platforms. Specifically, TikTok's content and user base are international, while Douyin's content and users are predominantly Chinese (Rogers 2024). Additionally, Douyin includes a unique feature called the "Positive Energy" section, where users and government accounts promote nationalist and patriotic content (Chen, Valdovinos Kaye, and Zeng 2020, 25). Given these differences, Rogers (2024) underscores the importance of comparative, cross-platform analysis to uncover nuanced distinctions between TikTok and Douyin. His study examines how the same event is portrayed on both platforms, focusing on the presence or absence of content such as #ChinaProtest. However, his analysis overlooks the content creation techniques and the role of comment sections, which could yield deeper insights. To address this gap, this research builds on Rogers' comparative approach by investigating how the same event is portrayed on both platforms, with a stronger emphasis on the content itself and the dynamics within the comment sections.

2.3   Chinese cyber nationalism and playful patriotism

Liu (2012) describes 'Chinese cyber nationalism' as a bottom-up, spontaneous nationalist sentiment driven by internet users' perceptions of external threats to China. Such grassroot phenomenon is different from traditional forms of top-down patriotic propaganda (Guo and Yang 2016). In terms of Douyin, Chen, Valdovinos Kaye, and Zeng (2020, 25) use the term 'playful patriotism' to describe how individuals and state use light-hearted and amusing content to prompt nationalism and patriotism instead of taking it seriously, seamlessly integrating these sentiments into the Douyin. Therefore, inspired by previous scholars' findings on the difference between TikTok and Douyin, this research also tries to follow these ideas and to seek the relevance between the platform vernacular of Douyin and playful patriotism.

3   Research Questions

RQ1: How is #GoodmorningVietnam portrayed and interpreted on TikTok and Douyin? Are there any differences?

RQ2: What unique affordances and vernaculars are presented in #GoodmorningVietnam on Douyin compared to TikTok?

4   Methodology

The data collection begins by querying #goodmorningvietnam on both TikTok and Douyin. To ensure unbiased query results, new accounts are created specifically for this research on each platform. Using Zeeschuimer (Peeters 2021), the top 200 posts from each platform are scraped to form the primary dataset. From this dataset, the two most highly engaged posts on each platform—based on metrics such as likes, views, and comments—are purposefully selected as case studies for detailed comparison and analysis.

4.1   Visual formula: Video collages

To address the research questions, this study adopts digital methods to analyze the data (Rogers 2024), focusing on both the visual formulas of the posts and the textual formulas of the comments on TikTok and Douyin. Specifically, it examines how the "repetition-with-variation" of these visual and textual elements contributes to the portrayal and narrative of the hashtag #Goodmorningvietnam on each platform. As noted, Hagen and Venturini's protocol is only designed to analyze textual formulas. To identify visual formulas, this research repurposes the "video collages" feature of 4CAT (Peeters and Hagen 2022). Rather than relying on frame-by-frame video montage for multimodal analysis (Manovich 2009; Geboers and Pilipets 2024), video collages allow researchers to detect recurring patterns across videos (Peeters and Hagen 2022). This feature aligns with the research goal of identifying visual formulas. Additionally, video collages can still extract video frames to form an image wall which enable both "close-looking" and "cross-reading" of content. It resonates with the concept of "metapictures" (Rogers 2021; Geboers and Pilipets 2024), allowing researchers to analyze visual patterns comprehensively. By applying this method, the study systematically investigates the repetition-with-variation in posts, identifies visual formulas, and compares findings across platforms.

4.2   Textual formula: Matrix plot

To identify and compare the textual formulas in the comment sections of TikTok and Douyin posts using the hashtag #goodmorningvietnam, this research adapts Geboers and Pilipets

(2024)'s method of identifying word pairs and creating matrix plots. While Geobers and Pilliet applied matrix plots to compare textual formulas across different templates and soundscapes, this study uses them to examine and contrast the textual formulas of the same hashtag across platform. For TikTok, the top 200 comments for each post are exported and analyzed using Rieder (2015)'s TextAnalysis tool to identify bigrams and their frequencies, with the top six bigrams selected to generate a matrix plot. For Douyin, where Zeeschuimer cannot scrape comments, the research employs the Chinese data scraping tool Bazhuayu to collect comment data. Since TextAnalysis tools do not support Chinese, the study adapts the "Tokenise" feature in 4CAT combined with Jieba, a Chinese tokenizer, to generate top six bigrams and their frequencies. Challenges unique to Douyin also include the need for manual rematching of mismatched word pairs and manually converting exclusive emojis used by Douyin users for inclusion in the matrix plot. By addressing these complexities, the research systematically compares the textual formulas of comments on both platforms, using matrix plots to reveal patterns and differences.

4.3   Limitations

While TikTok and Douyin are predominantly aural platforms, this method still relies on the traditional use of hashtags to structure the comparison, rather than mapping the soundscapes. Also, This research method was unable to uncover the temporal traceability of memecry. While the study of secondary orality in internet memes is closely tied to the temporal aspects of communication (Venturini 2022, 74), this study focuses primarily on spatiality. Specifically, the method lacks a temporal flow or RankFlow to track how memetic formulas circulate and evolve over time, instead focusing on how these formulas are applied and remixed across platforms. Furthermore, despite employing various approaches to handle Chinese text, the results suggest that bigram analysis is not well-suited to the Chinese language system. More advanced and accurate Chinese language analysis models are needed to apply in the future. Lastly, due to Douyin's unique affordances, which allow users to upload pictures and GIFs in the comment section, current data scraping tools struggled to extract this content. As a result, only a limited selection of images could be manually analyzed, making it difficult to fully display metapictures or conduct a systematic visual analysis.

5   Finding and Discussion

5.1   Memetic formulas across platform

Instead of identifying "word pairs" as textual formulas (Geboers and Pilipets 2024), this research aims to identify "clip pairs" as visual formulas in TikTok and Douyin videos. Using video collages, it visually demonstrates how users construct their content in #GoodmorningVietnam on both platforms. Different colors are used to frame and categorize the similar and differing elements in the video collages, aiding in the identification of visual formulas. The findings reveal that both templates on TikTok use the same approach: combining a *Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987) movie clip with Vietnam War footage to construct narratives in 2022. The movie clip originates from the 1987 American comedy film of the same name (Levinson 1987), featuring a scene in which a broadcaster loudly shouts "Good Morning, Vietnam" in a mocking tone (Figure 1). On Douyin, Template 1 follows a similar method to construct its content in 2022. However, Template 2, created in 2024, employs a more complex approach. Specifically, it first appropriates a Vietnamese patriotism challenge clip from TikTok, then incorporates the movie clip with Vietnam War footage, and finally integrates Sino-Vietnamese War footage to complete the narrative. The Sino-Vietnamese War, a conflict between China and Vietnam following World

War II, ended with a Chinese victory (Figure 2). Through video collages, it becomes evident that users across both platforms utilize the combination of the movie clip and Vietnam War footage as a foundational template. Such "clip pair" emerges as a visual formula for #Good-morningVietnam. Furthermore, this visual formula is reused and remixed in Douyin's Template 2 in 2024. By utilizing such visual formula and remixing it with new elements, it transforms the meaning of the original meme, illustrating the concept of "repetition-with-variation" of memecry.
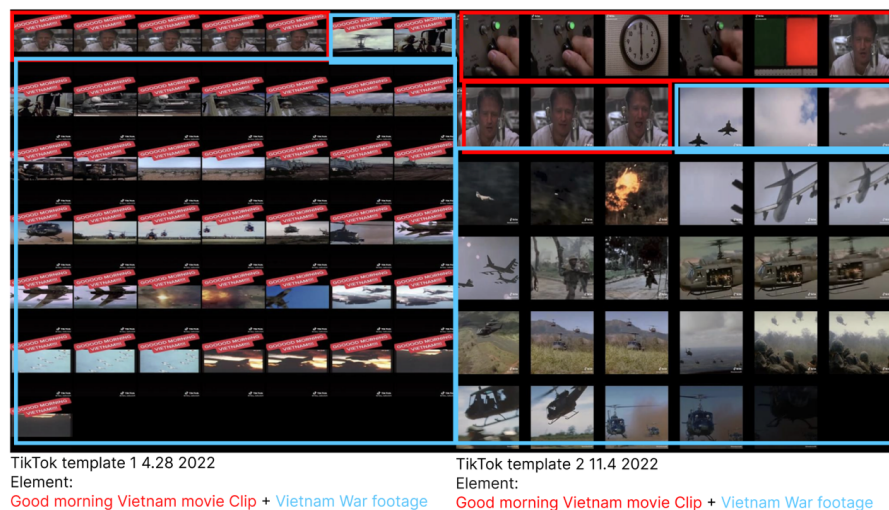

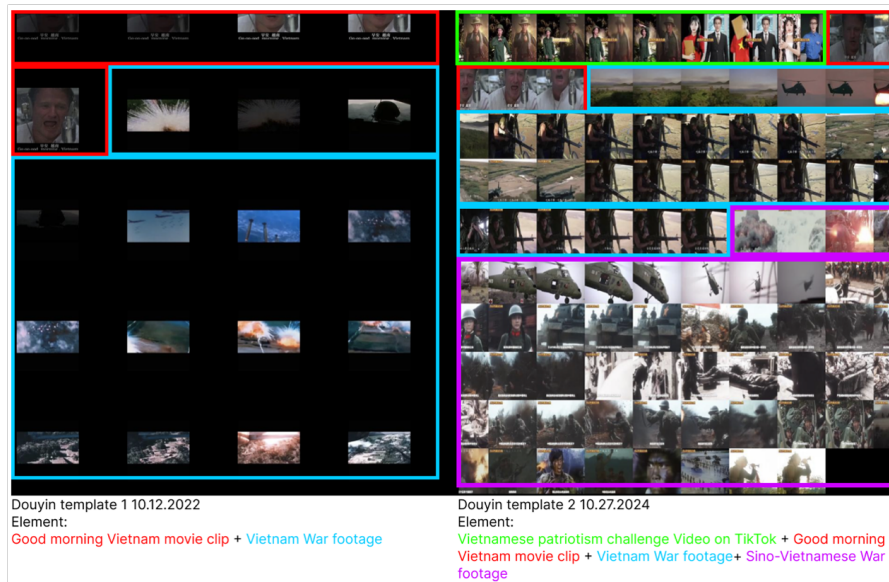Figure 1: TikTok Video Collages with brief description

Figure 2: Douyin Video Collages with brief description

In terms of how the meaning is constructed in different ways, it can use "situation and suspense" to analyze it (Wang and Suthers 2022, 313). Situation refers to providing a context, while suspense involves the continuation of that context, prompting the question, "What happens next?" For both templates on TikTok and Template 1 on Douyin, the broadcaster's ironic shout establishes the situation, while the suspense is introduced through the Vietnam War. The combination of such 'situation and suspense' ironizes the Vietnam War, aiming to mock either the Vietnamese or the Americans involved in this war. However, in Template 2 on Douyin, the

'situation' shifts to portray "fake" Vietnamese patriotism, highlighting the idea that Vietnam continues to suffer from the consequences of the Vietnam War despite their victory over the U.S. The 'suspense', in this case, pivots to the Chinese victory in the Sino-Vietnamese War. The meaning of the post transforms to the comparison and tension between "fake" Vietnamese patriotism and "real" Chinese patriotism through changing the 'situation and suspense'.

Comment sections function as a medium of affective resonance with video posts (Geboers and Pilipets 2024). Building on this idea, this research utilizes a matrix plot to illustrate how comment sections affectively respond to memecry through word pairs and emojis (Figure 3). This approach aligns with the call to "take the comments seriously" (Reagle 2015). The matrix plot reveals that in both TikTok templates, users consistently mock the United States. Emojis such as and are used to symbolize the U.S., while conveys their reactions. Users also employ similar textual formulas, such as "oil freedom" and "freedom and democracy," to sarcastically critique the U.S. for claiming to fight for freedom while actually pursuing wars for oil. When comparing the two TikTok templates, the affective resonance remains consistent, as both rely on similar textual formulas to satirize the hypocrisy of the U.S.

However, on Douyin, a different type of affective resonance is evoked (Paasonen 2019). For Template 1 on Douyin, while its content and visual formulas are similar to TikTok's, users tend to mock the suffering of both Vietnam and the United States during the war. For instance, users employ formulas like "immersive experience" to express how watching the video makes them feel as though they are U.S. soldiers killing Vietnamese. Additionally, they use phrases such as "the grass is laughing" to mock the ambushes suffered by U.S. forces in Vietnam. This highlights how, despite similar content and visual formulas, the affective resonance varies across platforms. Future research could explore the reasons behind these differences and their connections to each platform's unique vernaculars. For the "fake" Vietnamese patriotism template on Douyin, users invoke word pairs like "Xinhua News Agency" (the official outlet that announced China's victory in the Sino-Vietnamese War) to critique "fake Vietnamese." These textual formulas serve as an affective dissonance against "fake" Vietnamese patriotism while simultaneously evoking affective affirmation of "real" Chinese nationalism and patriotism.
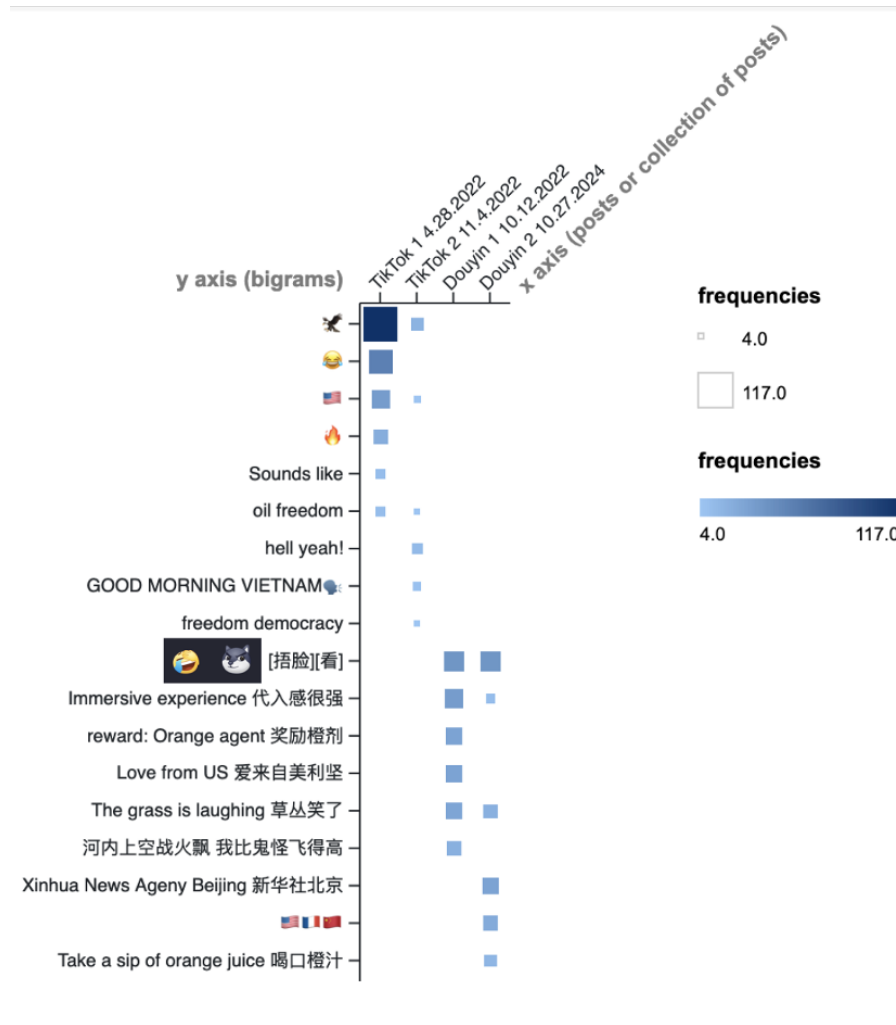
Figure 3: Matrix plot of #GoodmorningVietnam comment section on both TikTok and Douyin (with translation of text and exclusive Emoji on Douyin)

5.2   Special affordances and vernaculars on Douyin

During the cross-platform analysis of both content and comments, this research identified unique affordances and vernaculars on Douyin. Firstly, Douyin features an exclusive emoji system that differs from TikTok's, offering users distinct ways of expression. This unique emoji set may elicit different affective responses compared to TikTok. Additionally, Douyin allows users to upload images and GIFs directly in the comment sections (Figure 4). Under such circumstances, Douyin users have greater opportunities to creatively appropriate and assemble multiple forms of memes to engage with and respond to the content. It fosters a phenomenon described as "memes within memes," where Douyin users combine textual memes with image-based memes to reverb with video memes. Such affordance and practice may function as affective amplifiers, providing more space for users' affective reverberation compared to TikTok.

Figure 4: Images memes in Douyin comment section

Lastly, this research reveals that Douyin has a strong patriotism and nationalism vernacular compared to TikTok. Within the same event #Goodmorningvietnam, while TikTok users mock the hypocrisy of Americans, Douyin users indiscriminately attack outsiders and mock the suffering of both Vietnam and the United States during the war. Simultaneously, they emphasize China's victory to promote Chinese nationalism and patriotism. Through a cross-platform analysis of #GoodmorningVietnam, this research finds that, even without direct state sponsorship or intervention, light-hearted and amusing short video content promoting Chinese nationalism and patriotism on Douyin has emerged as a bottom-up, grassroots phenomenon. It argues that such playful nationalism and patriotism (Chen, Valdovinos Kaye, and Zeng 2020, 25) has already become an internal part of Douyin's platform vernacular.

6   Conclusion

Through a cross-platform analysis of #GoodmorningVietnam on Douyin and TikTok, this research first identified the similarities and differences in textual and visual formulas across posts and comment sections on both platforms. It found that the same event can be portrayed in distinct ways and, more importantly, that similar content can evoke different types of affective resonance across platforms. Subsequently, the research recognized the unique affordances of Douyin and explored how these features provide greater opportunities for users' affective reverberation. Finally, it illustrated how playful patriotism has become an integral part of Douyin's platform vernacular. This research underscores the importance of treating Douyin and TikTok as distinct platforms and the need for further studies on Douyin's unique affordances and vernacular.

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