

Exploring the Reasons behind the Emergence of Internet Memes and Their Impact: A Case Study of the "泰裤辣" Phenomenon

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Abstract. The viral spread of the "泰裤辣" meme in China has turned it into a phenomenon in the online world. From a functionalist perspective, "泰裤辣" has become a means of emotional release, a tool for social interaction, and a material medium for social and cultural expression, leading to its popularity on the internet. As a meme with strong postmodernist characteristics, the complete journey of "泰裤辣" from its birth, deconstruction, construction, to reconstruction reflects a facet of the current online society. "泰裤辣" acts as a mirror, reflecting the interplay between the online and real-world societies, as well as the differences between self and the other.

Keywords: Internet Memes; Functionalism; Deconstruction and Construction; Meme Culture; Mapping.

1. Introduction

"I am a very stubborn person. I never care about what others say to me, what they want me to do, or how I should do them. If you can be like me, then I think it is 泰裤辣!"

Recently, after the virus-like spread of the "泰裤辣" meme in China, it became an internet sensation. The meme originated from a passionate speech by the singer Xiao Gui during a concert. The singer attempted to inspire others with profound words, but the content lacked substance, highlighting his low educational level. Due to this contrast, the speech quickly became a target for ridicule among netizens, who transformed the phrase "太酷啦!" (meaning "so cool!") into the homophonic "泰裤辣!" to sarcastically express their feelings of mockery, rebellion, and irony towards boring, useless, or ineffective events or conversations. For example, if one has to work for six consecutive days before the May Day holiday, they might say, "This situation is really 泰裤辣!"

In fact, the original intention of this speech was not fundamentally problematic in terms of attitude and values. It aimed to encourage people to be brave and true to themselves, not overly concerned about others' opinions. However, it failed to elevate the message and ended up sounding like nonsense. In the eyes of exhausted "office workers," "wage slaves," or "university (research) victims," it became a tool for emotional release in the online world.

2. Analysis based on Anthropological Theory

2.1. Functionalism: How "泰裤辣" Became an Internet Meme

Marxist anthropologist Malinowski believed that the essence of culture lies in its functionality. Functionalists advocate considering culture as a tool created by people to satisfy their various needs, taking into account both the whole and how culture fulfills human needs.

2.1.1. A Means of Emotional Release

In the midst of a three-year pandemic in China, coupled with a downturn in employment, and an unfavorable international and social environment, young people face multiple pressures such as education, employment, and marriage. Their personal will is suppressed by societal constraints, and the overall environment strives to create a positive atmosphere, making it difficult to release negative



emotions. "泰裤辣," with its stark contrast between attempting to inspire positive energy and its lack of substantive content, is utilized by young people as a means to vent their negative emotions. It has become a tool for them to satirize empty positive energy, mock the exhaustion of the current situation, and resist the oppressive reality.

In the real world, individuals are constrained by factors such as class, occupation, and economy, and their independent selves are suppressed. However, the virtual and casual nature of the internet gives young people the freedom to choose. "泰裤辣" provides an excellent outlet for young people to express their negative emotions, balancing the gap between reality and ideals through emotional release.

2.1.2. A Tool for Social Interaction

Internet language, fundamentally, is the language used by netizens to communicate on the internet, and communication is its fundamental function. Effective and timely information transmission is essential for communicative functionality. [3] The term "梗" (meme), which "泰裤辣" represents as a current example of meme culture, serves the purpose of information exchange. The phrase "泰裤辣" in conjunction with the sentence pattern "*If you can be like me..... then I think it is 泰裤辣!*" plays a role in information exchange. This emotional expression becomes a tool for users to resonate with each other, seek emotional support in society, and exchange events that evoke similar emotions. Therefore, "泰裤辣" fulfills the fundamental function of social interaction for netizens in the online society.

2.1.3. A Material Medium for Social and Cultural Expression

The social function of internet language, which involves the expression and dissemination of social culture, requires a material medium, namely language. With the development and popularization of the internet, netizens continuously create a large number of unique internet languages for the convenience of communication.

The formation of unique internet language has its cultural roots. [1] "泰裤辣" serves as a clever material medium that evades social responsibility, conveying a cultural message to the online and real-world societies—a message of finding joy in hardship. Its essence is a subtle expression of societal demands: "Reject empty positive energy, vent one's dissatisfaction, and demand practical changes."

2.2. Postmodernism: Deconstruction and Construction of "泰裤辣"

2.2.1. How "泰裤辣" as a Target of Criticism was Deconstructed, Constructed, and Reconstructed

Postmodernism emerged during social transformation as a viewpoint distinct from traditional ideologies. American scholars Best and Kellner pointed out that there is no unified theory of postmodernism, and even basic consistency among various positions is lacking. Postmodernism is merely a spirit, a set of value patterns. Its manifestations primarily include deconstruction, decentralization, pluralism, negation of the status quo, opposition to the mainstream, and constant innovation..... [5]. Postmodernism's essential characteristic is the celebration of innovation and the continuous deconstruction and construction of concepts. As a cultural trend, postmodernism had a strong impact on the Chinese people who had experienced nearly 30 years of planned economy and the unit system after the reform and opening up. Postmodernism is a rebellion against traditional Confucian thought and a deconstruction of the hierarchical norms in Chinese society. Confucianism advocates hierarchical order and moderation, while postmodernism opposes centralization and emphasizes the self, dissolving the authority of Confucian thought. [5]

The essence conveyed by the phrase "太酷啦" (so cool) and its subsequent deconstruction into "泰裤辣" is the core object of deconstruction by postmodernism. Netizens used postmodernism to

reconstruct the phrase "太酷啦" by homophonically transforming it into "泰裤辣," deconstructing the positive energy viewpoint within the phrase. The sentence pattern "*If you can be like me..... then I think it is 泰裤辣!*" was constructed as a tool for resistance and venting, aiming to refute the mainstream culture's excessive "admiration" of positive energy—an "abnormal" positive energy that sacrifices and dedicates without considering personal returns and survival costs. "泰裤辣" became the target of postmodernist deconstruction, as its representation of positive energy lacked substance.

2.2.2. Mainstream Media's Reconstruction of "泰裤辣"

While "泰裤辣" rapidly gained popularity on the internet, mainstream values in the real world did not passively wait to be influenced by emerging internet culture. Mainstream media, representing real-world mainstream values, reconstructed the meaning of "泰裤辣."

For example, an article titled "泰裤辣，还得是咱妈" ("泰裤辣，it has to be our mother") was published by the WeChat public account "青春上海" on May 14th. In this article, "泰裤辣" became an exclamation with positive and appreciative connotations to attract readers. Mainstream media did not ignore the "carnival" of postmodernism but instead incorporated joy, admiration, and appreciation—values with positive connotations—into the phrase to reconstruct its spiritual essence during the extensive dissemination process. Similarly, mainstream news media such as Pengpai News, Sichuan Fire Department, and Tencent News followed suit, attempting to gradually transform "泰裤辣" into an exclamation of positive energy.

It is not excluded that some individuals initially used "泰裤辣" as a positive term. However, in practice, it is the mainstream media's influence that has shaken the core essence of "泰裤辣." According to the 51st Statistical Report on Internet Development in China released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), as of December 2022, China's internet user population reached 6.7 billion, with an internet penetration rate of 75.6%, and a mobile internet user population of 6.5 billion. With such a massive audience, mainstream media's promotional efforts are beyond the reach of ordinary self-media. Extensive promotion has given birth to new connotations of "泰裤辣"—an exclamation of positivity and appreciation. The original form of resistance, negation, and decentralization in "泰裤辣" has been neutralized and reconstructed by mainstream culture.

This is the process of "泰裤辣" going viral on the internet: undergoing comprehensive deconstruction from "太酷啦" to "泰裤辣," from representation to essence, and attempting to influence real-world society through meme culture. However, under the promotion of mainstream media, "泰裤辣" gradually acquires new positive connotations. Thus, "泰裤辣" has completed its journey from birth, deconstruction, construction, to reconstruction. As for when "泰裤辣" will be abandoned by the time-sensitive internet and another "泰裤辣" will be embraced, only the reveling netizens can provide us with an answer.

3. "泰裤辣" : A Mirror of Self and the Other

3.1. The Mirror between Online and Real-world Societies

The contemporary era has witnessed the emergence of the internet society as a macroscopic conceptual entity. [4] The tangible real-world and the virtual internet society together constitute today's human society. With the widespread adoption of the internet, the number of online users is escalating, and the virtual internet society is nearly parallel to, if not surpassing, the tangible real-world society. The term "泰裤辣" serves as a bridge between these two realms.

3.1.1. The "Reflection" of the Real-world Society

The real society has undergone three years of pandemic, global economic decline, and challenges to its economic foundations. The prospects for the superstructure are not optimistic, as global

phenomena such as aesthetic degradation, employment difficulties, and fertility crises suggest a gradual decline from the past three decades of glory. Individuals of all ages are affected by a range of issues caused by the global economic downturn, constrained by societal norms, and the authentic self is suppressed. The consciousness of resistance and satire expressed by "泰裤辣" vividly illustrates this scenario. The internet society becomes the optimal choice for evading societal responsibilities and obligations, surpassing the real social network. The suppression imposed by the real society on individuals leads to the evolution of the internet society into its current form, standing as a mirror reflection of the self before the mirror.

3.1.2. The Online Society "within the Mirror"

The online environment, especially the public opinion atmosphere, is not as harmonious as before. Controversial events prompt online users to engage in stereotypical and endless verbal battles rather than discussing the causes and consequences. Controversial events seem to serve as an excuse for venting negative emotions and engaging in endless character assassinations, particularly in matters involving international relations and political themes. Network culture follows a similar pattern, with memes such as "绝绝子(so nice)," "软敷敷 (so soft)," "泰裤辣," and "拟态baby辣 (you are so mean)" constantly surfacing and gaining popularity. Entertainment to the point of death seems to be the theme for netizens in the internet society, beyond the control of mainstream media. Behind this lies the essence that the internet society is a reflection of the real society. Due to the virtual nature of the internet society, people can freely express desires, emotions, and needs that are suppressed in the real society, leading to an unbridled outpouring. The internet society becomes a vast "dump," filled with all sorts of "garbage," yet effective cleaning efforts are scarce. The internet society is the mirror in which others are observed.

When the internet society becomes unable to contain the continuous influx of "garbage" and spills into the real society, the real society is inevitably influenced by the internet society. However, the virtual internet society is derived from the real human society and is always under the control of the real society. The real society and the internet society mutually influence each other, with the self (real society) reflecting upon itself through the other (virtual society) and undergoing changes. The other is observed by the self, discovering differences yet finding similarities, unconsciously influenced by the self.

3.2. The "Monster-Revealing Mirror" between Authentic and Virtual Selves

In the internet society, individuals can reshape and perfect themselves. Humans are social beings who must shape themselves through interactions with others in society to become part of that society. With the development of the internet, besides the real society, the internet has become a substantial social sphere, where individuals shape themselves through interactions.

3.2.1. The Authentic "Virtual Self"

"泰裤辣" allows netizens to shape a self that dares to express and vent, expressing emotions and thoughts that were previously suppressed. The constraints of societal norms are weakened in the internet society, allowing individuals to expose their true selves online. While the internet society shapes a virtual self, what is expressed is the authentic thoughts of the self, perhaps referred to as the authentic "virtual self."

3.2.2. The False "Authentic Self"

Humans exist in society, constantly shaping themselves through interactions to meet the needs of society and individuals. The real society is the culmination of social relations that have evolved over thousands of years, and individuals truly exist within it, shaping their authentic selves. However, in the real society, people integrate and detach themselves from different social networks for personal gain, concealing their true thoughts by saying half-truths to achieve their objectives. People genuinely exist in the real society, but the expressed thoughts are the false self, which might be considered the false "authentic self."

"泰裤辣" allows the genuine emotions and thoughts concealed in the false "authentic self" to be released through the authentic "virtual self." When the "authentic self" reflected in the mirror named "泰裤辣" is fundamentally different from the "authentic self," it is akin to the demons revealed by the monster-revealing mirror in traditional tales, where seemingly beautiful entities turn out to be terrifying monsters.

4. Conclusion

The skyrocketing popularity of "泰裤辣" reflects the current state of the online environment in recent years. Meaningless trends, conscious resistance, purposeful dissolution—the connotations of "泰裤辣" are gradually shifting from resistance and denial to admiration and appreciation. The birth of the "泰裤辣" meme took less than a month, making it an emblematic example of postmodernism. In deconstructing the original intentions of the artist, it is also deconstructed by the values of the real society, ultimately reconstructed as a new internet slang.

This is a clash of values between the real society and the virtual society. The real society is criticized for its increasingly oppressive environment, while the virtual society is inevitably influenced by the values of the real society. The two continuously engage in a game, seeking an unstable balance. As long as new phenomena-level memes emerge, the balance will be disrupted, initiating a new round of games. In the viral spread and usage, the self is exposed, the authentic "virtual self" is fully showcased, and the virtual "authentic self" is concealed.

In the era of rampant individualism and amusing ourselves to death, “泰裤辣” is not likely to be the sole internet slang with such depth and utility. How the internet society will develop, and how individuals will create new modes of interaction in the internet society, is a sign and a warning. Whether the internet society will, under the guidance of “meaningless memes,” head towards a carnival of entertainment to the point of death is worth contemplating.

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