

Narrative of Youth Trauma under the Mechanism of Meme and Emotional Transmission

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Keywords: Trauma narrative, Internet memes, Emotional communication

Abstract: As a particular form of communication, Meme is noteworthy for its gestalt structure and the significant proportion of trauma narratives in the text. This study explores the dissemination process of internet memes from the perspectives of meme theory and emotional communication, focusing on how youth groups experiencing trauma are bi-directionally impacted by imitating, transmitting and evolving meme. Based on the python text data mining and analysis method, this study realized the basic judgment of the emotional tendency of narrative content. The results show that the mediating role of meme and the mechanism of emotional transmission are deeply involved in the youth's traumatic narrative process, triggering the transmission of traumatic memory and two-way sensitive disclosure, which provides a new perspective for us to understand the psychological state of youth and explore the characteristics of contemporary network culture.

1. Introduction

In the era of digital media, Meme, as the fundamental unit of cultural communication, is influencing the dissemination and reception of information in its unique way. It breaks through the typical network meme propagation based on images and texts, and instead features significant cinematic and fictional narratives, including dialogue, multiple characters, clues, suspense, foreshadowing, multilinear narrative, recall narrative and other expression techniques to construct complex plot structures. Most notable, however, is the presence of a significant proportion of trauma narratives in the themes, with typical examples such as the 'cat meme' and the 'doomer'. The so-called trauma is a modern psychological term that has evolved from medical terminology. Trauma research has gained prominence and sustained popularity in recent years, exhibiting distinct interdisciplinary characteristics. The book 'Trauma and Literature' cites a set of data from The New York Times: from 1851 to 1960, the term 'trauma' appeared a total of 300 times in the newspaper; whereas from 1960 to 2010, the term 'trauma' appeared in the newspaper 11,000 times[1]. The disasters, accidents, childhood psychological trauma, family conflicts, campus bullying, and workplace issues portrayed in these meme narrative texts mirror the psychological state and social challenges faced by contemporary youth. This greatly aids our attention to and understanding of youth mental health issues, and offers a fresh perspective for further exploring trauma healing and social support in the digital media era. This article analyzes the dissemination mechanism, audience characteristics, and social impact of memes, revealing the cultural logic and social significance

behind their narrative of youth trauma. This helps to further understand how young people use this emerging medium to express and handle personal trauma, and how this form of expression resonates widely, thereby affecting their mental health and social cognition.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Research and Review on Memetics Theory

Meme theory was first proposed by Richard Dawkins in 1976, and its core term is meme. This concept first appeared in the book 'The Selfish Gene'. Memes are referred as a cultural transmission unit[2] or imitation unit that carries cultural concepts, symbols, or practices. Susan Blackmore, a student of Dawkins, significantly enriched and refined Dawkins' views in her book 'The Meme Machine' [3], which initially established the theoretical framework of memetics. Blackmore posited that the essence of memes lies in imitation, broadening the scope of imitation from culture to encompass a wider array of categories, including ideas, information, and behavior[4]. Subsequently, memetics has expanded to various fields such as psychology, sociology, cultural studies, philosophy, and language teaching abroad, and has developed into different schools of thought. Throughout the academic research and application based on the perspective of memetics, Memes and memetics can have applications in various fields.

Firstly, within the framework of linguistic research, scholars focus on discussing the formal and semantic evolution mechanisms of language memes. Caliendo and Anselmi proposed that Memes can serve as a language persuasion tool, providing dialect flexibility[5]. Subsequently, many scholars explored new research methods and perspectives of meme theory in multiple subfields of linguistics, such as pragmatics, translation, and language teaching.

Secondly, situate the study of memes within the logical framework of communication and semiotics research, and analyze the relationship and role of meme mechanisms in communication. After Web 2.0, the combination of meme theory and Internet buzzwords marked a notable turning point, and since then meme theory has been widely used to analyze and predict the spread and impact of online cultural phenomena in the fields of advertising, communication, and social media. Memes have become so ubiquitous in society that 'a unique research field has developed, known as memetics' [6, 7].

Thirdly, within the framework of psychological and sociological research, the core features of memes are utilized to explain and analyze the specific psychological processes and social phenomena that arise under their influence. Blackmore referred to this type of research school as the external school, where memes are social phenomena presented.

After reviewing the research on memetics, the following shortcomings are identified: Firstly, in terms of research perspectives, most studies are confined to the perspective of 'linguistic memes within the framework of memetics,' focusing primarily on linguistic memes such as vocabulary, catchphrases, advertisements, translations, etc. Although the introduction of internet memes signifies a new research trend, unfortunately, many studies still linger on narrower linguistic issues such as internet catchphrases, failing to fully recognize the communicative characteristics of different media, especially the digital multimedia attributes. Secondly, the corpus of the existing studies spans a short period, lacking a comprehensive examination of meme dissemination paths and an accurate grasp of the overall changes in memes. Thirdly, in terms of research methods, there is a scarcity of empirical studies on memes, which limits the guiding role of memetics to traditional intuitive experience, and its objectivity and verifiability remain to be examined.

2.2. Research and Review on Emotions and Emotional Transmission

Emotions are human attitudinal experiences of objective things and the corresponding behavioral responses. Early theories of emotions originated from Darwin's evolutionary viewpoint, he believed that emotions are innate and a product of the evolution of the human race, therefore emotions are universal.

Psychology, as an important theoretical source for the study of emotion communication, has several important theories.

The first is the Social Sharing of Emotion (SSE) doctrine that gradually emerged in the 1990s[8]. This doctrine emphasizes that when an emotional event occurs, people tend to voluntarily share their emotional experience with others. Individuals in an emotion-sharing environment are more likely to be induced by emotions, and the sharing of emotions will stimulate secondary sharing behaviors, which constitutes the process of dissemination of such information as emotions. The higher the intensity of the emotion people experience, the stronger their willingness to share. Next is Emotional Contagion theory (ECT), which is often used to analyze the spread of emotions[9]. Emotional contagion primarily refers to the process of individuals experiencing their own emotions by experiencing the emotions of others. In research on the mechanisms of emotional contagion, the mimicry-feedback mechanism is commonly accepted. In this regard, it shares similarities with the transmission mechanisms of memetics. The generation and diffusion of network memes is a direct manifestation of emotional transmission in cyberspace.

3. Study Design

3.1. Research Methods

This article initiates with the fundamental theories of emotional communication and memetics, establishes research objectives through literature review, and employs a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, including Python-based web data mining and content analysis, to capture the characteristics of memes and narrative content emotional tendencies within the online environment.

3.2. Text Mining

The study selected popular videos on the Bilibili platform as the original dataset, and the titles of cat meme videos have typical meanings, often reflecting the story type and author's emotional tendencies intuitively. Therefore, this study conducted a search using the keyword 'cat meme' to obtain the URL address corresponding to the homepage, and achieved data crawling from multiple pages through a cyclic structure. A complete workflow is formed from building the URL to the final data storage. After data crawling, a total of 2023 video title texts and 10181 video comments were obtained.

3.3. K-means text clustering

Text clustering is to divide a series of documents into several clusters. The method used here is the k-means algorithm, which constructs a TF-IDF vector matrix to measure the similarity between documents. Each document will be automatically classified into its most similar cluster. Each category may contain one or more characteristic words, but it is not absolute. Some data of the clustering results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Examples of clustering statistics results.

Category	Title
1 Brother	About cat meme helping my brother with the homework.
	My husband's cousin is my biological brother.
	About the fact that my brother is too good-looking and is pestered by strange girls.
2 Vedio	Original video source of popular cat meme.
	Shocked! Meme video was on fire.
	When you casually make an embarrassing video, it is inexplicably popular.
3 Life	Kong Laoer's sinful life.
	Tthe life of Joseph, a 60 year old French man.
	When I use cat meme to open aespa's life.
	If we open Yin Jinghan's life in the way of cat meme.
4 About	About the bullying of classmates on campus.
	About my mother in prison.
	About being misunderstood as aloof by roommates.
5 Discover Find	About me discovering the anchor's side job.
	In the second year of junior high school, I discovered evidence of my father's infidelity, which changed the trajectory of my life forever.
	I found out that my biological brother is my uncle.
6 Almost	The cat that almost died at my grandparents' house.
	When I was a child, I almost slept in a pile of maggots.
	I almost lost my dad...
	Almost killed in big city.
7 School	About being groped by female classmates in high school.
	Invited by energetic Chinese international students to become school idols.
	My high school teacher predicted a once-in-a-century flood.
8 Boss	If the boss deducts half of the salary after resigning.
	I didn't expect you to be such a boss.
	Eating breakfast at the workstation, the boss crawled out from under the table.

3.4. Word Frequency Count

The python Jieba word segmentation module and its jieba.posseg function are used here. It provides word frequency counting function, so as to provide a more accurate method for word segmentation. Some high-frequency words in the statistical results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Word frequency statistics

Terms	Count	Terms	Count
Cat	932	Almost	26
Meme	898	Class teacher	22
Matter	160	Dad	22
Story	67	Encounter	19
Mom	42	Classmate	18
People	33	School	17
Find	31	Almost	26
See	27	Class teacher	22

3.5. Sentiment Analysis

Text sentiment analysis, also known as text propensity analysis, is the process of analyzing and predicting the subjective text with emotional propensity. This study adopts the Python programme to write the code combined with the PaddleHub big model to achieve the sentiment score calculation on the crawled data. In the research design, the emotional tendency is mainly set as two positions, positive and negative, with the POSITIVE value representing its degree of positivity. The research results showed that there were a total of 1166 negative emotion texts (<0.5), accounting for approximately 57.6%, while positive emotion texts (>0.5) reached 858, accounting for 42.4%. There are 548 extreme negative emotion texts (<0.2) and 291 extreme positive emotion texts (>0.8), the mean value of sentiment analysis was 0.418, and the median was 0.398.

4. Conclusions

4.1. Social environment: the motive force to trigger youth's traumatic narrative

From the frequency statistics of video titles, it can be seen that these high-frequency words have obvious dimensional trend:

First, in addition to the characteristic words 'cat meme', the words 'thing' and 'story' are the most frequently used, which show the unique narrative perspective of cat meme videos. In addition, the frequency of 'three elements of narrative' is also very high: character (e.g. 'mother', 'teacher'), environment (e.g. 'company') and plot, and the narratives cover all kinds of scenes. Text clustering results also confirm this point. These videos have no significant 'theme anchor'. Multiple themes, such as family relationships, danger and averting danger, mundane daily life, curious anecdotes, and profound experiences, can be the content theme of cat meme, whether it is joy or sorrow, as long as it is a story.

The emotion analysis results show that most of the emotional tone of the narration of cat meme are biased towards negative emotions. It is worth noting that almost all the story contents containing 'head teacher' in the title are negative emotions (such as 'bullying', 'depression' and 'isolation'). From the perspective of emotion itself, although the surface form of cat meme is relaxed and humorous, the core is often some negative emotions or even bad experiences.

According to the social construction theory of emotion, emotion is the product of social construction, which is generated with a profound social background[10]. With the increasing pressure of social competition, the rapid pace and materialization of modern society leading to a series of problems such as increasingly complex and alienated interpersonal relationships, employment difficulties, and slow class mobility, these individual traumatic memories do not exist out of thin air or in isolation. Trauma becomes an object of memory shared by a generation, and meme creates an emotional link that can be widely resonated. As Laurie said, 'Trauma narratives are often about contrived traumatic scenarios, an implicit critique of the ways in which social, economic, and political institutions are able to create and perpetuate trauma indefinitely'. This inspires us to pay attention to capturing the real discourse space of young people under the grand narrative, and to see through the crux of a society from the memory of individuals' own living conditions. Traumatic events are the driving force to trigger youth's traumatic narration. For instance, the meme video titled 'About Me, Someone Who Has Been Bullied Since Childhood' can be succinctly characterized by its depiction of deeply distressing occurrences, encompassing a variety of harrowing experiences such as being a left-behind child, enduring relentless bullying, and confronting the stark realities of urban-rural discrimination.

4.2. The mediating role of meme: narrative mechanism and emotional healing

The study found that creators will unconsciously ignore the details about themselves in the process of creation. They reshape their past experience through the image of the cat, display it to others in a more humorous, positive and acceptable way. Whether it is the object of inflicting pain or the person who receives the pain, which is 'beautified' through the adorable image of cats. For example, 'the kitten holding its head', which is often used to depict a moment of great suffering, has an added absurdity of black humour, presenting the narrator's tendency to show others his or her vulnerability and pain in a light-hearted and self-deprecating way.

Secondly, such meme narratives also reflect the narrators' mastery and re-understanding of the past, reorganising the narrative sequence and examining the events from the perspective of scriptwriting; they sometimes need to examine the psychological motivation of the abuser from his point of view and find suitable cat pictures or psychological monologues for him. The process of 'dissociation' helps the narrator to distance himself from the pain of the past and to achieve emotional objectification, and thus psychological comfort. The process of finding the most appropriate cat animation is actually the narrator's exploration of his or her own emotions and thinking process. In this process, the narrator is often able to reinterpret the events of the time and to see it psychologically as something that provides a useful value or an important moral lesson.

In addition, due to the limitation of video length, it can provide endings that real life cannot provide. Although the narrator's life continues, as a story, the termination of the video provides a psychological end and prevents the continuation and recurrence of painful memories caused by traumatic events. To a certain extent, the ending of the story constructed by the narrator often meets people's expectations better than the ending of the event itself. According to the American sociologist Irving Goffman, who put forward the 'Theory of Mimetic Theatre' in his book 'Self-Presentation in Everyday Life', people play roles in society, which is actually a kind of impression management process carried out in the 'foreground' and 'the presence of others', thus enabling individuals to realise their ideal self-presentation. When people try to create meme videos, they will default to the presence of a potential audience, so in catering to the narrative text and audience expectations, the narrator will unintentionally or intentionally mould the ending into a tendency of 'the darkness is over and the light is coming', which also plays a role in the healing effect under the psychological implication. This expectation of default audience presence is not groundless, but based on the interactivity of social media platforms. Being listened to is not only the premise of emotional catharsis, but also an important factor for the narrator to obtain psychological comfort and satisfaction.

4.3. The bridge role of meme expression vector

Traumatic experience is a lonely experience. Individuals affected by trauma often find it difficult to express their feelings and needs with accurate language or behavior, or have details that they are unwilling to state. This kind of intentionally or unintentionally ignored memory may become an unspeakable barrier. The expression vector of meme may become a bridge. It can be found that the posture, facial expressions, and intonation of memes can accurately represent people's appearance at that time in many cases, which is embodied as an 'emotional performance'. The audience realizes the 'situational' perception of the expression and emotion, that is, 'imagine the emotional experience similar to others in the scene', so as to become the intermediary of empathy, and reserve a lot of imagination space for the audience's text decoding of symbols. For the creator, it is easier to use meme to express. By simply setting a specific background and montage's transition skills, meme can help the narrator smoothly 'skip' the process that is difficult to describe. This highly condensed and simplified story framework is of great significance for the narrator to bridge the

memory gap and reconstruct the traumatic narrative.

4.4. Transmission of traumatic memory and two-way sensitive disclosure

Emotional disclosure is a type of self-disclosure. It can be further differentiated into positive and negative emotional disclosures based on the emotional valence of the disclosures. ‘Sensitive Disclosures,’ a type of negative emotional disclosure, refers to the sharing of negative emotions, stigmatised experiences, or vulnerable life experiences. The study found that there were spontaneous sensitive disclosure in the comments under the title of negative emotions. The listener is not only a receiver of information, but also a participant and sharer of trauma. In other words, during the listening process, through empathy and reproduction, the relationship between the victim and the traumatic event will be transferred to the listener. The presence of the listener creates a narrative exchange for the testimony of trauma. Therefore, in cat memes, it can be found that the audience has a dual identity as a trauma ‘listener’ and ‘narrator’. Even if they do not participate in the production process of the meme, the assimilation effect of the meme stimulates their expression, thereby achieving the reproduction and dissemination of the meme. For themselves, disclosing negative emotions has become a way of emotional release and liberation.

In addition, meme's unique entertainment discourse mode is highly consistent with the preferences of youth groups, which makes it easy to sublimate personal emotional catharsis into collective resonance in the process of communication, so as to establish a deep emotional bond between communicators and audiences. This phenomenon coincides with Collins' view that ‘the core mechanism of interactive rituals is a high degree of mutual attention’.

Through the form of meme, people can find an easier way to express their experiences and emotions, achieve self-relief and cultural self-help, and also provide a new perspective for us to understand their own inner world, that is, the so-called ‘walk in the door to experience other people's stories, and go out to return to their own lives’. It is hoped that through further research, the cultural logic and social significance behind meme can be more comprehensively revealed.

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