

Personal Experience Sharing Cat Meme Videos among Contemporary Chinese Young People: Take the Bilibili Platform as an Example

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Abstract: This study explores the phenomenon of personal experience-sharing cat meme videos among contemporary Chinese young people on the Bilibili platform. By employing qualitative content and discourse analysis on two popular cat meme videos and their comments, this research delves into how these videos foster empathetic communication, thereby forming an interactive connection between creators and audiences. The research finds that the cat meme video connects the real world with the video world through the means of cat meme symbol, scene construction, narrative method, and atmosphere creation. The cat meme video absorbs the audience's emotional perception and identification, so as to promote the audience's emotional fit with the cat meme video and thus trigger the audience's empathy. The findings indicate that viewers are not merely passive recipients but active participants who, through their interactions, enhance the emotional transmission of the videos. This two-way empathy communication leads to the establishment of a supportive online community, where individuals share similar experiences, offer advice, and provide emotional support. Consequently, cat meme videos on Bilibili serve as a medium for young people to express their social emotions, creating a vibrant and emotionally connected online community.

Keywords: cat meme, empathetic communication, Bilibili video platform, personal experience, affective mediation.

1. Introduction

Cat meme videos are a popular form of online content that often feature humorous and cute behaviors of cats with catchy sound. On social media platform Bilibili, they gained billions of views, reflecting their widespread appeal and the deep emotional connection between creators and audiences. The research object is cat meme videos about personal experience sharing, where creators share interesting or surprising events from their real lives. There are over 1 thousand personal experience sharing videos on Bilibili till now [1].

The popularity of the personal experience sharing cat meme videos is because they have the function as the intermediary of the creator's self-emotional expression, causing emotional resonance between creators and audiences. Therefore, this study aims to explore how personal experience sharing cat meme videos on Bilibili promote empathetic communication, thereby establishing an interactive connection between creators and audiences. Through four empathetic communication

elements: scene, atmosphere, symbol and narrative. This emotional resonance can promote the establishment of an online community of mutual support and understanding and help the youth group to express their social emotions. This not only expands the research field of empathic communication, but also allows researchers to focus more research on short video platforms based on personal experience sharing and provides a theoretical model for future research on video memes.

Bilibili is a video platform aimed at young users, which strongly supports User Generated Content and encourages users to upload their own original or secondary videos. These videos are often based on the user's own life experiences and emotional experiences. At the same time, Bilibili has a highly interactive community culture, and almost all users will make high-quality comments and express their opinions on the videos they are interested in.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Meme and Cat Meme

Susan Blackmore first proposed the concept of “meme” to describe a unit that replicates and transmits information through cultural transmission. As a unit of information, they are similar to genetic factors of genes and conduct inheritance, variation and diffusion through person-to-person transmission, which is similar to the transmission of biological genes [2]. In the digital world, a network meme is an information unit that spreads through the Internet and a group of digital projects with common content or form, which are transmitted, imitated, or transformed by many users through the network [3]. On Bilibili, these memes are usually animated, and static pictures taken from popular animations and movies on Bilibili, which are edited and processed to form memes with specific meanings. Users can use various memes to express their emotional attitudes and opinions [4]. The viral spread of meme is central to its success and relies heavily on users' sharing and interaction [3].

Previous research on cat meme only focused on the semiotics of images such as emoji and "messy cat-like language"[5]. Cat memes have two characteristics, one is the anthropomorphic expression of the cat image, and the other is the furry and cute image, which are the secret of the rapid spread of cat memes [5]. These images often do not require the viewer to use too much sense and thinking ability, to bring them an intuitive and strong visual impact. This research focuses on cat meme videos, which are made and spread by using animated images of cat. In the video, cat memes are used as an intermediary to convey emotion in the video, and its excellent visual and auditory stimuli are more impactful than pictures and can arouse people's emotional resonance.

The previous research on meme adopts two methods. One is quantitative data analysis, which analyzes the characteristics of meme videos by counting the playback volume of specific types of meme videos [6]. This kind of analysis can only simply distinguish meme videos and cannot reflect the empathetic communication reflected in meme videos. The other is qualitative discourse analysis and content analysis, which can reflect the emotional attributes of words themselves through analyzing real-time comments on Bilibili, so as to observe the emotional trend of audience feedback on the whole [7]. Some content and elements used in videos can promote emotional resonance between creators and audiences, such as the expression imagery of narrative, images, text, and background [8]. However, these studies do not combine discourse analysis and content analysis for a specific type of video.

2.2. Empathetic Communication

In the last century, foreign scholars began to study empathy in communication. Miller believed that empathy is the process of social interaction between the receiver and the information source, which includes understanding, recognition, and emotional resonance [9]. According to different forms of empathy, the transmission of empathy can be divided into verbal empathy, emotional empathy, and

non-verbal empathy. David Berlo defined it as a kind of mental empathy related to making inferences about others and proposes that this goes from "I-and-the-other" to "a mode of cognition" to "unconsciously empathizing with others" [10]. According to Arnett, empathy is the emotional experience of the recipient to the information source [11].

However, there is a problem with these studies. At present, the research of foreign scholars is based on the psychological function of empathy to analyze its role in communication. In particular, empathy is regarded as a skill that therapists need to master when communicating with patients face to face [12]. Scholars who apply the theory of empathy communication to social media follow the previous research methods and regard empathy as a psychological means applied in the process of information communication, rather than a process of communication [13]. Our research will focus on the whole process of cat meme video spreading and use the theory of empathic communication to discuss how cat memes become the medium of creators' self-expression and the process of arousing audience's emotional resonance.

The research on empathic communication in China is at the beginning stage. Wu first proposed the concept of empathic communication, and Liu Haiming and Song Ting defined it as the behavioral process in which individuals participate in information reception, infection, and expression, as well as transmission and sharing [14, 15]. Li Chengjia and Peng Zhubin believe that the essence of empathy is the communication process in which the subject resonates with others after recognizing and understanding their emotions and gives feedback to them [16]. Zhao defines empathic communication as the formation process, transmission, and diffusion process of common or similar emotions [17]. Therefore, empathic communication is a behavioral process of communication, which is a process in which an individual rises from emotion to cognition after receiving emotional stimulation. It is a cognitive process of audience acceptance, identification, feedback and diffusion through emotional transmission, infection, interaction, and comfort [8]. They put forward the idea that video can connect the real world and the virtual network world through four means: scene, atmosphere, symbol and narrative, so as to absorb the audience's emotional perception and identification, and promote the audience's emotional fit with the video, thus triggering the audience's empathy. Starting from the situation of the audience, Hu Jiangxia believes that proper empathy will achieve the effect of psychological healing [18]. Through the "viral" spread on the Internet platform, cat memes enable creators and audiences to have a spiritual dialogue across time and space [3]. By means of scene construction, atmosphere construction, symbols and narrative methods, cat meme connects the real world with the video world and captures the audience's emotional perception. It makes the audience have emotional fit with cat memes and then triggers the audience's empathy.

In China, research on empathic communication focuses on documentary research, public event research and news discourse research. The focus of empathic communication research is still on the empathic communication strategy of mainstream media [7]. Scholars generally believe that in the era of social media, mainstream media gradually use the means of emotional communication to promote the transformation of its production mechanism and communication mode, which determines to a certain extent what kind of emotions can enter the life of the public, and ultimately affects what kind of emotions the public adopts to socialize [17]. However, these researchers have not paid much attention to video platforms such as Bilibili, which are mainly used by young people, as well as the empathic communication embodied in short videos represented by users' personal experiences and original content. The dissemination of cat meme video is a kind of empathic communication that establishes emotional connection and influences each other between creators and audiences. Its content, often based on the stories of the creators themselves, is widely distributed on the video platform Bilibili.

3. Methodology

This research uses the combination of discourse analysis and content analysis to study cat meme videos on bilibili platform. Content analysis can help us realize multi-dimensional analysis of cat image memes, background image Settings and auditory effects, and systematically summarize a large number of artistic expression elements in the video to analyze the role of multi-angle emotional transmission media. Discourse analysis can focus on video creators' storytelling to better understand the story text and explore the linguistic strategies used to convey their thoughts and emotions.

Our conceptual framework is empathic communication through multimodal form of cat meme video. The analysis on empathic communication of cat meme video draw on the research “The wind xiangyin, leisurely nostalgia: dialect movie’s empathy” from Chen Tianyi and Li Siyi [8]. The cat meme video connects the real world with the video world through the spiritual dialogue with the audience across time and space, through the means of cat meme symbol, scene construction, narrative method, and atmosphere creation. The cat meme video absorbs the audience’s emotional perception and identification, so as to promote the audience’s emotional fit with the cat meme video and thus trigger the audience’s empathy.

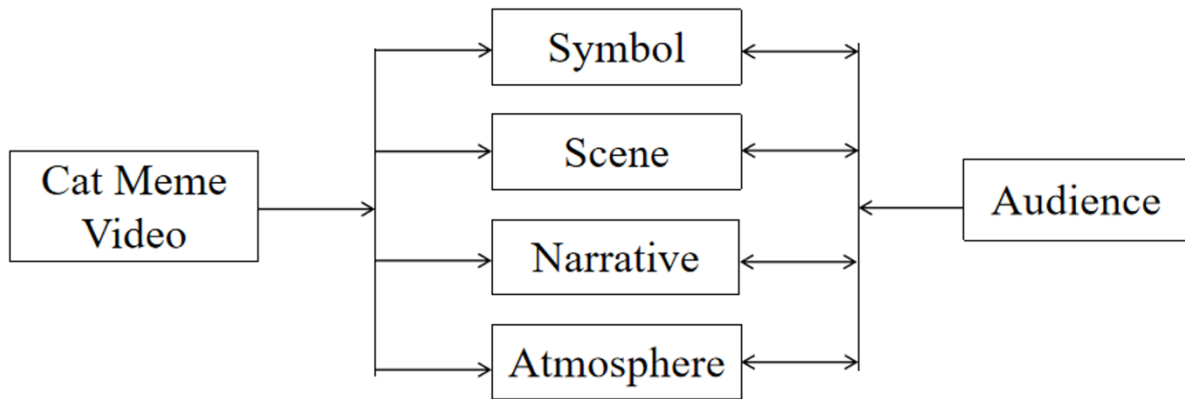


Figure 1: The empathic communication mechanism of cat meme video

Therefore, this paper categorizes the four elements of scene, atmosphere, symbol, and narrative to analyze the content of the two popular cat meme videos at present, and studied how these four elements promoted the emotional resonance of cat meme videos and affected the audience. At the same time, this research selected the top twenty-five comments of these two videos for discourse analysis to help us understand the emotional expression and attitudes of viewers in comments, which is especially important for the study of empathetic communication [19, 20].

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Empathic Communication through Multimodal Form of Cat Meme Video

4.1.1. Symbol: Cat Meme

The cat meme video features the cat memes as a visual and sound symbol. It becomes a means of self-disclosure for young people with cute, anthropomorphic, highly recognizable memes that convey specific emotions. Cat meme videos feed unique and specific references through the symbol of cat meme. Emotional communication gradually deepens in the process of interaction between the video and the viewer, between the author and the viewer, and between the viewer and the viewer.

4.1.1.1. Elements of Cat Meme

The images of cat meme are a variety of cute cats. They are dynamic and their behaviors are very similar to humans such as eating, dancing, glaring, manicuring nails, screaming, crying, turning the head, coughing, singing and so on. These behaviors are done naturally by cats, manipulated by human, or digitally synthesized. Some cats even have facial expressions similar to humans', such as sadness, shock, and pain. Most cat memes have specific fixed sounds, including a real meow by the cat or a specific piece of music attached to it. When there is no sound in a video clip, the cat meme appearing at the time doesn't have built-in sounds, or an event comes to a screeching halt, or the character is suddenly very shocked to realize something.

Each cat meme expresses a specific fixed emotion or action. For example, a cat meme that shows a gray cat holding its head in its hands and screaming is used when a character in a story is in pain and having an emotional breakdown. A cat meme that shows a chewing cat is used when a character in a story is eating food or taking medicine.

Usually, a cat meme's emotions and actions do not simultaneously match those of the characters in the story. For example, a cat meme shows a dancing cat, but the characters in the story are not dancing, they are playing. The author uses the cat meme to convey a feeling of being so happy that he/she wants to dance. Another example is a cat meme that shows a cat chewing without expression, but when the author uses this cat meme, the caption reads, "We were happily eating lunch." So, the cat meme only shows the action of eating, not the emotion of happiness.

In addition, some cat memes are widely used to represent specific groups of people. For example, a black cat which is manicured and has no expression is always used to represent a mother, a teacher, a doctor, or other superior figures who are calm and serious.

4.1.1.2. Emotional transmission

Cat meme videos are relatively easy to make. The author just needs to write a script and then applies cat meme materials according to behavior or emotion. Cat meme materials are relatively fixed, about seventy, and the number is slowly increasing with the Internet information update. So, the cat meme video has a strong reproducibility. Since each cat meme has the same memory point and provides the same emotion, it is easier to transmit the content and emotion, lowering the threshold of understanding the content for different types of audiences.

Emotional transmission through cat memes is better than through real people. First of all, the subject of cat meme is a cute cat. Cats are animals that are generally liked by the public. According to the 2023-2024 White Paper on China's Pet Industry, the number of pet cats in China reaches 69.8 million in 2023, with an average of 1 in every 20 people owning a cat. Secondly, the image of a cat meme is easier for readers to bring themselves into the character than a real person. A real person can be seen his/her fixed gender, age, race, cultural background, class, and possibly occupation, wealth, hobby and so on from his/her appearance and behavior. Someone who does not have the same characteristics may not be able to bring themselves into the character and thus not be able to accept the emotions expressed by the author. Whereas the cat in cat meme provides the audience with a virtual subject that can be substituted for, people who have similar experiences or emotions can bring themselves into the characters, regardless of those demographic characteristics. Finally, one of the key features of the cat meme is funny. It is able to provide funny stories for young people who look to social media for information that makes them happy. These stories are about awkward, sad, and happy everyday life rather than personal accomplishments or successes, serious social problems, etc. Even when a video is about the author's experience with depression and anxiety, cat meme makes the narrative lighthearted and bantering. This contributes a stress-free and enjoyable viewing experience for the viewers.

4.1.2. Scene: Background Images and Story Background

Scene refers to the tableau composed of all elements in time and space and is the important spatial carrier that drives the plot and presentation of cat meme videos. The "symbolic reality" suggested by the cat meme video and the "subjective reality" depicted by the viewers jointly contribute to the construction of the scene.

4.1.2.1. Symbolic Reality

Symbolic reality is the real scene of the objective world replaced by the background pictures or videos. It restores the real scene by creating a "realm" in the video space, transforms the abstract emotion into a figurative expression, and promotes the visualization of emotional transmission. In the video *A heart-broken autumn outing -- I woke up on the shoulder of teacher*, the author chooses free online pictures which have bright colors, is simple and featured, as the background of the video, providing cat memes with space for action and dialogue. The images resemble real-world scenes, such as a middle school classroom with wooden desks and chairs, the interior of a bus with blue or black leather-covered seats, a park with paths, trees, and benches, and an amusement park with a "pirate ship" playing program and a Ferris wheel. And the bright colors of the pictures express the author's emotions about that personal experience, that is overall happy in spite of awkward memories. In the video *My first attempt at meme video*, about my 17-year struggle with depression and anxiety disorder, the author selects free pictures and video clips from the Internet that are simple and depict typical scenes, photos of the real world he/she shoots, and records of the games he/she plays, to give cat memes a space for action and conversation. These pictures and video clips are also very similar to the real-world scenes, and the colors and brightness of them reflect the author's emotions. For example, the dimly lit hospital and dimly lit classroom in the front part of the video express the author's pain of suffering from depression and anxiety; the brightly lit bedroom and cozy cat cafe in the latter part of the video express the author's happiness and relaxation when his/her symptoms are alleviated.

4.1.2.2. Subjective Reality

The "symbolic reality" of the cat meme videos acts on the "subjective reality" of the viewers. "Subjective reality" refers to the viewers' experience of an authenticity that is based on his or her subjective imagination and practical experience. In cat meme videos, which is the viewers' recollection of reality or imagination based on the author's experience. For example, the video *A heart-broken autumn outing -- I woke up on the shoulder of teacher* presents the timeline that middle school students go for autumn outing in a day, including being given mobile phones in the classroom, finding a friend to sit with in the bus, having fun in the destination, reluctantly returning at only 2 pm, handing in mobile phones after arriving school. This process is one that most young viewers have experienced in the same way. The viewers will unconsciously put their own identity into one character of the video when they watch it. When their subjective experience of spring and autumn outings coincides with the process of spring and autumn outings presented in the video, the memories of spring and autumn outings in their student days are aroused, and the only entertainment (spring and autumn outings) in the students' heavy study life is perceived in a more concrete way. The viewers form a deep emotional connection with the author, and the feeling of "the happiness of school days" is strengthened.

4.1.3. Narrative: A Personal Experience that Develops Chronologically

The two cat meme videos this research selected adopted a chronological narrative approach. It helps viewers understand the video content in a short time. Especially as a video released on Bilibili, the plot is short and not complicated, and the audience can understand the whole meaning on the first watch is the key of the video' widespread.

At the same time, these two videos also use the technique of life narrative. Life narrative refers to the narrative subject expressing his or her own life story and directly reproducing the life experience, emotional feelings and emotional expression of individual life [8]. In A heart-broken autumn outing -- I woke up on the shoulder of teacher, a cat meme, the author describes embarrassing stories that happened during his or her autumn outing. and in My first attempt at meme video, about my 17 years' struggle with depression and anxiety disorder, the author describes his or her own experiences with anxiety and depression. Both of these videos describe the creators' stories in middle school through life narrative. Also, the expression of emotion in the life narrative stimulates the audience's emotional memory, making the audience shift from the person who listens to the story to the person who participates. People with similar experiences have a strong emotional resonance and translate that emotion into the comments in the comments section. Audiences, who have had middle school experience or are looking forward to middle school life, will participate in sharing their own experience and vision for the future.

4.1.4. Atmosphere: Background Music and Comments Section

Atmosphere refers to the feeling brought by the environment in which the audience receives the information. Since different viewers watch videos on mobile devices in different places, the physical environment of the audience is not taken into account, and this research considers the network environment. During and after watching a cat meme video, the live comments on the video and comment sections constituted a specific environment.

They provide an immersive atmosphere and emotional orientation for the viewer. In the two videos this research analyzed, the environment in the comments section was relatively harmonious. In A heart-broken autumn outing -- I woke up on the shoulder of teacher, the comments section mostly focused on sharing the same experience and expressing envy. It reflects the audience's emotional identification with the creator's work. Inspired by such an atmosphere, the audience can express their views more freely, which reflects the cognitive process of acceptance, identification, feedback and disseminate in empathetic communication. The harmonious atmosphere promotes the process of feedback and disseminate, which is manifested by the increase in the number of real-time comments and comments in the comments section of the audience, and almost every comment has "likes" and replies.

In My first attempt at meme video, about my 17 years' struggle with depression and anxiety disorder, the atmosphere in the comment section has led to more audiences with anxiety and depression coming forward to share their experiences, to offer some help and support to other people with anxiety and depression, and to encourage and support them to cooperate with treatment. This atmosphere seems to lead to the establishment of a harbour for people with anxiety and depression, where they can speak up opinions that they would not dare to express to other "normal" people in real life. This also reflects the emotion-oriented effect of the atmosphere of the comment section on the topic. Of the 505 comments in the comments section, almost none were incomprehension and abuse directed at the creators or those suffering from anxiety and depression. After some people raised concerns that some people might abuse the creator in the comment section after the video went viral, many people came out in support of the creator and expressed their support and understanding in the interactive comments below this comment.

4.2. The Two-way Effect of Empathic Communication from the Perspective of Audience

The video content shows the author's narrative logic and personal emotions, and the audience communicates through the comment section, not only to respond to the video content, but also to empathize and understand the experience of others. By sharing their personal stories and experiences, viewers create emotional connections with other viewers and creators. Such interaction transcends the traditional one-way communication mode and forms a two-way or even multi-directional communication network. This kind of active participation makes the audience become an important part of the emotional transmission process.

4.2.1. Two-Way Empathy Communication

In cat meme videos, creators convey information and emotions to viewers through the video content, achieving initial empathy communication. However, during the viewing process, viewers are not just passive recipients; they go through processes of acceptance, identification, feedback, and dissemination, forming a two-way empathy communication mechanism.

Viewers, after receiving the emotional information, express their emotional understanding and cognition in the comment section, interacting with the creator. For example, after watching a video, a commenter might praise the video itself:

"A meme video full of student feeling, inexplicably touched, so good the youthful feeling." Zi Quan P said [21].

Viewers with similar experiences express understanding and recognition of the creator's experience and share their detailed stories, such as:

"We are alike... I studied very hard in the first-year of high school, and managed to rank second. However, from the second semester, my stomach hurt all day long. The pain was unbearable. I went to the hospital for examination and got gallstones and cholecystitis. It was said that this stone might be due to my grandmother making me have intravenous drop in the clinic every time I was a little sick when I was a kid. In the first semester of my sophomore year, I also went to school for 2 days and came back for 4 days, leaving everything behind. However, it's much better now in the second semester of sophomore year, and I can only take a maximum of 2 days off per week. I believe I can hold on, let's come on!" Ji Feng Zhi Chen said [22].

This response not only shows empathy but also demonstrates how, under the influence of empathy communication, viewers, driven by detailed emotions, spontaneously provide feedback. By using comments, personal attitudes and experiences are shared and spread in the internet space. Comments are not just feedback on the video content; the commenters are also trying to dialogue with the creator, conveying emotional resonance through their stories. At the end of the comment, the commenter encourages the creator, indicating that cat meme videos and their comment sections have become a medium for emotional exchange between young people with similar experiences.

Through this two-way empathy communication, the comment section of cat meme videos becomes a place for emotional exchange. Viewers not only express their resonance with the video content through comments but also share personal experiences, provide support and suggestions, forming a multi-directional emotional communication network. This mechanism not only enhances the emotional communication effect of the videos but also establishes a deeper emotional connection between viewers and creators.

Creators convey emotions to viewers through videos, while viewers feedback through comments, further extending this empathy communication. Viewers are not only recipients of emotional transmission but also active participants. Through their interactions, emotions are further spread and deepened.

4.2.2. Building a Community of Mutual Support and Understanding

By analyzing the comment content, this research finds that viewers often share their similar experiences, provide comfort and suggestions, and express support for the creators in the comment section. These interactions not only enhance emotional connections among viewers but also make the creators feel understood and supported by the audience. In addition to the interaction between creators and viewers, empathy communication among viewers also occurs in the cat meme comment section, achieving the social emotional expression of young people with similar experiences.

Some viewers, when posting comments, do not focus on commenting on the video content but are eager to interact with people who have similar experiences. For example, they express their confusion in the comment section to seek specific coping suggestions:

"Guys, I am studying abroad, I feel very anxious, and then a little nervous. For example, when answering questions in class, I want to throw up, sometimes I'm so nervous that my hands trembled. What is going on?" Jiang Yu said [23].

Meanwhile, other viewers in the comment section express understanding and support for depression, providing specific coping suggestions. This interaction forms a community of mutual support and understanding, where viewers feel a sense of belonging and emotional support. For instance:

"Many people with depression have gastrointestinal problems, and some new studies have also found a link between depression and gastrointestinal disorders. In Chinese medicine, the function of the spleen and stomach also affects emotions. I also suffer from depression. After trying various ways, I found that staying away from stressors, sleeping well, and maintaining good gastrointestinal health (eating well, puff) can effectively reduce the number of acute episodes of depression and anxiety. Therefore, I now recommend starting from daily life. I hope that friends who are troubled by depression cheer up and recover soon!" Tingting Ni Zai Shuo Shenme said [24].

Such comments not only express personal emotions and experiences but also trigger resonance and discussion among other viewers. They provide effective suggestions for young people with similar experiences of depression, further strengthening the emotional connection of the community.

In conclusion, cat meme videos are not just entertainment content but a bond for community formation. In this community, viewers and creators share and support each other, creating a network space full of understanding and warmth. This process demonstrates how internet platforms, through content creation and interaction, promote emotional connections and support among community members in modern society. Viewers, by expressing their emotions, attitudes, and suggestions in the form of comments, are not only recipients of empathy communication but also active shapers and participants of the emotional community. Through two-way empathy communication and the building of a community of mutual support and understanding, cat meme videos achieve the social emotional expression of young people, forming a vibrant and emotionally connected online community.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how personal experience-sharing cat meme videos on the Bilibili platform promote empathetic communication and contribute to the formation of an online community of mutual support and understanding. The findings reveal that cat meme videos are not merely a form of entertainment but a significant medium through which young people express their emotions and connect with others.

Through qualitative content and discourse analysis, it was discovered that cat meme videos facilitate a two-way empathy communication mechanism. Creators convey their personal stories and emotions through videos, which resonate with viewers. Viewers, in turn, engage in the comment

sections by sharing their own experiences, offering advice, and providing emotional support. This interaction transcends traditional one-way communication, forming a dynamic and multi-directional network of emotional exchange. For example, viewers shared their struggles with anxiety and depression, seeking and offering support, thereby transforming the comment section into a space of mutual understanding and empathy.

The two-way empathy communication observed in the comment sections demonstrates that viewers are not passive consumers but active participants in the emotional exchange process. They provide detailed feedback and share personal stories, enhancing the emotional impact of the videos and creating deeper connections with the creators and other viewers. This process underscores the importance of empathetic communication in fostering a sense of community and belonging among young people.

Furthermore, the study highlights the role of cat meme videos in addressing broader social and emotional issues faced by contemporary Chinese youth. By providing a platform for emotional expression and support, these videos help alleviate feelings of isolation and stress. The findings suggest that cat meme videos on Bilibili contribute to the creation of a supportive and understanding online community, where young people can freely express their social emotions and find solidarity with others who share similar experiences.

In conclusion, this research extends the understanding of how digital content, specifically cat meme videos, can facilitate empathetic communication and community building in online spaces. The study's insights into the interactive dynamics of content creation and viewer engagement on Bilibili provide a theoretical model for future research on video memes and their impact on social and emotional connections in digital environments.

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