

The Impact of Fragmented Cultural Dissemination on Public Cognition: From a Postmodernism Perspective

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Abstract. The concept of postmodernism was already present in contemporary society, especially in the digital era. Traditional cultural dissemination materials and communication materials are replaced by more fragmented ones. This includes the domination of short-form videos and their platforms. Moreover, fragmented cultural dissemination methods are able to carry fragmented culture, such as internet memes, which can be fragmented culture independently or as a form of transformation material. These forms of fragmented culture and their dissemination material had brought behavioral changes to people's lives, that is, the change in lifestyle, making people rely on fragmented culture and its dissemination methods. This essay is aimed at discovering the cognitive impacts that fragmented culture has on people. The results of two case studies and several qualitative content analyses suggest that public cognition is now fragmented and diverse, which fixed the postmodernity, and also brought side effects such as cyberbullying. This study aims to provide a better understanding of contemporary society, especially the digital era.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Sociology, Media, Public Cognition

1. Introduction

As the ongoing process of mediatization, contemporary society can be described as media-saturated. Contemporary society had reached the concept of hyperreality, that the simulations produced by media are displacing real life, reshaping people's perception of real life, and driving public cognition towards fragmentation. This study is inspired by the hyperreality theory and focuses on the effect brought by media on public cognition.

The existing research includes specialized studies about single fragmented cultural dissemination material and identifications of their postmodernity or impacts on people, while a few of the research studies combine different materials and focus on the impact on public cognition. The existing studies that concern public cognition are largely in communication studies and psychology. Moreover, much of the body of these researches are situated in communication and psychology.

This paper uses historical research of fragmented cultural dissemination materials (involving short clips, internet memes and algorithmic recommendation technology), qualitative content analysis and case studies of certain online phenomena to unearth the ways in which fragmented culture and its dissemination materials influence on public cognition. Its purpose is to provide

people better understanding of the postmodern media and its contents, rather than actual solutions for these social phenomena.

2. Internet memes

2.1. Definition

The Internet meme is a form of fragmented cultural dissemination method. It refers to digital artifacts sharing common traits of content, form, or perspective, created by users and disseminated, imitated, or transformed via the internet [1]. Usually, internet memes present as forms of pictures with words that are either emotional—mainly humorous—or thought-provoking. Benefiting from their simple format and capture of public attention, internet memes can be easily shared and spread on the internet. The images in memes can be pictures, screenshots or comics found on the internet and used without authorization, thus, the meme creators may not know the origin and the original meaning of the materials. Since the words in the memes are created by people other than the original publisher of the image, there are progresses of recontextualization during the creation of internet memes.

The characteristic of loss of original meaning of internet memes also produces a range of undesirable outcomes in society. For example, people may use improper pictures to create a recreational context. This could be unethical, leading to psychological harm or cyberbullying. This point will be further analyzed through a case study of a real internet meme in the following sections.

Another characteristic of internet memes is that the initial popularity of an internet meme is not related to its long-term success [2]. This suggests that an internet meme may remain popular by secondary circulation and creation, while the culture inside the meme will become more fragmented. Thus, the fragmentation of internet memes had enhanced.

2.2. Case study

There is an internet meme that was very popular on the Chinese internet—the picture presented five grieving parents, while the content of the meme was about satire on Chinese education from parents towards children (Figure 1). After this meme became popular, other versions of this meme were created and soon took over the place of this meme, while their purpose was all about irony and satire, for example, the teenage subculture. However, this series of internet memes had been evaluated by some internet users as unethical. The parents in the original picture were family members of a murder victim, as this picture was a screen of a news report of this case, the Xinran Ji case [3]. This specific internet meme may build incorrect cognition for the internet users about what Chinese parents and education are. People may start to believe that Chinese parents are hard on their children, while Chinese education is utilitarian and unreasonable. Besides bringing secondary to the victim's parents, these types of internet memes also reflect another postmodernity, that is, the surface level of cognition. People are not caring about the facts or the social events anymore, while they care about emotional value. Even though some internet users had pointed out that this internet meme is not ethical; this specific meme is still spreading through the Chinese internet.

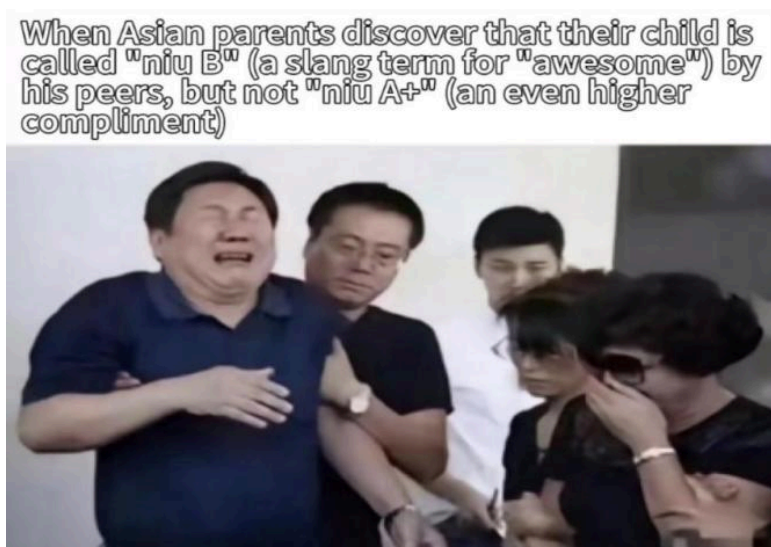


Figure 1. Case study 1

The second case is a meme about Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). The picture in this internet meme presents an old TCM doctor showing a gesture of number five to his patient, while the contents of this internet meme are humiliation towards TCM and medical treatment (Figure 2). In fact, the TCM doctor in this picture was a kind and long-lived TCM doctor, Dr Huiliang Liu, who had exquisite medical skills and was very responsible for his patients. The condition of this internet meme is very similar to the formal one; the meaning and genre of the meme are totally different from the original meaning of the image. This could also affect people's cognition and increase the stereotype towards TCM.



Figure 2. Case study 2

These two specific internet memes are perfect examples of recontextualization and fragmented culture inside internet memes. Since the meme creator found this picture on the internet, the original purpose of the picture had been misinterpreted, and it was made into irrelevant memes. In the process of times of secondary circulation and creation, the purpose of the meme would be more different from the original picture. Moreover, after times of circulation of the internet memes, the

original creators of these memes are hard to find. The internet users could only get fragmented information and culture, which were not the truth of the social event (the meta-narrative), and thus create fragmented public cognition.

Internet memes also act as ideological control other than the production of entertainment for internet users. Memes act as agents of influence and change, shaping values and perceptions, and become instruments of information disorder by simplifying complex issues through emotionally charged content [4]. Governments can also take part in the spread of internet memes, and use the memes as ideological control of their own countries, cognitive manipulation of internet users and external propaganda. Thus, internet memes can enhance people's challenge towards meta-narratives.

2.3. Impacts on public cognition

Since the format of the internet meme itself is a form of fragmented culture, people build their cognition based on misinterpretation of real social events, while these fragmented cultures are independent and can form a worldview as a whole. In addition, the fragmented cultures are different in the internet users, as different internet memes are popular in different media platforms, so cultural differences still exist in internet memes (for example, the specific internet meme that was presented in the case study was particularly famous in Chinese social media). Thus, the characteristics and influences of internet memes are highly matched with postmodernism.

3. Short-form videos

3.1. Definition

Short-form videos (hereafter referred to as short clips) refer to short videos that typically range between 15 and 60 seconds. One characteristic of short clips is the removal of context; the information and culture in short clips usually have no background or history, mainly because of the time limit of short clips. Thus, people can only get partial information and culture in short clips. Some short clips are summaries and snippets of social events, while others consist of short and amusing incidents from everyday life. However, the social events and everyday events in short clips can be edited or fake. In addition, social news can also be edited into short clips other than entertaining videos.

Another characteristic of short clips is high selectivity [5]. This triggers a phenomenon, where people tend to watch the content that they are interested in and avoid others; for example, people who only prefer entertainment news avoid hard news such as political, economic, and international news [5].

There are specialized platforms that are designed for short clips, such as Douyin and TikTok. On these short-clip platforms, long videos may not be successfully published. Some of the long video platforms or other social media are starting to encourage short clips. For example, YouTube is promoting its short clips partition, YouTube Shorts, while X (Twitter) has led in the videos and short clips mode.

3.2. Mechanism

Short clips are highly connected with its reinforcer, algorithmic recommendation technology, which is a technology that determines the ranking of content presented to the users [6].

Algorithmic recommendation technology has a significant impact on short clip platforms, such that people who use these types of media are more likely to get in touch with homogeneous information, and more specifically, the information that they are interested in. According to the filter bubble theory, algorithmic recommendation technology includes selecting information for users by the platform, and hiding the content that users are not willing to see. In Douyin, the platform would selectively show the comments for different users based on their personal information of the account allegedly. For example, in the comments of a video with controversial topics, the platform will present comments that support men for male users and the ones that support women for female users. Whether or not platforms exercise actual control over the information to which users are exposed, public perceptions of this nature are sufficient to demonstrate the effects generated by algorithmic recommendation technology. Thus, sustained exposure to homogeneous information may lead to growing partial cognition for people.

The result of algorithmic recommendation technology is obvious on short-clip-based media platforms. These specialized media platforms have a similar characteristic, that is, the promotion of short clips and punishment of long videos. Douyin, for example, has extremely strict audits on long videos. Videos that last for more than 20 minutes may be banned for audit. Moreover, there is another mechanism related with media—not only for short clips. Video completion rate (VCR) refers to the rate at which users complete watching the videos. Short clips have higher VCR, especially the ones that only have 15-30 seconds. VCR is related to the profit of the video producers. Videos that have higher VCR can get recommendation from the platform, therefore, more internet users will see this video. The view count of the video can determine the income of the creator. Thus, internet influencers tend to publish short clips since short clips have higher VCR, higher view counts and can bring higher profit. Then the numbers of short clips and the probability that people build fragmented cognition had increased rapidly. Algorithmic recommendation technology has another side effect, which is the increase of controversial content. Since controversial content can push users to post more comments and bring more profit, people may publish obvious and unnecessary controversial content on the media.

In addition, a short clip itself is a fragmented cultural dissemination method and able to carry other fragmented culture. Internet memes can be spread by short clips; thus, this combination will enhance the fragmentation of public cognition.

3.3. Impacts on public cognition

According to the disciplinary power theory, the form of short clips is taking people's attention and making people rely on short clips. As short clips can be a way to reach information or even news, people may be addicted to short clips. However, short clips are fragmented cultural dissemination materials. The content in short clips is fragmented. If people use short clips to get information and news continuously for a very long time, their cognition will also be fragmented and keep in surface level.

4. Conclusion

This paper has analyzed three fragmented cultural dissemination methods, that is, internet memes, short-form videos and algorithmic recommendation technology, and their mechanisms and impacts on public cognition. This study has discovered that social media and present postmodernity, while fragmented culture and its dissemination techniques are influencing people's cognition. Since the information is fragmented and remains the surface level on social media, people are "addicted" and

rely on fragmented information and thus build surface-level cognition. Moreover, fragmented cultural dissemination methods can bring side effects that enhance the fragmentation and postmodernity of contemporary society and social media. Certain social phenomena are highly related to fragmented culture and its dissemination methods. Under this situation, internet users, internet influencers and everything inside fragmented culture and its dissemination methods have their responsibility. People with fragmented cognition are more likely to post short-form videos and internet memes that contain fragmented information on the internet and will influence more people and their cognition. The postmodernity of contemporary social media is a cycle where short-form videos, internet memes and algorithmic recommendation technology are influencing each other. The secondary circulation of fragmented culture is inevitable. During this study, the internet memes in the case studies had been edited, that is, the translation of the text in the memes. However, due to the differences between languages, the original meaning of the meme may not be expressed accurately. This phenomenon is worthy of more attention.

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