

The Research on the Communication Strategies of Hellish Memes on China's Internet from the Perspective of Carnival Theory

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Abstract: With the in-depth development of Internet, memes have spread from real life to cyberspace and various types of Internet memes have emerged during the process, including controversial ones. Hellish memes are one of the most typical memes among them. From the perspective of audience, this study uses Bakhtin's Carnival theory to explore the reasons of the prevalence of hellish memes on China's Internet, and provide communication strategies for the propaganda department of Chinese government. This research hopes to reveal the reasons of hellish memes' prevalence in the field of audience analysis and enrich the research dimensions of hellish memes. The study finds that three closely-related reasons account for the prevalence of hellish memes on China's Internet: Firstly, hellish memes satisfy people's sensory pleasure; Secondly, hellish memes fit people's rebellion against the dominant values; Thirdly, hellish memes cater to people's pursuit of open thinking and innovation. Based on the reasons of hellish memes' prevalence, this study also puts forward three communication Strategies for the propaganda departments of Chinese government: Firstly, they should strengthen the immorality of hellish memes through recreation on hellish memes; Secondly, they should take advantages of new media to improve the quality of hellish memes; Thirdly, they should adopt the character of open thinking shown in hellish memes to enriching the dimensions of dominant values.

Keywords: hellish memes, carnival theory, audience analysis, strategies

1. Introduction

In the book *the selfish gene*, Richard Dawkins defined the factors of cultural transmission as “memes” [1]. The role of memes in cultural transmission is similar to the role of genes in biological evolution. Memes possess characters of heredity, variability and selectivity, and they are continuously transmitted through human imitation. After entering the era of internet, memes have become more and more common on cyberspace, and those memes are known as Internet memes. Shifman precisely defined Internet meme as “the dissemination of content such as jobs, rumor, videos, or websites from one person to others via the Internet” [2]. Numerous netizens use various Internet memes every day, such as sticker, short videos and catchwords, and like memes, Internet memes develop into different forms day by day.

Hellish memes, as a special kind of Internet memes, are often defined as memes using dark humor to make fun of others' disabilities, gender, races and so on, or serious social issues [3]. Hellish memes originated from internet platforms in western countries, and then gradually spread to China. However, as the birthplace of hellish memes, hellish memes are not popular in western countries, and there are few studies related to hellish memes. On the contrary, hellish memes are prevalent on China's internet platforms, and belong to one of the most popular types of Internet memes in China. The current researches on the prevalence of hellish memes in China are quite few as well. In details, these researches mainly focus on the impact of hellish memes' dissemination. Sin Ying Liu mainly analyzed the impact of hellish memes on adolescents' participation in climate change issues [3]. Bo Hong Tsai made a discourse analysis on hellish memes in the style of anti-political correctness, and pointed out that disadvantaged groups in society used hellish memes to vent their dissatisfaction [4].

Researches on the reasons for hellish memes' prevalence on China's internet are relatively few. Yu Jun Lin analyzed the concealment of hellish memes' prevalence from the perspective of content, which helps hellish memes to widely spread [5]. There are very few researches analyzing the reasons for the spread of hellish memes on China's internet from the perspective of audience. Why this kind of immoral and dark Internet memes can be popular on China's internet and favored by a lot of internet users? That is definitely a question.

This study based on the Carnival Theory of Bakhtin. Hellish memes' content mainly involves the humorous attitude towards other people's suffering, serious social issues or public catastrophic events. In other words, in hellish memes, people's cognition of specific serious topics is subverted in the form of humor, and positive sensory feedback is given in the form of laughter. Obviously, this is related to the Carnival Theory. Hellish memes act as the carrier of Carnival, and the audience's motivation to spread hellish memes is consistent with the Carnival Theory's values to a certain extent. The first chapter analyzes the spreading course of hellish memes on China's Internet and the summarizes relevant theories; The second chapter analyzes the reasons for hellish memes' prevalence on China's internet with Carnival Theory; the third chapter puts forward strategies for the propaganda departments of Chinese government in the face of hellish memes' prevalence. The main purpose of this study is to sort out the spreading course of hellish memes in China, explain the reasons of hellish memes' prevalence on China's internet and put forwards strategies.

2. The Overview of Hellish Memes' Spreading Process on China's Internet and Carnival Theory

2.1. The Spreading Process of Hellish Memes on China's Internet

Hellish memes refer to under a specific particular cultural background, the combination of other people's suffering, serious social issues or public catastrophic events with humorous forms of communication to form a strong black humor effect. Essentially, hellish memes convey immoral content. Because of the immorality of hellish memes, the guilt caused by watching such memes seems to make the audience fall into the "hell" of Christian culture, so such memes are called hellish memes [6]. Typical hellish memes include mockery of the disabled, discrimination against specific races, and ridicule of terrorist attacks.

Since the rise of hellish memes on the Internet in western countries, some hellish memes have been introduced to China's internet through social media and other internet platforms. In August, 2021, Baidu Tieba, a social networking platform on China's internet, officially established "hellish memes bar", where netizens post different hellish memes. Since then, a large number of hellish memes have converged on "hellish memes bar" and spread to other Chinese Internet platforms, such as Bilibili, The Little Red Book, Weibo, etc. In February of the next year, the "hellish memes bar" was temporarily banned, and then reopened in March. In August, 2023, "hellish memes bar" have

attracted more than 1 million users. Hellish memes are widely seen on other major Chinese Internet platforms as well. In summary, currently hellish memes have the characteristics of wide range of spreading and large audience base on China's internet.

In February, 2022, Baidu Tieba was the first to supervise the fast spread of hellish memes. Without any prior announcement, it imposed a one-month temporary ban on the "hellish memes bar", which to some extent reduced the popularity of hellish memes on China's internet. However, after the release of the ban, hellish memes still had a strong influence on China's internet. In May 2022, Bilibili released a special community rectification announcement, saying that "it is found that the phenomenon of making fun of others" illness or even death is spreading rapidly in the community, and will not be limited to offline video or account blocking". Since then, for the first time, the Chinese Internet platform has officially expressed a negative attitude towards hellish memes. However, after releasing the rectification announcement, hellish memes are still widely seen on the platform. During the same period, Zhihu and other Chinese Internet platforms also deleted a large number of topics related to hellish memes, but did not make a clear announcement. After deleting the topics, new hellish memes appeared on the platform rapidly. In July, 2022, the rule of law daily released a video criticizing hellish memes and the bad social atmosphere it advocated, which was the first time that the Chinese official media made a clear public statement about hellish memes. However, since then, hellish memes have remained popular on Chinese Internet platforms. It can be seen from the above that the current regulation of hellish memes on Chinese Internet platforms did not make a different, in other words, the regulatory strategies such as short-term ban, deletion of topics and public statements did not successfully restrict the fast spread of hellish memes, which also proves that hellish memes have a solid audience base on China's Internet.

2.2. The Theoretical Framework of Hellish Memes' Prevalence -- Carnival Theory

Put forward by Bakhtin, a literary theorist of the former Soviet Union, Carnival theory, plays an important role in the field of western literary research. Bakhtin's exposition of Carnival theory goes from the shallower to deeper. On the whole, Carnival theory can be explained into three levels: Carnival and Carnival style, Carnivalization in the field of literature and Carnival values [7].

Bakhtin's exposition of Carnival theory began with Carnival, a European folk activity. Bakhtin found that "in the Middle Ages, in fact, people reveled in the square in almost every religious festival..." [8]. At the Carnival, people completely subverted the serious and sacred religious culture and social hierarchy in the Middle Ages. They use vulgar language to ridicule the holy image and people of different social classes freely and intimately contact with each other in the square [9]. These phenomena reflect that the contradictory and separated things in the Middle Ages were reunited in different forms during Carnival, and the social order was reconstructed in a "reverse" way. The manifestations of the series of Carnivals are called "Carnival style" by Bakhtin. Many celebrations that are similar to Carnival are also included in the scope of Carnival style. Thus, Carnival style is the denotation of Carnival.

Carnival style contains a set of discourse closely related to Carnival, which advocates sensibility and symbolizes the realistic dependence of Carnival style. When Carnival discourse is transformed into literary expression, it shows the Carnivalization of literary field in Bakhtin's exposition. As time passed by, the influence of Carnivalization in the field of literature has gradually exceeded the Carnival and Carnival style that existed in the reality level, highlighting the strong vitality of the combination of Carnival discourse and literature.

After summarizing the characteristics of Carnival, Carnival style and Carnivalization in the field of literature, the values of Carnival have been quite distinct. Rooted in the heavily fortified social hierarchy and the inviolable religious culture in the Middle Ages, Carnival undoubtedly points to the other extreme which is completely opposite to the Middle Ages. In the Carnival, people believe in

sensualism, release their suppressed desires, pursue a free and open social atmosphere, resist the solidified authority and ideology, and emphasize the open interpretation of the world and the liberation of creativity.

As a Western cultural theory, whether the Carnival theory can be applied to Chinese society needs to be considered. Ming Yan pointed out that Carnival theory is a theory based on the period of cultural transformation, and its theoretical significance can only be revealed when it involves the study of the period of Chinese cultural transformation [7]. Juan Hui Ye pointed out that today China is in a period of great change, with rich and diverse social culture and multiple collision of values, which provides social base for the application of Carnival theory [10]. In addition, the contemporary China's Internet has also laid social base for Carnival. Zhao Yi Peng pointed out that the decentralized characteristics of cyberspace fit the cultural core of Carnival theory [11]. The virtual internet constitutes a special form of life which is different from the real life. On the Internet, people can freely express themselves without succumbing to the dominant social values. Therefore, the Carnival theory can be used to explain current communication problems of China's Internet.

3. The Reasons for the Spread of Hellish Memes on the Internet in China

3.1. Hellish Memes Satisfying People's Sensory Pleasure

Although most of the hellish memes are inconsistent with morality, from ridicule on the disabled to racial discrimination, it has to be admitted that hellish memes are humorous. Why can hellish memes make people laugh? McGraw & Caleb Warren proposed the benign violation theory to explain the mechanism of humor. They pointed out that people would laugh only when they perceive that something is both violated and harmless [12]. The most common example, such as the physical interaction of tickling each other, often raise a laugh, because tickling is not only a threat to the body, but also safe and harmless. Violation not only refers to the threat to the body, but also includes the threat to people's existing values. Harmlessness also means that people can reasonably accept the threat in their existing values. Back to hellish memes, it is not difficult to find hellish memes which make people laugh are both violated and harmless. Therefore, when specific audience views certain hellish memes, it often raise a laugh.

Sensory pleasure has always been an important demand for human survival and development, and laughter is undoubtedly an important kind of pleasure experience. The publicity of sensual pleasure and the pursuit of desire release in the Carnival theory accurately reflect the attitudes of many Chinese netizens today. When hellish memes with various contents and forms were widely spread on China's internet, the audience gained a strong sense of humor from them. On the Internet platform, the vague generalization of morality has further relaxed the tolerance of hellish memes, which makes the humor brought by hellish memes far stronger than the discomfort they brought. Because of the strong sense of humor, people tend to watch more hellish memes to stimulate sensory pleasure, which greatly promotes the spread of hellish memes on China's internet.

3.2. Hellish Memes Fitting the Contemporary People's Rebellion Against the Dominant Values

Dominant values refer to the values extracted and consciously constructed by the ruling class from social values, which occupy a dominant position in the social value system and play a dominant role [10]. The content of hellish memes is full of the rebellion and deconstruction of the dominant values. For instance, in the Titan submarine accident, hellish memes can present the desperate scenes of the victims in the submarine in a humorous and relaxed way, impacting the seriousness of death in dominant values. At the same time, because most of the victims of the submarine accident are elites in the society, some hellish memes also possess a strong hatred of the rich, shows people dissatisfied

with the status quo of the social class nowadays. Not only the Titan submarine accident, hellish memes constantly combined with new social issues to carry out different rebellion against the dominant values.

Carnival theory emphasizes the rebellion against the dominant authority and ideology, which is rooted in the monopoly of official authority and religious ideology on society in the Middle Ages. At that time, official authority combined with religious ideology constructed a set of undeniable social order and so-called truth by controlling people's thoughts and beliefs. However, Carnival broke the authority system. In Carnival, people questioned what could not be questioned and challenged what could not be challenged, which not only formed a strong cultural impact, but also served as a "safety valve" in the Middle Ages to relieve people's dissatisfaction [7]. At present, Chinese government emphasizes a set of grand social narrative, where individuals are ignored to some extent. In recent years, affected by the Covid-19 epidemic, China's economy has suffered, and the life pressure of people, especially youngsters, has increased. In addition, the internet platform is tolerant of individual expression. People use hellish memes to express their dissatisfaction and rebellious attitude towards the dominant values. To some extent, the prevalence of hellish memes serves as an important valve to release social pressure. People's dissatisfaction with the dominant values on China's internet was expressed through hellish memes, which accelerated the spread of hellish memes.

3.3. Hellish Memes Catering to People's Pursuit of Open Thinking and Innovative Consciousness

Hellish memes show the open attitudes towards the world and innovative consciousness. It is no exaggeration to say that as long as there are people suffering and social have serious issues, hellish memes will always exist as the other side of pain and seriousness. When looking into hellish memes, it is not difficult to find that they both have two opposite elements, such as life and death, deformity and integrity. These coexisting elements form a sharp contrast with the one-way interpretation of the dominant values. For example, in dominant values, funerals are always solemn, and the disabled always need to be respected and cared for. However, in hellish memes, funerals can be filled with laughter, and disabilities can be ridiculed. In the process of watching hellish memes, people actually develop a new perspective on the problem: the content of pain contains the factor of joy, and serious topics can be lightly interpreted, which also implies that everything is relative and moving, and there is no absolute scale to measure value. In other words, hellish memes reveal an open thinking of the world.

In addition, hellish memes, as a branch of Internet memes, inherits and develops the variability of Internet memes during its spread. In terms of form, the forms of hellish memes on China's internet are constantly changing. From pictures combined with words to short videos, the variation trend of hellish memes in form is to convey more vivid and concrete information. In terms of content, hellish memes are drawn from a wide range of materials. From historical events to social issues, from other people's experiences to literature, they can become the original materials of hellish memes. People from different cultural environments and social backgrounds select materials from them, and continue to innovate and spread hellish memes. The continuous variation of hellish memes in form and content constitutes a rich and diverse hellish memes genealogy, which shows that hellish memes are open and innovative in the stage of creation and dissemination.

Carnival theory also emphasizes the open thinking of the world and innovative consciousness. Bakhtin found that during the carnival, the clown would be temporarily crowned king, and soon be removed from the crown and demoted to clown again. The cycle of clown "Coronation and decapitation" not only represents the rebellion against the official authority, but also implies the philosophical principle that things are relative and constantly changing. Contemporary China emphasizes the social integration function of the dominant values, and each individual needs to accept

them, which to some extent limits people's diversified value judgment and cognitive tendency. On the contrary, the relatively free and inclusive environment of the Internet has created a broader thinking space for people beyond the dominant value, where people share diverse ideas and create novel memes. In other words, the limited thinking space in the real society unfolds on the Internet, and people tend to pursue open thinking and innovative consciousness on the Internet. Therefore, the open and innovative characteristics of hellish memes have a strong attraction to people, stimulating people to create and disseminate hellish memes on China's internet.

4. Communication Strategies of Hellish Memes on the Internet in China

Due to the rich variety of hellish memes, their influence on China's internet is also multidimensional. Emmanuelle brigaud and Nathalie Blanc found that after exposure to specific hellish memes, people's tendency to accept moral violations that meet their own interests increased [13]; Bo Hong Tsai found that certain hellish memes can aggravate people's dissatisfaction with social issues [4], which shows that certain hellish memes have a negative impact on individuals. Sin Ying Liu found that specific hellish memes can induce people's sympathy and guilt, and promote people's moral introspection and participation in social issues [3]. It can be seen that specific hellish memes also have a positive impact on individuals. In order to create a harmonious internet environment, based on the analysis of the reasons of hellish memes' prevalence, and combined with the pursuit of maximizing the positive impact of hellish memes, this study, taking the propaganda department of the Chinese government as the main role, puts forward three suggestions on the regulation of hellish memes' dissemination and promotion of advocating proper values.

4.1. Strengthening Hellish Memes' Immorality Through Re-Creation

Based on the analysis of the formation mechanism of humor of hellish memes, it is not difficult to find that hellish memes possess characteristics of both violation and harmlessness. Although they are immoral, they do not break the psychological boundary that makes people feel uncomfortable. Sin Ying Liu's research points out that the immorality of certain hellish memes will make people feel uncomfortable, so as to stimulate people's sympathy and guilt, and create the possibility for moral introspection and participation in social issues [3]. In other words, the strong immorality of certain hellish memes maybe counterproductive. People tend to have moral pressure when watching such hellish memes, so as to adjust their behavior to meet the moral requirements. In addition, for the same hellish memes, different audiences have different interpretation tendencies, and they sense different moral pressures. Therefore, while taking advantage of hellish memes' immorality, the propaganda department should also specifically identify different audiences and adopt appropriate propaganda strategies.

Specifically, the government propaganda department can analyze the audience of hellish memes, grasp the tendency of different audience to watch hellish memes, and then select typical hellish memes with different viewing tendencies to re-create them. In the process of re-creation, the propaganda department should follow the principle of strengthening immorality to express different hellish memes. For example, hellish memes aimed at mocking the disabled can clarify the identity of the disabled, such as the audience's relatives or friends, thus generating moral pressure on the audience. Based on the increase of moral pressure, it can hinder the dissemination of hellish memes from the audience, and create opportunities for reflective morality and participation in social issues. Of course, in order not to let moral pressure turn into dissatisfaction with the propaganda department, or even counterproductive and aggravate the prevalence of hellish memes, the propaganda department also needs to show a positive attitude while re-creating the hellish memes and emphasize the importance of Internet morality.

4.2. Improving Hellish Memes' Content Quality by Using New Media

From the perspective of communication forms, hellish memes have two main forms: pictures with text and short videos. The information carried by short video form is more vivid and rich, and the communication effect is more direct and powerful, thus bringing a stronger sensory impact to the audience. Therefore, the propaganda department needs to focus on hellish memes in the form of short videos, while giving due consideration to the hellish memes in the form of pictures with text.

From the perspective of communication content, based on the above analysis of the characteristics of hellish memes' rebellion to the dominant values, hellish memes can sometimes highlight the opinions of netizens on social issues. Although hellish memes' rebellion against the dominant values is critical to some extent, it is easy to lose the depth of thinking if the rebellion is too indulged in the deconstruction of the dominant values. There is no essential difference between sticking to the opposite of the dominant values and unilaterally accepting the dominant values. Both of them fall into a single perspective of thinking and can hardly perceive problems from a comprehensive and dialectical perspective. As an important part of China's governance, healthy and rational social public opinions need government's attention and correction. Therefore, the propaganda department needs to improve the content quality of hellish memes based on the form of short videos.

Specifically, the propaganda department should take advantages of short videos on the new media platform to improve the content quality of hellish memes. By reducing the unilateral deconstruction in hellish memes, adding some positive thinking to immoral content, audience can get inspiration while laughing. In short, the propaganda department should set up the rational style of hellish memes to help the audience thinking rationally.

4.3. Learning from Hellish Memes' Character of Open Thinking to Enrich the Dimensions of Dominant Values Publicity

Hui Juan Ye pointed out that the socialist core values are the current dominant values in China [10]. However, Chun Yu Deng pointed out that the current dissemination of socialist core values is still challenged by insufficient power [14], including that the dissemination of socialist core values is generally in the form of slogan propaganda, and is obviously limited in the depth of the dissemination content. How to enrich the depth of the publicity of socialist core values is significant for the propaganda department. Based on the above analysis of the hellish memes, it is not difficult to find that the essence of hellish memes' appeal to the audience lies in its open attitudes towards the world and a sense of innovation that breaks the rules. In fact, this trait of hellish memes also provides ideas for better publicizing the socialist core values.

Specifically, the propaganda department should expand the dissemination content of socialist core values from different dimensions. For instance, "patriotism" is an important component of the socialist core values. When publicizing this concept, most of the current propaganda only stays in the dimension of the benefits of "patriotism" to whole China. After learning from hellish memes, the publicity of "patriotism" can be expanded to a richer dimension, such as from the negative side of "patriotism", to explore the impact of "unpatriotic" on society; or the propaganda department can deeply analyze the concept of "patriotism", explore the advantages and disadvantages of different types of "patriotism", and clarify the differences between rational patriotism and blind nationalism; or explore the impact of "patriotism" on each individual. Other values can also be expanded in a similar way.

In essence, hellish memes' prevalence on China's internet benefits from its open attitude towards the world and its innovative consciousness, which successfully stimulates audience to create and disseminate hellish memes. Fully unfolding the publicity dimensions of socialist core values can not

only deepen the audience's understanding of socialist core values, but also make the audience become the propagandist, practitioner and defender of socialist core values.

5. Conclusions

Based on the current situation of hellish memes' prevalence on China's internet, this study draws the following conclusions through the above analysis.

Firstly, the reason why hellish memes can be widely spread on China's internet and difficult to be effectively regulated is largely due to the fact that hellish memes meet the psychological needs of contemporary Chinese netizens. Specifically, hellish memes mainly meet three kinds of psychological needs of current Chinese netizens, which are sensory pleasure, rebellion against the dominant values, and the pursuit of open thinking and innovative consciousness. In fact, the three reasons are closely related and work together to promote the process of creating and spreading hellish memes. Open thinking and innovative consciousness is the core of the rebellion against the dominant value. People perceive the power of open thinking and innovative consciousness from hellish memes, and practice it in the process of creating and disseminating hellish memes. In this process, people's sensory pleasure is satisfied and constantly gives positive feedback to people's brain so as to ensure the whole process work continuously, and finally build a cultural tool to rebel against the dominant values.

Secondly, in order to maintain a positive and harmonious internet environment in China, based on the reasons of hellish memes' prevalence, this study puts forward three communication Strategies for hellish memes from the perspective of the propaganda department, two of which are designed to regulate the prevalence of hellish memes, and one is designed to learn from hellish memes to promote the publicity of dominant values. Specifically, the propaganda department can strengthen the immorality of hellish memes through re-creation, so as to promote people's moral introspection and participation in social issues. in addition, the propaganda department can also improve the content quality of hellish memes by taking advantages of new media so as to enhance people's rational thinking ability; Finally, by learning from the characteristics of hellish memes, the propaganda department can enrich the dimensions of socialist core values publicity, so as to enhance its communication influence.

This study expands the study of the reasons for hellish memes' prevalence from the perspective of audience and still has some deficiencies. For instance, the reasons of hellish memes' prevalence in this study needs some empirical data support. It is hoped that in the future, combined with empirical research, it will more comprehensively reveal the reasons of hellish memes' prevalence on China's internet, so as to put forward more solid communication Strategies.

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