ATLANTIS
PRESS

Online Cultural Comparison between China and the US: A Research on the Connotation of Pepe the Frog Memes

Tianyu Zhou

International College Beijing, China Agricultural University, Beijing, China, 100091
tianyu_20010901@163.com.

ABSTRACT

Sad Frog is popular on social media in China as part of Sang culture, but its original name is Pepe the frog and now a culture of hate in the US. Cyberculture and cyberplace provide fertile environment for the reconstruction and spread of memes. By comparing and analyzing the differences in Chinese and American political systems from the perspective of media ecology proposed by Postman, this study finds that memes in the US are politically polarized, while Chinese memes are prone to individual emotional release. There used to be politicalized memes with negative implications, but memes now are dominated by Sang subculture instead of political polarization.

Keywords: *media ecology, cultural comparison, social media, Pepe the Frog*

1. INTRODUCTION

On January 26th in 2022, TubeStation, a Chinese restaurant well-known for American pizza, launched a series of peripheral products marked by Pepe the Frog. Pepe the Frog, an animation character with green skin and swollen eyes, was created by an American artist Matt Furie several years ago, and it has now been sweeping across Chinese social media in the form of sad frog memes. Chinese youths and young adults like to use sad frog memes to express their pessimistic attitudes toward the existing or potential disappointment they encounter at school or the workplace. These passive attitudes are prominent features of Sang culture – a Chinese subculture that aims to seek empathy on social media, like WeChat, Weibo, and Bilibili [1]. While Pepe is a popular "superstar" domestically, it is a symbol of hatred culture in the US, associated with white supremacy, misogyny, Fascism and other right-wing ideologies [2][3]. While sad frog memes can attract empathy on Chinese social media, Pepe would arouse racial conflicts, and tensive debates about the hierarchies in the US. American people would be irritated if they saw the image of Pepe on their pizza boxes.

Whether the subculture in China or the US, the spread and extension of Pepe's connotation are carried by memes on the Internet. Internet memes are permeated with cultural values, and are widely spread on social media by netizens to joke about public events or personal life in the form of humorous pictures [4]. However, the connotations of memes vary in different cultural contexts, such as Pepe the frog in the US and China.

This study aims to discover and analyze the relationship between memes and their media ecology by comparing and contrasting the interpretations and practices of Pepe the frog's connotation in China and the US. Moreover, the theory of cyberculture and cyberspace are employed to explore memes' role in reconstructing cultural connotations and raising cultural awareness. Memes are loaded with thick cultural meanings that spread fast on the Internet, especially on social media. A deeper understanding of memes in different countries' media ecology aids to promote cross-cultural communication by mutually respecting social norms and recognizing cultural values.

2. CYBERCULTURE, CYBERPLACE, AND THE ORIGIN OF PEPE THE FROG

2.1. Online Communities Breeding Cyberculture

To understand why Pepe the Frog could evolve from an innocuous animation character into the symbol of

hatred culture in the US and Sang culture in China, it should start with the rising of memes from the emergence of cyberculture. When the Internet emerged, cyberspace, a digitalized space built by the connection of computers and cables gradually took shape, allowing real-time communication between remote actors around the globe [5]. According to Bell (2001), although cyberspace has no substantial entity in the physical world, it does exist and mutually coexists with cyberculture [5]. It also pinpointed that, when cyberspace gathered a large number of people, individuals are autonomously divided into various groups attributed to their online behaviors and identities [5]. As communication enforces the awareness of "in-groupness" and "out-groupness", individuals forge their exclusive group languages. As a result, virtual communities arise, which signifies the construction of cyberculture [5]. Since the cultural value of memes stems from people's sense of belonging to a virtual community and their motivation to express and spread their cultural identity, cyberculture becomes a fertile environment for the development of memes.

2.2. Memes are Cyberplaces

While users passively receive messages from cyberspace in web 1.0, social media, such as Twitter, and other interactive online platforms hugely enrich cyberculture in web 2.0. As the prominent feature of these social networking sites, "Interactivity" is combined by cyberspace with "connectivity", such that cyberspace evolves into a "cyberplace", where people from their communities actively participate in constructing and reconstructing cultural artifacts online to showcase their communal identities [3]. Pelletier-Gagnon and Pérez Trujillo Diniz (2021) argued that the cyberplace is not a static symbol like cyberspace, but an interactive and dynamic site that allows participatory reconstruction [3]. Their proposal of cyberspace in a spatial dimension [3] is consistent with Bell's cyberculture in intangible cyberspace [5], as both of them are based on "a sense of community", which also breeds memes. Memes are not fixed, and encourage the participatory development of their cultural meanings [4]. Therefore, memes like Pepe the Frog are typical forms of cyberplace [3], where people refix and infuse cultural values through modifying the original pictures on social media and other online platforms.

2.3. The Rise of Pepe the Frog

The origin and popularity of Pepe the Frog are supported by the development of cyberculture, while the mutation of Pepe is related to the features of cyberplace and the nature of memes. When Pepe the Frog was first created by Matt Furie, he was a free and easy animation character who pees with his pants down to his ankles, and earned people's love by his tag, "feels good man"

[2]. Pepe's casual attitude towards life was an ideal feature for people, so memes on Pepe the frog became a symbol of happiness and personality and swept the Internet on social media. Pepe the frog was a "symbol" at first, because Pepe stood for the author's original intent without meaning reconstruction. However, Pepe's single-layer setting on challenging social norms was hidden trouble for its subsequent development as memes.

Memes' vitality exists in spreading through the Internet, and the essence of its survival depends on memes' worthiness of "copying", ignoring the "fidelity" of its information [3]. In other words, once the current meanings of memes reach saturation on online platforms, memes either turn to dying down or updating new information. There are risks of mutating into destructive meanings that erode the original ones [6]. Pepe the Frog is "repurposed" [3] to be the weapons of the alt-right to "spread their propaganda and support their candidate" [6]. Though Matt Furie attempts to redress the twisted spread of Pepe memes with the hashtag #savepepe on Twitter, Pepe memes have grown into an intensified debate on Pepe's peaceful or hatred sides [6]. The evolvement of Pepe's meanings is irretrievable because of memes' features as a cyberplace.

Memes keep updating as users scroll down the interface, with new posts emerging and substituting what people saw just now. In addition, "intertextuality" [2] speeds up the mutation of Pepe memes when users reconstruct the original posts and comment on new ones below [3]. Cyberplace explains memes' capacity of reconstructing and refixing their cultural values so that Pepe memes can get rid of original contexts and extend into the hatred culture in the US and the Sang culture in China.

3. DE-CONTEXTUALIZED RECONSTRUCTION AND CONTEXTUALIZED INTERPRETATION

3.1. De-Contextualize Pepe the Frog

Besides updates and intertextuality, another feature of Pepe the frog in cyberplace is these memes' obscure implications [3], which allows de-contextualized reconstruction and contextualized interpretation of it. Social media is an environment that encourages participatory culture, where Pepe can be de-contextualized and reconstructed. According to Pelletier-Gagnon and Pérez Trujillo Diniz (2021), in different versions of reconstructed memes of Pepe the frog, what he wears and what he does vary, but his basic facial features remain the same – green skin, big swollen eyes, and thick red lips [3]. Pepe's fixed feature reveals frogness in a human-like portrayal, signifying both humanity and animality [2]. Glitsos and Hall (2019) pointed out that Pepe reminds people of their animality,

tracing back to humans' social hierarchies since the primitive age. Combined with the form of humor and jokes, memes shield hierarchies and attempt to provoke conflicts between different social groups [2]. Basic frogness features of Pepe are de-contextualized in memes, what they imply can be interpreted in multiple understandings. In other words, Pepe's uncertain part of expression decides their reliance on a specific context to understand the exact meanings of related memes.

3.2. Pepe the Frog in the US Context

In the US, Pepe the frog memes are related to the troll-culture, a kind of provocative alt-right expression with humor on social media that aims to cause chaos and challenge established social order [7]. According to Merrin (2019), the hatred culture of Pepe the frog was strongly promoted by 4chan, "an online home" of trolling humor and the major re-producer for political memes and chaos [7]. In the US, memes with a joking tone are a common way for the young generation to state their political stance and seek resonance with their peers on social media [8]. The major young users in 4chan reconstructed Pepe the frog into alt-right memes and ironically expanded pro-Trump social media momentum in the 2016 President Election [7]. The chaos caused by memes disappointed people, so they came to doubt their trust in the participatory public [6], and Pepe the frog intensified the social conflicts and ended up as a culture of hate. Memes have long been politicalized and taken as an expression of trolling-humor in the US, and Pepe the frog fails to survive the political hijack for chaos.

3.3. Pepe the Frog in the Chinese Context

Under the officially encouraging social atmosphere, Pepe the frog's development in China is influenced by the pre-existing Sang culture among the young generation. Before the introduction of Pepe the frog, Sang culture had been popular on social media with memes featured by "lying down", "giving up", and "caring about nothing" [9], such as Geyou Tang. The Chinese government advocates "positive energy", and encourages young people to perform well in academics, be filial at home, and contribute to society, so an individual's personal fulfillment is connected to the promotion of the nation [10]. The heavy hopes and responsibility of young people revolve around the burdens on them, so they turn to social media to unleash their passive emotions and seek empathy from their peers [9] [11]. Young people want to separate themselves from the positive mainstream culture to set up their group identity, so memes around Sang culture become their communal languages on social media [11]. When Pepe the frog entered China, he is renamed as Sad Frog, and labeled with "sadness" to follow the trend of Sang. In the Chinese context, Pepe the frog is adapted

and integrated to be a typical icon of Sang culture, and these widely-used memes receive the large public's resonance.

3.4. The Common Sense of Resistance in China and the US

In both China and the US contexts, Pepe the frog memes resist the mainstream culture and social norms of the public. Pepe memes' purpose like this is related to Pepe's original portrayal, who urinates in an egotistical way. Pepe's behavior reflects a sense of resistance to causing "social disruption" [2]. Glitsos and Hall (2019) proposed that Pepe memes want to "disrupt" the ingrained social regulations, and seek individual liberation [2]. In China, resistance exists in the youth and young adults' losses about their future by doubting individuals' promising futures depicted by the government. They get tired of using their "positive energy" to fight for a better tomorrow, but lie down to avoid the blatant competition in the society [10]. While in the US, more intensive conflicts are provoked around race, gender, sex and social class, and thus evolve into a culture of hate. People use Pepe the frog memes to express their dissatisfaction with the current hierarchies and underlying dark sides in society [2].

4. A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF MEDIA ECOLOGY BETWEEN US AND CHINA

With the same origin, Pepe the Frog is attached to alt-right ideologies and becomes an icon of hate in the US, while his Chinese version, Sad Frog, expresses the emotion of Sang to seek empathy. The above section demonstrates how contexts impact the interpretation and development of Pepe the frog, and narrows the focus to further explore how media ecology influences the connotation of memes in China and the US. Media ecology is proposed by the media theorist Neil Postman, and he considered media as an environment to study how the structure, characteristics, and functions of media influence communication [12]. Employing the viewpoint of Postman, this study would provide a comparison and analysis of American and Chinese media ecology mainly from the perspective of politics, and the economic and cultural factors that are based on politics.

4.1. Gatekeepers, Commercialized Ecology and Public Participation in the US

Compared to China, media in the United States is relatively democratic, open to various political views, and the public actively participates in politics on social media. The United States is a neoliberal capitalized country with multiple parties. In the political aspect, journalism is meant to stay neutral and non-partisan to

earn trust from the public [13]. Therefore, journalism is responsible for being gatekeepers to supervise the government by reporting and evaluating their decisions on mainstream media. Mainstream media's intention to discuss the government's policies and actions can be extended to social media, so there are memes mocking senior officials and spreading across social media. For example, a major turning point for Pepe the frog's politicization was the time when Pepe substituted Trump's face on memes [7].

Besides, economic profits drive the media and journalism in the US and decide what they report. Journalism in the US aims for explicit democracy at the cost of their political position [13], so they could gain much fewer subsidies from the government and parties than Chinese journalism. As a result, most American media (both mainstream media and social media) gain profits from advertisements supported by corporations. In order to satisfy their customers and investors, journalists' reports are targeted at their audience rather than the government, so media platforms are inclined to seek democracy to serve the public [13]. To improve their speculation on audiences' preferences, social media apply curation algorithms to filter content according to the audience's browsing habits [14]. However, as a result of that, sensationalizing content that includes the elements of violence, pornography, and conflicts is more frequently recommended by curation algorithms, and they tend to cause chaos on social media. Chaos makes these memes more heated and debatable. Therefore, violent Pepe the frog and other memes that are highlighted with polarized emotions are spread across the Internet, and become the weapons of the alt-right to constantly create chaos.

Furthermore, memes' politicization also comes from the American public's agenda. American society encourages the public to participate in journalism and express their opinions without regulations and constraints [6]. The young generation in the US likes to use memes to express their political positions and views on social media, because memes have been the communal languages [8], which also leads to the spread and development of politicized memes. However, humor and joking obscure the political intention, inducing the emergence of provocative polarized memes [7]. 4chan is a social media that reconstruct and spread Pepe the frog memes with alt-right ideas, even though its original aim is to provide a platform to express political stances freely.

4.2. Positive Energy, High Expectation and Intense Competition in Chinese Society

Compared with the US, China is a socialist law-based country led by the Communist Party of China (CPC), so they have relatively strict censorship on media and journalism. The principle of Party spirit is a basic system of Chinese journalism, so Chinese journalism must align with the CPC Central Committee and unconditionally observe the CPC constitution (Li, 2021). Because the government, CPC, and journalism are on the same side, journalism in China receive subsidizes from the government to make up for their revenues. Li (2021) also pointed out that journalism in China has a policy of self-censorship, so media platforms are responsible for revealing and criticizing behavior and words that violate laws and social ethics [15]. These regulations and requirements for mainstream media are also applicable to social media. There used to be a series of memes characterized by a frog with glasses on social media around 2016 in China, which has the tendency of politicization. However, these memes were taken down after self-censorship, and Pepe the frog memes today are merely the icon of Sang culture.

From the cultural perspective, Chinese young people's aim in using social media is to express personal emotions [16], rather than political attempts. The social environment is the advocacy of "positive energy" [10], which focuses on individual's growth and achievement and their relationship to the contributions to the society. Memes about Sang culture are mostly used by Chinses young people, who have lost confidence in achieving the "success" promised by the country. The tensive competition leads to huge stress on the young generation both at schools and at the workplace, so they apply Sad Frog memes to release their passive emotions online and seek empathy from their peers. Because of the censorship of media and individual's focus on personal emotions, Pepe the frog and other memes in China could not get politicized and polarized. Instead, memes turn into an implicit form to express their dissatisfaction and doubts with the self and society.

5. CONCLUSION

Postman's concept of media ecology provides the lens for analyzing the development of Pepe the frog and other memes in the context of the US and China. Media in the US are more commercialized, so memes on social media tend to be politicized and polarized to catch the eyes of audiences and serve for them to express their political stance. In China, media are closely connected to the action of the government and under quite strict censorship, so Chinese netizens use memes to release their individual passive emotions, which evolves into the Sang culture today.

However, this study focuses on analyzing the reason that led to the status quo of memes in the US and China, lacking evaluation of the harms in reality caused by memes, such as the politicized Pepe the frog. Memes are regarded as a joking metaphor that obscures users' attitudes [8], but the harms caused by memes can be substantial. To what extent the creators or users of

memes should be responsible remains unconsidered. There should be further research to investigate the negative effects on people or groups who are targeted by memes.

REFERENCES

[1] Su, H. & Jia, R. (2019). Social representation and reflection of Online "loss culture" from the perspective of post-subculture. Modern Communication (Journal of Communication University of China) (05),12-19.

[2] Glitsos, L., & Hall, J. (2019). The pepe the frog meme: An examination of social, political, and cultural implications through the tradition of the Darwinian Absurd. Journal for Cultural Research, 23(4), 381-395. https://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2019.1713443

[3] Pelletier-Gagnon, J., & Pérez Trujillo Diniz, A. (2021). Colonizing pepe: Internet memes as cyberplaces. Space and Culture, 24(1), 4-18. https://doi.org/10.1177/1206331218776188

[4] Denisova, A. (2019). Internet memes and society: Social, cultural, and political contexts. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

[5] Bell, D. (2001). An Introduction to Cybercultures (1st ed.). Routledge.

[6] Anderson, C. W., & Revers, M. (2018). From counter-power to counter-pepe: The vagaries of participatory epistemology in a digital age. Media and Communication (Lisboa), 6(4), 24-25. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v6i4.1492

[7] Merrin, W. (2019). President troll: Trump, 4Chan and memetic warfare. In: Happer C., Hoskins A., Merrin W. (eds), Trump's media war, pp. 201-226, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-94069-4_13.

[8] Penney, J. (2020). 'It's so hard not to be funny in this situation': Memes and humor in U.S. youth online political expression. Television & New Media, 21(8), 791-806. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419886068

[9] Zhou, P. (2017). The Internet buzzword "Ge You Lie" and the "mourning culture" behind it from the perspective of language memetics. Contemporary Educational Practice and Teaching Research (01),264-265. doi:10.16534/j.cnki.cn13-9000/G.2017.0209.

[10] Tan, K. C., & Cheng, S. (2020). Sang subculture in post-reform China. Global Media and China, 5(1), 86-99. https://doi.org/10.1177/2059436420904459

[11] Luan, Y. (2018). The communication mechanism and psychological motive of "demotivation culture". Media Observer (10), 28-33, doi:10.19480/j.cnki.cmgc.2018.10.004.

[12] Media Ecology Association - What Is Media Ecology? (2021). Media Ecology Association. https://www.media-ecology.org/What-Is-Media-Ecology

[13] McChesney, R. W. (2003). The problem of journalism: A political economic contribution to an explanation of the crisis in contemporary US journalism. Journalism Studies (London, England), 4(3), 299-329. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616700306492

[14] Berman, R., & Katona, Z. (2016). The Impact of Curation Algorithms on Social Network Content Quality and Structure. SSRN Electronic Journal. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2848526

[15] Li, L. (2021). Introduction to Journalism. 7th edition, Fudan University Press, Shanghai, China.

[16] Liu, Z. (2013). Social media Dependence and Media Demand: A Case study of college students' microblog dependence. Journalism University (01),119-129.