



# The Resonance of Symbols: Cat Memes as a Communication Practice of Youth Subculture

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**Abstract.** In the recent era when digital media is increasingly integrated into daily life, Internet memes such as cat memes have involved from mere symbols of entertainment into a distinct youth subculture phenomenon. Despite its wide spread, existing research has failed to explain in detail how it, as a distinct culture practice, resonates so profoundly with young people. The discovery that the “Crying Cat” meme is highly favored by the youth. This study will take this as the case to explore how cat memes function as a form of youth subculture dissemination. By combining the theory of memes and subculture studies, it is proposed that the essence of cat memes is a kind of “soft resistance” based on emotional resonance. This study employs text analysis to reveal that contemporary youth through the creation of the “lovable weak” symbol, employ display of vulnerability and self-deprecating humour to form an emotional sanctuary for expressing pressures and constructing identity, facilitated by platform algorithms. The conclusion posits that cat memes represent a significant shift towards emotionally practices within youth subcultures.

**Keywords:** Cat Memes, Youth Subculture, Emotional Resonance, Soft resistance.

## 1 Introduction

With the continuous development of the Internet, a culture phenomenon known as “memes” has become rapidly popular around the world. Internet memes usually refer to pictures, videos, texts or behaviours that are quickly spread, widely imitated and re-created on the Internet. For instance, a humorous emotion, a popular online phrase, or a fascinating dance video may become memes. Among all kinds of memes, cat memes is one of the most representative categories. Its lovely visual effects and high creative freedom make it popular among young people. Once this study delves deeper into cat memes, it cannot help but want to ask: Why do cat memes have such powerful and lasting vitality? What is the social cultural logic behind them? On the surface, the popularity of cat memes may be attributed to cute attributes brought by the cut appearance of cats themselves. However, from the perspective of cultural communication, it will be found that it is difficult to fully explain the deep meaning behind it by relying on the element of cuteness along.

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First of all, the concept of meme was originally proposed by Dawkins, who defined memes as the basic units of cultural transmission, believing that culture spreads, mutates and reproduces like genes [1]. With the rise of social media, the theory of myth has presented new and more specific manifestations. Shifman systematically defined network memes, emphasising that the core of network memes lies in their reproducibility, variability and transmissibility [2]. Cat memes package perfectly embodies these characteristics: a basic cat picture can be matched with different text by countless users, thus creating endless meanings and being used in various social situations. The popularity of cat emoticons is also closely related to the subculture of young people. This is different from the traditional study of subculture. For example, Hebdige proposed modernism characterised by confrontation in modernity, such as modernity and punk in the last century, and this trend emerged in a more moderate way [3]. The popularisation of platform algorithms also plays a crucial role in this process. With the deepening of research, scholars have found that these memes are not just products of online entertainment; they have actually become a unique way for modern people to participate in public discussion and express their attitudes. The reason why they can continue to this day is not only because of the cute characteristics of cats themselves, but also because they accurately capture the emotional needs and lifestyles of contemporary young people.

Although existing studies have explored all aspects of the phenomenon of cat memes, there are still some questions that have not been systematically answered: why can cat memes cross national borders and cultural boundaries, resonate so strongly among young people, and eventually evolve into a subcultural phenomenon called “soft resistance”? In order to answer this question, this study will adopt the dual perspective of communication and cultural research, taking the “Crying Cat” as an example, combined with meme theory and youth subculture research, to reveal how cat memes help teenagers realise emotional resonance and build self-identity in digital space.

## 2 Literature and Theory

As a global Internet symbol, cat memes' study needs to be combined with meme theory and youth subculture theory.

Meme theory provides a basic framework for the study of cat memes. This theory was first proposed by the British evolutionary biologist Dawkins in his publication “The Selfish Gene”. He compared cultural communication to genes and pointed out that it is constantly replicated and spread among people through imitation. Dawkins' research has established three core characteristics of memes: persistence, strong reproductive ability and precise replication, these provide a theoretical basis for understanding the transmission pattern of cat memes [1]. However, Dawkins' theory is too abstract on the Internet. Shifman systematically remodelled the meme theory, enriched and built a framework for it. She proved that memes continue to mutate in the communication process through the three dimensions of content, form and position and keep the core characteristics unchanged. This provides a methodological tool for better analysing the composition of cat memes [2]. Subsequently, the research on meme theory gradually

shifted to its social function. Milner analysed how cat memes have become a tool for public expression and interaction in social culture, pointed out the significance of cat memes is more than simple humour, it deeply reveals their role in constructing social discourse [4].

Among the many meme models, cat memes are one of the most classic categories. Miltner's analysis of the LOLcats community shows that although cat memes look humorous and funny on the surface, there are many complex mechanism behind it [5]. In the process of the development of the Internet, cat memes model has become more and more typical. Simon's research on "meow" cat meme shows that sound and visual elements together constitute the attractiveness of contemporary cat memes, thus further expanding the research on cat memes [6]. Julian took the "Grumpy Cat" as an example to show how cat memes are used to explain complex concepts and attract young learners to participate and highlighting their cross-situational communication ability. This also shows that young people can better understand and process information through cat memes [7].

In terms of subculture, traditional youth subculture studies, such as Herbdig's research. He emphasised youth subcultures resist the symbol system through unique styles and challenge the order and values of mainstream society. This resistance is manifested in a very distinctive way of expression [3]. However, the cultural communication practice of cat memes is completely different from Herbdig's conclusion. It does not form resistance through a strange style, it shows an obviously gentle and restrained trait. Scholar LingLi Zhang pointed out that cat memes have the characteristic of "softness", presenting serious topics through the image of cute cats, thus providing a gentle outlet for emotional expression and conveying dissatisfaction with the current situation [8]. The introduction of this "soft" point of view provides significant help in understanding the subcultural characteristics of cat memes. So, what contributes to this "soft" characteristic? Through the study of the social psychology of cat memes, Jingjing Yan found that its creation and dissemination provided a channel for young people to share experiences and release emotions, forming a collective emotional resonance. Their popularity deeply reflects the emotional needs and social habits of this group [9].

At the same time, through platform promotion, cat memes have successfully become mainstream. Their widespread dissemination lowers the level of creation and encourages ordinary users to actively participate and create. This enriches the diversity of the content of cat memes and promotes the integration of different cultures. Trillò further pointed out the aesthetic and technical characteristics determine users' usage habits, which makes them use cat memes differently on different platforms [10]. The systematic analysis of Lum and Lazovich shows that the platform does not display content passively. On the contrary, it makes some cat memes popular quickly through active screening, sorting, recommending and stimulating certain content, while others gradually disappear [11].

It can be seen from the above content that the existing research has laid the theoretical foundation for the study of cat memes from multiple angles. Meme theory explains its communication mechanism, subculture theory analyses its transformation from "style resistance" to "soft resistance", and the platform algorithm points out the internal and external drivers on which it depends. However, the above research did not deeply

explore how cat memes resonate in cultural interaction through “soft resistance”. This paper will make up for this shortcoming.

### 3 Research Method

This study collected numerous popular cat memes, ultimately selecting the widely circulated “Crying Cat” meme as its case study. The reason for choosing this as the subject of study is that it has been in circulation for a considerable period and, through years of evolution, has become deeply ingrained in various online communication contexts, establishing itself as one of the default choices for many individuals to express their emotions. Moreover, on social media, content featuring the “Crying Cat” meme frequently elicits positive user engagement and emotional resonance. For instance, certain official accounts have received considerable likes and engagement after using this meme. Ultimately, the “Crying Cat” paired with different text yields varied meanings, making it more worthy of study.

This paper employs textual analysis to conduct an in-depth exploration. Text analysis enables a stratified examination of the case, beginning with its outward appearance. Visually, the tear-filled, large eyes and anthropomorphic expression of sorrow immediately convey that this is a cat in the act of weeping. Then analyse how textual anchoring and relaying alter the meaning they convey. Finally, analyse how stylistic collage, by superimposing the “Crying Cat” onto classic films, famous paintings, and other works, manages to downgrade serious symbols, integrating them into contexts saturated with personal emotion.

### 4 Research Result

#### 4.1 Surface Analysis

**Weaken Emotions: Sorrow Is Softened into Lovely Complaints.** The defining characteristic of the “Crying Cat” is its exaggerated expression of sorrow. This look does not occur naturally in cats’ genuine expression but is created through later processing, introducing tear drops and moist eye sockets. Moreover, this visual melancholy does not carry an overly heavy emotional weight; rather, it resembles a mild complaint or an emotional release. The social pressure faced by young people are often difficult to express through direct confrontation, yet the “Crying Cat” with its image of both grievance and cuteness can transform bitter emotions into finding humour in adversity. This aestheticization of sorrow through cuteness is precisely an expression of soft resistance. Beyond the basic feature of recognition, this paper also analyse the “Crying Cat” from a semiotic perspective. As a cultural symbol, it gradually acquires new meanings through users’ continuous replication, collage and re-creation, forming distinctive cultural representation when combined with other elements such as text and background. Its dissemination has gradually settled into a stable presence across online platforms through the pushing effect of platform algorithms, becoming part of youth subculture.

**Blurred and Grainy Visuals Lend a Sense of Realism and Liveliness.** Many “Crying Cat” pictures feature low pixel count, poor lighting or simple composition. This casual style lends the meme a distinctly everyday feel, making it resonate more closely with user’s daily lives. The blurred image quality and exaggerated tears collectively evoke a palpable sense of helplessness, a visual symbolism that more effectively fulfills the need for subtle expression and collective resonance. Meanwhile, blurriness itself serves as a significant symbol within Internet culture, bearing the trace of replication, forwarding, and continuous re-creation. This shows that the origin of the image is not a single one, it’s a collective product formed through multiple flows. This vague feature does not hinder the recognition, but enhances its uniqueness.

## 4.2 Semantic Differences Manifested in Different Scripts

**Self-deprecating humour.** This is the most common usage, typically with “I” as the subject, such as “when I tried hard to study but gained nothing” or “my attempts at exercise ending in failure”. Behind such captions lies young people’s response to pressure, exhaustion and self-imposed demands. This form of expression externalises emotions through self-deprecating humour, transforming negative feelings into mild complaints through the use of endearing imagery. Through the medium of cats, the gravity of serious topics is lightened, transforming emojis into a safe conduit for conveying emotions. This approach both releases emotions and enhances the dissemination of content. This shows one aspect of passive resistance: when reality cannot be altered, allowing emotions to be safely expressed. Furthermore, such captions cater to users’ desire for subtly expressed emotions, making the endearingly self-deprecating persona easily recognizable to all and fostering sustainable dissemination.

**Emotional Expression in Interpersonal Relationships.** When captions involve emotional expression, the “Crying Cat” is often used to convey feelings of longing, loss, or dependence in relationships with others, for instance, “me after my friend canceled our get-together”. Rather than directly expressing anger or disappointment, the user employs the image of a cat to construct an endearing vulnerability. This kind of expression aligns with the interactive characteristics of contemporary youth online socialising: within loose online relationships, directly voicing dissatisfaction may cause social tension, but employing exaggerated yet endearing imagery allows one to avoid excessive exposure of genuine emotions, thereby maintaining a relaxed social atmosphere. The psychological mechanism underlying this mode of social interaction lies in young people’s management of emotional expression. They seek to convey grievances without appearing overly emotional, thereby developing a form of soft expression. The tearful emoji serves not merely as a simple entertainment symbol, but also embodies young people’s careful handling of emotions on social media.

**Group Expression: Reflects the Collective Sentiment of the Entire Group.** In certain contexts, such as “students’ state during exam week” or “workers facing pressure from their bosses,” the “Crying Cat” has evolved from a personal emotion symbol into a collective emotional emblem. When emotions pertain to a group, users are no longer expressing individual sentiments but rather constructing a widely relatable collective predicament. In this context, the “Crying Cat” serves as a vessel for collective

sentiment, channeling public discontent over high rents, workplace competition and the burdens of daily life, while offering users a humorous means of confronting advertise. It is significant that the platform's algorithmic mechanisms foster emotional resonance and engagement, enabling the "Crying Cat" meme to be continuously replicated, imitated and disseminated, thereby generating an enduring cultural cycle. This demonstrates that the "Crying Cat" phenomenon did not gain popularity by accident, but rather emerged through users' own deliberate choices and promotion. In this sense, the "Crying Cat" is no longer merely an ordinary meme, but a cultural symbol of identity that carries the emotions of young people and serves as an outlet for stress.

### 4.3 As Depicted in Film and Television Productions

In film and television works, the expression method of the "Crying Cat" is not simply replacing the expression with the character's face. Its cultural function varies from different types of works. For example, in comedies, the "Crying Cat" effect is usually combined with exaggerated performance style and dramatic sound effects. By suddenly superimposing the picture, a kind of visual incoordination is created, triggering a humorous effect. Its appearance often enhances the response of the characters in the program, creating a relaxed and pleasant program effect through exaggerated actions and exaggerated expressions. As an example, when the actor shows embarrassment, failure or surprise, a sudden crying cat can instantly magnify the original slight emotion into absurd humour, allowing the audience to release emotions in the shortest time. The function of the "Crying Cat" is different in the narrative of youth themes or social pressure. It is usually used to express the character's helplessness and breakdown in the face of setbacks, turning great pressure into a self-deprecating emotion. It allows the audience to recognise their situation in a relaxed atmosphere, makes it easier to bear negative emotions, forms a unique sense of self-deprecating identity in the current youth culture.

In addition, the appearance of the "Crying Cat" changed the original emotional direction, disassembling the originally serious or heavy emotions into a mixed experience of laughter and tragedy. This allows the audience to feel the helplessness of the character and get emotional comfort from this slight contrast. The "Crying Cat" also has the function of relaxing and entertaining negative emotions such as pain and anxiety, which makes the audience to perceive the character's helplessness while also finding emotional relief in the subtle contrast. This makes scenes that could have made the audience feel uncomfortable or too heavy more acceptable. This superposition method is highly consistent with the use logic of short video culture and Internet memes. At the same time, it is important to focus on whether this kind of film presentation will make the audience gradually get used to treating serious topics in a relaxed way, thereby reducing the urgency of the problem itself.

## 5 Conclusion

In summary, it can be found that the spread of cat memes as a subcultural symbol is essentially a “soft resistance” based on emotional resonance. Young people use a series of symbols on the online platform to release their emotions. This practice provides a safe channel for personal emotions to express and resonate with more people. This “soft resistance” marks the change of the adolescent subculture from an open resistance model to a more hidden resistance model, providing an important way to understand the thinking and mental state of teenagers. This study has achieved some results in “soft resistance” in the subculture of teenagers, but there are still many limitations. First of all, the research materials mainly come from China's network environment, which is not enough to show the differences between different cultures. Secondly, the text analysis method is subjective and lacks data comparison of real user behaviour. Finally, the impact of this study on the platform algorithm is limited, it fails to fully explain how this mechanism promotes the spread of cat memes. Future research can carry out cross-cultural comparisons, and combine data analysis such as interviews or questionnaires to verify the actual feelings of teenagers using cat memes. At the same time, the impact of platform algorithm recommendation on cat memes should be studied more deeply, so as to build a more complete research framework for youth subculture communication practice.

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