



The Linguistic Architecture and Value Sublimation of “Shushu Wo A” (I, the Little Rat) in Chinese Youth Discourses

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Abstract. This research takes the emerging internet buzzword “Shushu wo a” (I, the little rat) as the research object. Adopting online observation and case analysis, the study explores the buzzword’s linguistic and paralinguistic features including semi-objectified personal structure, reduplicative morphemes and matching memes, and analyzes its unique narrative strategies adopted in different contexts. The findings reveal that beneath the buzzword’s self-deprecating expression lies concealed self-esteem and longing for a better life. During online communication, it undergoes semantic shifts, breaking from subcultural circles into mainstream discourse and realizing value reconstruction from individual sorrowful narration to grand national narratives. This paper aligns with scholarly attention to the positive shift and complex mental narratives of internet buzzwords in the Chinese digital context. It transcends simplistic interpretations of youth self-deprecation in existing research, offers novel insights into empirical evidence and discourse analytical perspectives for understanding the positive transformation of contemporary youth’s social mentality, and enriches research findings on online discourse and digital culture.

Keywords: “Shushu Wo A” (I, the little rat), Internet Buzzwords, Youth Subculture, Social Mentality.

1 Introduction

In the context of digital communication, internet buzzwords have become a vital form of daily expression among young people, as well as an important indicator reflecting contemporary youth values and social mentalities. In recent years, the self-referential expression of “shushu” (rat) has spread widely across social media. Originating on *Baidu Tieba* in 2022, the phrase “Shushu wo a” (I, the little rat) quickly proliferated to mainstream social platforms such as *Weibo* and *Douyin* [1]. Young people actively degrade themselves to the status of rats living in sewers, using self-deprecation and humor to vent their emotions and construct a marginalized identity within the context of real-world society. By voluntarily portraying themselves as rats living in the gutter, young people achieve emotional catharsis through self-deprecation and humor, constructing a

marginalized identity within the real social context. What appears to be self-abasement and devaluation of individual worth is in fact a distinctive mode of expression for young people to buffer real-life pressures and alleviate negative emotions. Selecting this typical subcultural discourse as the research object enables a close examination of the actual living conditions and expressive habits of contemporary youth, carrying significant research value and practical implications.

Existing studies on internet buzzwords tend to adopt a critical perspective and remain confined to a negative narrative framework for a long time, paying insufficient attention to the positive dimensions embedded in youth self-deprecating discourse (see discussion in literature review). Meanwhile, research on emerging subcultural buzzwords over the past three years remains relatively scarce, lacking in-depth textual analysis. Addressing this research gap, this paper takes “Shushu wo a” as the core research object, systematically analyzes its discursive features and narrative strategies. Moving beyond simplistic negative interpretations, it elucidates the living conditions, psychological needs, and mental outlook of the younger generation. The unique contributions of this study lie in two aspects. In terms of research content, it conducts a systematic discourse analysis of the recently emerged buzzword “Shushu wo a”, filling the research gap regarding new youth popular discourses; in terms of theoretical and practical value, it identifies and explains the value sublimation path through which this discourse has broken out from niche subculture to enter the mainstream, providing new analytical perspectives and case references for fields such as online discourse dissemination and youth psychology research.

2 Literature Review

In the digital media context, internet buzzwords serve as a key vehicle for youth emotional expression. Their linguistic innovations and cultural implications have attracted widespread scholarly attention, with existing research exploring their linguistic features, communication mechanisms, and social functions to illuminate youth culture, social mentality, and contemporary trends.

Over the past five years, scholars have extensively studied internet buzzwords, which mirror the diverse, complex and contradictory social mentality of contemporary Chinese youth. Guo & Duan (2023) pointed out that internet buzzwords exhibit a shift “from political ridicule to self-deprecation”, revealing complex and contradictory social attitudes such as “anxiety and optimism” and “lying flat and enterprising” [2]. Meanwhile, Qin & Dai (2022) examined the evolution of social mentality reflected in terms such as “involution”, “Buddhist-style”, and “lying flat”, and highlighted the dilemmas in cultivating young people’s proactive striving spirit [3]. In addition, Sun (2025) attributed the prevalence of the lying-flat mentality to rigid social stratification and insufficient upward mobility [4]. However, most of these studies concentrate on youth’s passive escapism, while overlooking the subtle expressive mechanism of self-esteem hidden in self-deprecation.

While conducting research on youth negative psychology, the academic community has begun to focus on self-help discourse among young people. Zheng (2024) identified

the “dopamine XX” trend as reflecting youth’s active pursuit of well-being, revealing a semantic shift of internet buzzwords from negative resistance to positive construction [5]. Laksanapecti et al. (2023) argued that internet buzzwords serve as a discursive strategy for young people to pursue free expression in contemporary society [6]. Li et al. (2023) demonstrated that hedged self-deprecation reduces discursive intensity and eases negative emotional effects [7].

Overall, academic research has long focused on negative youth buzzwords such as “involution” and “lying flat”, emphasizing the passive resistance among young people. In recent years, however, academic attention has gradually shifted to expressions of positive orientation and discourses of complex mentality. The research object of this study, “Shushu wo a”, precisely conforms to this trend, capturing youth’s gradual psychological transition from negativity to positivity. In addition, existing studies have mostly concentrated on discursive phenomena between 2020 and 2022, with limited discussion of newer buzzwords. In terms of group specificity, research specifically targeting college students and new employees remains limited. This study analyzes the linguistic features and narrative strategies of “Shushu wo a”, extending prior research and offering new empirical evidence and analytical approaches to understand contemporary youth’s positive mental shift.

3 Methodology

The paper employs the case study approach, taking the online buzzwords and genre “Shushu wo a” as the research object, and explores its linguistic features and narrative strategies through content analysis and textual interpretation. The data used in this study are mainly collected from mainstream social media platforms such as *Weibo* and *Douyin*. Using “Shushu wo a” and “Shushu wen xue” (Shushu literature) as search keywords, the researcher conducted a three-month online observation. First, posts and short videos with over 50 likes were sorted; then, content that clearly reflected the core characteristics of this discourse was selected as the analytical sample, including the textual discourse, memes, and narrative scripts of the relevant videos and texts.

In the specific analysis, the study unfolds primarily along two dimensions. First, starting from micro linguistic and paralinguistic features, it interprets the sentence structure, mood, vocabulary use, and visual symbols of matching memes of “Shushu wo a”, so as to reveal the group psychology and emotional demands behind the texts and images. Second, from the macro perspective of narrative strategies, it analyzes the narrative mode, self-deprecating logic, and emotional expression mechanism of “Shushu wo a”, investigates what kind of social values are being indexed by this popular expression, and further reveals its cultural connotations and social significance.

4 Linguistic and Paralinguistic Features

From the perspective of syntax, “Shushu wo a” (Shushu means “rat” and “wo” means “I”) is composed of two seemingly contradictory personal references: “rat” as a self-reference and “I” as a personal pronoun. The speaker uses the third-person term

“shushu” to refer to themselves, positioning themselves as an object to be observed, sympathized with, or teased, while “wo” points to the speaker’s true self. The combination of the two creates a semi-objectified mode of expression in which “wo” witnesses, perceives, and narrates the experiences of “shushu” without directly bearing the pain, allowing the real self to remain somewhat detached. This approach aligns closely with the psychological state of contemporary youth. In times of difficulty, taking on the identity of “shushu” to bear failure and helplessness allows the real “wo” to form a layer of psychological protection, preventing themselves from being directly crushed by negative emotions; in moments of joy, “wo” views and celebrates themselves from an outsider’s perspective, shedding any trace of deliberate showiness while endowing the expression with a lively and endearing quality; in everyday situations, “shushu” serves the function of sharing and recording daily life, while “wo” examines themselves semi-objectively from a third-party perspective, acting as my own chronicler. Take a *Weibo* post documenting daily life as an example in the following Figure 1. If “Shushu wo a” was replaced with simply “I”, the tone of the entire post would become direct and stiff, losing the sense of relaxation and languor that the original conveys.

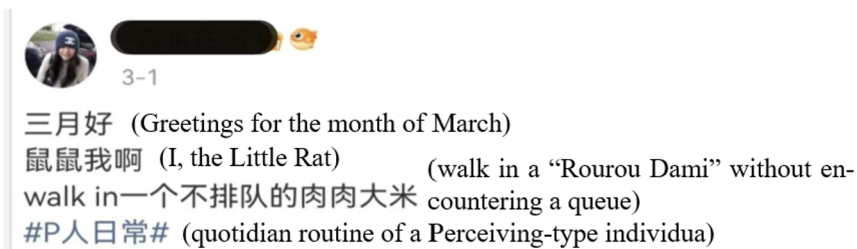


Fig. 1. Sample *Weibo* post illustrating the use of “Shushu wo a” in daily life documentation.

In the discursive construction of “Shushu wen xue”, written language and memes form a complementary expressive system, jointly fulfilling a unique function in recording experiences and conveying emotions. When the morpheme “shu” (rat) is reduplicated to form “shushu”, it not only alters the word’s meaning but also adds specific emotional coloring. Similar reduplicated words such as “tutu” (bunny) and “maomao” (kitty) generally convey a sense of cuteness. Yet “shushu” carries not only cuteness but also an extra layer of pathos and vulnerability that evokes sympathy. Meanwhile, in most comments, netizens often add soft, cute modal particles such as “nie”, “la”, “na”, “ei” after constructions like “Shushu wo a”. For example, one popular comment on *Douyin* with 14,000 likes reads: “I, the little rat, got into a top-tier university from a very poor area and went to a big city, but it just wasn’t what I expected, ‘ei’?” This structural approach further softens the statement’s aggressiveness and formality, while amplifying a tone of coquettishness, self-deprecation, and vulnerability. This cute treatment sets the tone for subsequent emotional expressions.

As a crucial part of textual paralanguage, meme is the typical pictograph presented in color and embedded in the text and has become a key marketing tool widely used on social media [8]. For netizens posting content related to “Shushu wen xue”, this practice is also common. They usually accompany their posts with memes of “Dashu” (Big rat)

or hamsters, expressing their emotions through the integration of text and images. The “Dashu” meme was created by the artist Shatang Xianbei in June 2023. The character is depicted as a gray rat who has been working for many years. With a personality that swings between rebelliousness and melancholy, the character exudes a low-energy vibe. Its signature thick dark circles under the eyes and large buckteeth perfectly capture the weary yet tongue-in-cheek state of the working stiff. In the meme series, “Dashu” often appears in highly contrasting postures, conveying the core emotion of finding joy in hardship. It grins brightly with a rope around its neck, looking as carefree as if swinging on a swing; it uses its natural enemy, the sticky mouse board, as a quilt, with an exceptionally serene attitude; sitting in front of a computer, it seems to hold a cup of coffee, but is actually holding rat poison, sighing “Ah... that really soothes the rat’s soul”, comfortably resting its feet on the desk with a finished takeout box beside it; or it stands motionless with dark, purplish circles under their eyes from staying up late, wearing an employee ID badge and holding rat poison, fully embodying burnout and numbness. Additionally, there is another category of rat-themed memes that employ homophonic puns. For instance, a picture of a hamster raising its paws and making a peace sign is captioned “Shǔshǔ wǒ a, xǐ dào lín tóu nié” (I, the little rat, washed to drench the head!). Here, in a Chinese phonetic pun, “xǐ” (wash) sounds identical to “sǐ” (die), and “lín tóu” (drench the head) echoes “lín tóu” (imminent) in Mandarin pronunciation. The extremely anxious phrase “my death is imminent” is thus softened into a playful, coquettish self-deprecating joke within the context of internet buzzwords. Another example is “qì shǔ suàn le” (just anger the rat and forget it). The character “shǔ” (rat) replaces “sǐ” (die), turning the aggressive phrase “I’m so angry I could die” into something milder. Where the original conveys bitter frustration over powerlessness, the “rat” version shifts the tone from “I am truly furious” to “I’m annoyed, but whatever”. Negative emotions are weakened, and the expression takes on a playful, self-soothing quality instead. The aforementioned memes are shown in Figure 2 below.



Fig. 2. A collage of “Dashu” and hamster memes illustrating dark humor and homophonic puns in “Shushu wen xue”.

These memes, infused with dark humor, transform negative emotions such as workplace burnout and life anxieties into visual symbols that can be poked fun at and shared. The exhaustion that was once hard to put into words and the helplessness felt in the face of pressure are embodied in the image of Dashu “finding joy in adversity”, manifesting as a rope that doubles as a swing, rat poison that serves as coffee, and a glue trap that functions as a blanket; in phonetic pun memes, anxiety and anger are softened into cute, coquettish self-mockery. To a certain extent, this transformation alleviates the heaviness and sorrow that users experience in real life. When viewers see a rat wearing an employee ID badge with dark circles, and staring blankly while clutching rat poison, they feel not merely sympathy, but strong resonance and relief. Upon seeing phrases like “I’m washed right to the head” and “just anger the rat and forget it”, such anxiety and anger are gently diluted in a knowing laugh.

It is worth noting that while young people use the phrase “Shushu wo a” to poke fun at themselves, creating a pessimistic narrative style, this is also a way to regulate their emotions. Though it appears to be self-deprecating, it actually implies a sense of self-respect. They are willing to be honest about their grievances, pressures and frustrations, rather than sinking completely into numbness and indifference. Meanwhile, as can be seen from the previous analysis of meme usage, images of real grimy sewer rats are almost entirely absent. This indicates that while young people engage in self-diminishment, they still maintain a pursuit of aesthetics and cuteness. Self-deprecation conceals self-respect, and humor serves as a means of defusing despair. In addition, young people call themselves “Shushu” because they observe that rats can survive even in extremely harsh environments. This reflects their admiration for the creature’s strong vitality, and also expresses their wish to strive and live well in this high-pressure society despite struggles. Through the self-title “Shushu” and related memes, young people quickly build a virtual space for empathy. In this space, the “Shushus” gather for comfort, gain group recognition and a sense of belonging, and thus compensate for the emotional deficit in real life.

5 Narrative Strategies

The semi-objectified linguistic structure provides a safe emotional outlet for young people. When they encounter setbacks and difficulties in reality, users can vent their emotions and express troubles through the objectified image of the little rat. This allows them to release their feelings while avoiding direct confrontation with negative experiences. Thus, “Shushu wo a” has gradually developed into a mature narrative strategy, becoming a discursive framework for young people to describe their living conditions, convey inner emotions, and seek group resonance.

The most typical and original narrative scenario of “Shushu wo a” is that the narrator projects anxiety onto the little rat character and humorously recounts their own miserable and embarrassing experiences online. In such contexts, the little rat is often frustrated in real life, facing difficulties such as failed job hunting, career setbacks, romantic disappointments, and financial hardship, hoping to release emotions through this self-deprecating expression. On the *Douyin* short-video platform, the hashtag “#Shushu

wo a” has garnered 1.513 billion views. Most videos combine hamster images with text to tell stories. Take a popular *Douyin* video with 52,000 likes as an example (Figure 3, left), the creator remarked in a self-deprecating tone: “I, the little rat, once had great ambitions. But four years of university have worn away so much. Now I’m always struggling painfully between striving and giving up tho (in Chinese: “nie”). I’ve always wanted to see the outside world, to study abroad—thinking that’s what real life is. But in the end, I, the little rat, still have to go back to the sewer tho (in Chinese: “nie”).”

In this narrative, the video creator adopts the voice of “little rat” to describe how ideals gradually fade under the grind of reality. By repeatedly using the modal particle “nie”, the tone of sorrow is softened; by projecting pain onto the little rat, the sadness caused by the rift between reality and ideals is alleviated. Meanwhile, the use of a meme depicting a crying hamster as the main visual further lightens the emotional weight, evoking empathy and pity from the viewer. A sharp contrast is drawn between “great ambitions” and “returning to the sewer”: the former represents once bright hopes for the future, while the latter reflects sober resignation toward one’s real situation. Self-mockery creates a humorous effect of expressing sorrow through banter. Yet the creator’s state of “struggling painfully between striving and giving up” reveals that they have not completely abandoned themselves. Their unwillingness to accept reality and their tenacity in holding onto their ideals are precisely the tenacious struggle of self-respect under the heavy pressure of reality.



Fig. 3. Hamster memes in *Douyin* videos illustrating youthful disillusionment (left) and persistent struggle (right).

These narrative features are also typically reflected in another similar text. On the *Douyin* platform, in a short video that has garnered 155,000 likes (Figure 3, right), the creator laments: “I, the little rat, have taken the wrong path every year. Life seems to tease me. I think it’s a new, beautiful beginning, but it turns out to be another bottomless abyss tho (in Chinese: “nie”). Maybe there will never be a happy future exclusively for me tho (in Chinese: “nie”), the little rat”.

The creator still uses the little rat as a narrative vehicle to reveal the mental predicament of repeated setbacks in life choices and a gradual loss of confidence in the future. The modal particle “nie” that repeatedly appears at the end of sentences softens the bleakness of their real-life experiences with a cute and gentle tone, thereby alleviating the intense sense of disappointment in their expression. Paired with a meme showing a

hamster lying on a book and sighing, accompanied by the caption “I’m tired,” this visual not only dilutes the emotional intensity of the text but also evokes the viewer’s sympathy through the image of the little rat as a vulnerable figure. Furthermore, the little rat in this narrative is by no means completely sinking or giving up. Even though life teases it time and again and pushes it into the abyss repeatedly, it still keeps striving for a new start, holding an undying longing for an ideal life.

It is not difficult to see that, in both of the above narratives, the core message retains an underlying tone of optimism that has not faded. Contemporary Chinese society is currently at a critical stage of rapid transformation, with a growing trend toward the solidification of social mobility. For young people in particular, it has become increasingly difficult to move up the social ladder through individual effort. After long-term struggle, they are more acutely aware of the constraints of reality and the limitations of individual power. Even so, their idealism has not been completely eroded by reality. They still hold sincere expectations for life and simple yearnings for the future. The narratives presented in the “Shushu wo a” series of videos are a true microcosm of this social mentality. This attitude of refusing to sink in frustration and still aspiring in adversity is precisely the most touching spiritual characteristic of Chinese society in a period of transformation. What it reveals is not merely individual emotional catharsis, but the persistent pursuit of dignity, happiness, and a better life among ordinary young people even under real pressure and structural constraints.

This form of youth expression, rooted in reality and imbued with resilience, has not remained merely a means of emotional venting. Over time, the contexts of the phrase “Shushu wo a” have expanded and its emotional tone has grown increasingly positive. This process of semantic and contextual expansion has enabled the phrase to gradually break out of its original niche youth subculture, giving rise to a highly representative phenomenon of “cultural crossover”. As its social recognition has grown, this grassroots online expression has gradually entered the mainstream discourse, garnering attention and adoption by national media, which have endowed it with new value and significance in terms of dissemination.

On October 30, 2025, a *Weibo* post published by People’s Daily Online with the hashtag “#I, the little rat, am going to space” surged to the top of the trending list. In the video, four lab mice underwent rigorous training and finally traveled to space with astronauts. Although the phrase “Shushu wo a” here no longer refers to young people themselves but to real experimental mice, it carries a profound metaphorical meaning. Mice are typically ordinary, inconspicuous, and often regarded as weak creatures, which corresponds to the humble, self-deprecating identity of young people who call themselves “Shushu”. The expression “I, the little rat, am going to space” symbolizes that even small individuals can embrace a magnificent stage of life. The “I” that was once seen as weak has been entrusted with a noble mission, shouldering the significant responsibilities of the era and the nation.

This phenomenon of official media borrowing youth slang profoundly illustrates the two-way interaction inherent in the mechanism of “cultural crossover”. Mainstream media take the initiative to adapt to youth linguistic habits by adopting the expression “Shushu wo a” familiar to young people, breaking the stereotypical impression of mainstream discourse, effectively narrowing the gap with the youth demographic, and

achieving efficient communication of values and ideals. At the same time, youth sub-cultural discourse, relying on the authoritative dissemination platform of mainstream media, has successfully broken through its niche limitations and gained wider social recognition and value affirmation. Originally used for self-mockery and venting about one's disadvantaged circumstances, “Shushu wo a”, through mainstream media's creative appropriation and reinterpretation, has undergone a value elevation from an individual's tragic narrative to a grand national narrative. It deeply links young people's identity as “ordinary individuals” with national development and the mission of the times. Ultimately, this has achieved an organic integration of youth self-identity and patriotism, fostering a positive interaction and symbiotic development between subculture and mainstream culture.

6 Conclusion & Discussion

This study examines the internet buzzword “Shushu wo a”, focusing on analysis from two perspectives: linguistic and paralinguistic features, and narrative strategies. The findings reveal that the expression utilizes semi-objectification structures, reduplication, modal particles, and emoji combinations to cushion emotional impact and soften tone, thus realizing a semantic shift from passive resistance to active construction. It also forms an overall expressive trajectory that begins with self-mockery, takes resilience as its core, and ultimately achieves value sublimation, gradually breaking out from niche subcultural discourse to enter the mainstream.

The empirical implication of this study is primarily reflected in two aspects. In terms of academic trend, it aligns with the shift in the academic trend of buzzwords research on Chinese social media from a pessimistic to a positive narrative, providing new empirical evidence and discourse-analytic pathways for this transition. As a viral online expression that emerged around 2023 and has remained popular until today (2026), “Shushu wo a” is mainly used by college students and emerging adults, demonstrating a strong demographic specificity. This fills a gap in academic research on emerging buzzwords on the Chinese internet in recent years. Regarding social psychology, this study reveals the psychosocial transformation of contemporary Chinese youth, who express resilience and persistence through self-deprecating language, and demonstrates how such discourse is absorbed and reshaped by mainstream culture. These findings carry deeper implications for understanding the evolving spiritual outlook and cultural identity of young people today. At the methodological level, this study also confirms that the combination of case study and online observation can capture the expressive characteristics and narrative logic of online discourse with considerable precision, proving to be a practical and effective approach for exploring how online buzzwords index social psychology and value systems.

In addition, the study has certain limitations. Constrained by time and paper's length, the study only selects seven samples for focused analysis (including memes, short video texts, and mainstream media reports), resulting in a limited sample size. Nevertheless, this study centers on in-depth analysis and interpretation. It not only proceeds from micro linguistic features but also provides multi-dimensional explanations at the macro

narrative strategy level. Given the objective constraints of the paper's length, it is difficult to cover more materials, which accordingly limits the sample size. Within the current Chinese internet context, besides “Shushu wo a”, numerous other internet buzzwords reflecting positive youth psychology have emerged, collectively signifying the psychosocial transformation of contemporary Chinese youth from anxiety and pessimism toward self-respect and self-love. Future research may further expand the corpus scale and conduct comparative analyses using multi-platform data, so as to continuously deepen the understanding of such popular youth discourses.

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