

Abstract

The exploration about the textual internet meme: a case study of KFC Crazy Thursday textual meme marketing activity in mainland China

In the digital era, the way people communicate has been greatly changed by information and communication technologies, such as social media. Internet memes spread virally among the public through social media platforms and utilized by contemporary people to communicate in the virtual world. Marketers or managers notice the impacts of internet memes and regard them as an effective tool to promote consumer engagement, which leads the development of meme marketing. Scholars also notice the impacts of the communication functions of internet memes. Thereby, relative studies about meme marketing are conducted and developed. However, existing studies predominantly concentrate on internet memes that possess pronounced visual elements, such as images or videos. This suggests a scarcity of comprehensive theoretical frameworks and case studies that delve into the characteristics and functions of textual internet memes as well as well as the motivations driving consumers to engage in textual internet meme marketing. Therefore, this research aims to enrich the gaps of textual memes in the field of meme marketing and brand communication within the case of KFC's textual meme marketing. In this case study, the characteristics, potential functions and hidden meanings of textual internet memes, and motivations of consumer engagement are explored. According to qualitative content analysis, four general features (i.e., amusement value, relevance, high iconicity and social interaction attribute) and three motivations of consumer engagement are identified (i.e., hedonistic need, cognition need and social interaction need).

Keyword: meme marketing, internet memes, customer engagement, social media marketing, brand communication

Words: 18,064

Table of contents

Abstract	1
Table of contents.....	2
Chapter 1 Introduction	4
1.1 Contextual background.....	7
1.2 Research gap and research problem	9
Chapter 2 Literature review.....	10
2.1 Social media and participatory strategic communication in marketing	10
2.2 Consumer engagement	12
2.2.1 Consumer engagement and social media	12
2.2.2 Consumer engagement under the Chinese context.....	14
2.3 Meme marketing.....	15
2.3.1 Overview of meme evolution.....	16
2.3.2 Definition and conceptualization of meme marketing	17
2.3.3 The factors and conditions of creating and spreading viral memes in marketing	19
Chapter 3 Theoretical framework	20
3.1 Content-related factors of viral memes	20
3.2 Theory of Semiotics	20
3.3 Uses and gratifications theory	23
Chapter 4 Methodology and research design	25
4.1 Research paradigm: social constructivism	25
4.2 Research design	25
4.3. Sample selection and data collection.....	26
4.3.1 The First Part: selection of marketing materials.....	26
4.3.2 The Second Part: the focus group discussion	27
4.4 Analysis procedures	29
4.5. Translations	30
4.6. Reflection	30
Chapter 5 Findings and analysis.....	32
5.1 Characteristics of KFC textual memes	32
5.1.1 Concise and similar content structure	32
5.1.2 Attractive openings in various genres	33
5.1.3 Unexpected reversal as ending.....	35
5.1.4 Integrating trending topics	37
5.1.5 Intertextuality	39
5.1.6 First-person perspective: “I” as the subject.....	41
5.1.7 Social interaction attributes.....	42

5.1.8 Humor with incongruity	43
5.1.9 Synthesis	44
5.2 The process of KFC Thursday becoming memes.....	45
5.2.1 Analysis through triadic model	46
5.2.2 Synthesis	48
5.3 The engagement motivation evoked by viral KFC memes	49
5.3.1 The hedonistic space of escaping from reality	49
5.3.2 A way to acquire Cognition	51
5.3.3 Social interaction currency.....	52
Chapter 6 Conclusion and discussion	53
6.1 The characteristics and influences of textual meme content	53
6.2 The motivations of Chinese consumers engaging meme marketing campaign	54
6.3 Contributions	54
6.4 Limitation and future research.....	55
Reference	57
Appendix 1	67
Appendix 2	69
Appendix 3	70

Chapter 1 Introduction

In the increased use and spread of information and communication technologies (ICT), the means by which people communicate, contact and acquire information of present worlds events have undergone dramatic changes, showing the development of digitalization (Badham et al., 2022). The Internet with participatory features, social media based on Internet and various other virtual communication technologies have raised and permeated in each aspect of people's daily lives, creating online spaces to enable dialogues and interactions (Sohaib et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2022; Badham et al., 2022). It is worth noting that social media provides the new way of communication that allows users to retrieve information based on their interests, rather than unilaterally accepting and consuming information pushed from traditional media (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014). Social media also gives users the freedom to create their own stories and conduct social interactions with others around these users' generated content through comments and reviews (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014). In other words, influenced by the digital media, the distinction between the roles of senders and receivers becomes less clearly defined. Users can be both recipients of information and creators and distributors of online content so that the users or even the public can co-participate in the communication and co-create the content. Hence one can see that the popularity and use of ICT and digital media such as social media, have led to a new co-presence of unidirectional as well as two-directional communication, which has also promoted the emergence of participatory culture (Falkheimer, & Heide, 2014).

According to Henry Jenkins, the participatory culture brought about by the rise and development of social media takes speech freedom as the characteristic, promoting the creation and dissemination of content by the public, thereby establishing connections among people around the world (as cited in Falkheimer & Heide, 2014). Driven by this participatory culture, various internet memes (i.e., emoticons) are also virally utilized by the public to establish connections and relationships with others on online platforms (Razzaq et al., 2023). It is also indicated by the evidence that internet memes, especially those with humorous properties, are considered as an important way of communication and interaction for current social media users, particularly social media users of Generation Z (Vardeman, 2022). Shifman (2014) also gave the definition of internet memes as:

(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users (p. 41).

Grundlingh (2018) argued that internet memes as a new type of social media language discourse, convey a variety of speech acts and help people to carry out different types of communication behaviors, such as providing information, calling for action and even expressing emotions through digital platforms.

In addition to being used by the public for daily communication in online media, online memes are also used by brand managers to affect the communication in the marketing field. One undeniable reality is that digital technology, particularly the rise of social media, has led to and facilitated a transformative shift in the roles and behaviors of consumers or users regarding the acquisition and dissemination of information. This transformation also exerts its influence on the realm of marketing, rendering online marketing an indispensable marketing and communicating arena that marketing practitioners cannot overlook. On the one hand, the role of consumers in branding communication has changed from a passive marketing information receiver to an active participant in the interaction and value-creation process (Weitzl & Einwiller, 2018). On the other hand, people receive massive amounts of information and advertisements from various online platforms every day, leading to a phenomenon that consumers may have become accustomed to receiving so much information every day and unconsciously ignore the processing of this information (Ghorbani, 2013). Thereby, consumers' opportunities to consciously process information are limited, resulting in a decrease in the amount of information that can be absorbed by consumers, while brands with negative characteristics will be more quickly rejected by consumers (Hoyer et al., 2014). This has led to a decline in the marketing effectiveness of traditional advertising methods. In addition, according to Ghorbani (2013), the market is now flooded with overlapping product offerings, line extensions, and new market entries, which results in brand saturation. In order to cope with the rapidly changing business environment, brands urgently need to transform their marketing methods to meet the needs of the digital era.

Therefore, this change of relationships between brands and consumers and transformation of consumers' role and the reality that traditional marketing methods have become less effective (Erragcha & Romdhane, 1970). Following this context, consumer engagement is regarded as one prominent concept and an alternative plan explaining and predicting today's consumer behaviors

by scholars and practitioners. Furthermore, considering the huge user base owned by social media platforms and their enormous potential for the aspect of attracting a larger consumer base, and the reality that the Internet has formed an online participatory culture, quite a few corporations and brands have realized that the core of brand sustainability and longevity is dependent on brand engagement and connecting with consumers (McKay et al., 2014). Thus, consumers with participatory desire are also seen as a significant value creator and driving force of product innovation for corporations and brands. Accordingly, the influence of consumer engagement has also been found to act on the aspect of the consequences of relations between brand and consumers, such as brand trust and brand attachment (Brodie et al., 2013). In brief, internet memes as a marketing strategy or means, an increasing number of brands are applying it to the promotion of their own brand products or services so as to form meme marketing.

Meme marketing is a new method of marketing in recent years and its positive effects of internet memes on brand recall and brand engagement has been demonstrated (Malodia et al., 2022). Although research on meme marketing has been conducted in recent years, these studies focus on internet memes with strong visual effects, such as picture and video memes. The relevant studies of internet memes in the form of text are limited. That is, the significance of memes of text types may be underestimated or overlooked. Additionally, the availability of case studies on meme marketing is also scarce. Therefore, this thesis selects KFC's successful use of textual internet memes for meme marketing as a study case, aiming to fill the gap regarding textual internet memes in the field of meme marketing.

In addition, this paper aims to enrich the branding communication field of strategic communication. According to Zerfass et al. (2018), strategic communication introducing multi-field communications (i.e., management, marketing and public relations) is purposefully used by organization “to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals” (p.493). Considering the development and relative impacts of digital technologies currently, strategic communication scholars also pay attention to social media and the participatory culture. In the branch of brand communication, consumer engagement is an important research topic. And meme marketing, as an emerging marketing method in recent years, has not yet been included in the branding communication within the field of strategic communication. Therefore, this article can provide a new approach to promoting the relationship between consumers and brands in the field of strategic communication.

1.1 Contextual background

KFC “Crazy Thursday”, which was launched in August of 2018 referring to special offers of KFC regularly available on Thursdays, has been one of China’s most entertaining phenomenal marketing campaigns (Ding, 2022). As of January 8th 2023, it has been followed by over 2 billion views and over 4 million discussions under the hashtag of the meme of #肯德基疯狂星期四# (KFC Crazy Thursday) on Sina Weibo (He, 2023). In the early stages of this marketing campaign, considering the general features of its target audiences who are Chinese urban white-collar workers, students and teenagers, KFC invited several well-known celebrities to appear in its publicity advertisements for the promotion so as to inform the public its special offers such as the products of chicken nuggets, French fries, hamburgers priced at 9.9 yuan. “Crazy Thursday, a single product is nine yuan and nine” was the slogan presented in elevator advertising in the brainwashing-style at that time (Pinpaiyiti, 2023). Unfortunately, it did not effectively achieve the purpose of attracting the attention of Chinese consumers due to the backward marketing strategy when it was first launched. The unsatisfactory result proves that the traditional one-way communication marketing method can no longer adapt to the reality of two-way communication in the era of interactive digital media. Thus, it is inevitable of the marketing practitioners of KFC to transform the original boring brainwash marketing strategy.

This marketing dilemma turned around in 2021 with a change in marketing strategy that meme marketing was adopted. KFC shifted their efforts to innovation in marketing content and advertised these meme content via social media. In May 2021, KFC released the first generation of advertising meme copy with the tone of call-to-action on the Internet: “Look at your downcast look! Do you know what day is it today? Today is KFC Crazy Thursday!” (Sun, 2022). Since then, this activity was an instant hit on Chinese social media and has been tied to Thursday and boosted sales that day. The content or copywriting of meme have been developing and become one typical and popular internet meme in China——“KFC crazy Thursday”, which combined with the current hot spots to continuously form new funny content.

Various co-creation internet memes of KFC crazy Thursday have formed the exclusive marketing content of KFC which are called “Crazy Thursday Literature”. the copywriting of “Crazy Thursday Literature” usually begins with a novel-style plot, such as a suspenseful reasoning story, an extremely dramatic love story, or a combination of current affairs hotspots,

and the celebrity gossip is incorporated into it, and the final ending will definitely return to “KFC Crazy Thursday”. The presentation effect of the copy is shown in the following figure 1 (The translation can be seen in footnote).

Figure 1¹



Although this marketing campaign is filled with a large number of online meme content in various forms, such as pictures, videos, text, etc., the textual form has the greatest influence and popularity and is most actively participated by Chinese netizens or consumers. Among more and more meme content with different styles, the noun phrase of “KFC Crazy Thursday (肯德基疯狂星期四)” is the meta-meme of this series of meme content. In other words, all meme content, sentences, slogans, stories, or other content are organized and created around the phrase "KFC Crazy Thursday".

KFC's sales showed significant growth on each Thursday, and its related topics will have more discussion on social media (He, 2023). According to these results, KFC Crazy Thursday marketing activity was effective. But the reason why Chinese consumers are willing to participate in such a textual meme marketing activity leading a huge online discussion topic, is not clear. And the reason why such a marketing activity can achieve far better results than other similar brands, cannot be drawn from the statistics, either. Therefore, this case can be studied from two perspectives. The first angle is to study the structure, meaning and characteristics of KFC crazy Thursday marketing copy itself. Another perspective is to study how Chinese consumers make sense of KFC Crazy Thursday adverting texts, and to explore their motivation for participation.

¹ Translation: @doge 扫文日记: “I was originally a noble princess from a prominent background, but I was framed by a cunning illegitimate daughter. My family abandoned me, and my teacher also abandoned me and even damaged my superpowers. If I can start my life again, I must eat KFC. Today is Crazy Thursday, someone who can order KFC for me, just come.”

1.2 Research gap and research problem

According to the previous description, there are currently two major gaps in meme marketing. Firstly, academic research on textual form of internet memes is scarce within the scope of meme marketing. Most researches focus on memes with strong visual effects. Consequently, there is a lack of theoretical research on the characteristics and functions of internet textual memes. Secondly, the case studies on meme marketing are not abundant, either. Particularly, there are few studies on meme marketing in the context of the Chinese market. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore the characteristics of virtual textual internet memes in meme marketing based on the case study of KFC, as well as the reconstruction process of decoding paths and meanings of relevant textual internet memes by consumers in the process of participating in meme marketing. Therefore, three questions are raised to investigate this research problem:

RQ1: What are the characteristics of viral advertising meme texts of KFC Crazy Thursday?

RQ2: How does the sign of "KFC Crazy Thursday" become an internet meme?

RQ3: What motivates Chinese consumers to engage in KFC Crazy Thursday meme marketing activities?

Chapter 2 Literature review

2.1 Social media and participatory strategic communication in marketing

From a historical perspective, the breakthrough development of new technology in the third industrial revolution has led to the emergence of new media, such as Internet and social media (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014). Firstly, new technologies such as personal computers and the Internet, which have emerged and become widely used since the 1990s, have made it easier for ordinary people to create and share information. An increasing number of individuals desiring connections with broader audiences join the ranks of traditional professional communicators, taking on roles as content producers and disseminators through new digital communication technologies (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014). This impact challenges the traditional media and its practitioners' ownership of media technologies and dominance in information dissemination (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014). Tim O'Reilly and Dale Dougherty put forward the term of Web 2.0 in 2004, describing the transformation in which static web pages are transferred into dynamic ones and user-generated content, reflecting the new structure of communication. Web 2.0 websites, such as social networks, allow users to interact and collaborate with each other in social media conversations and co-create user-generated content in virtual communities, rather than merely passively view the content on the website (Borel & Christodoulides, 2016).

The new communication structure developed based on the ICT and related concepts have been widely accepted by scholars to study and discuss its various characteristics and significance. Henry Jenkins points out three key characteristics of this new communications structure which are "convergence", "participatory culture" and "collective intelligence" (as cited in Falkheimer & Heide, 2014 p.339). Convergence refers to the coexistence of the interaction between old and new media and the emergence of new forms of communication under the influence of new media. The interpenetration and integration of different domains, such as the integration of private and public spheres and the interpenetration of media and media (e.g., people can watch news on mobile phones). Secondly, as the use of new media makes direct feedback possible, the trend of collective participation in communication is becoming increasingly conspicuous, which make the new communication structure show the characteristics of participatory culture. Thirdly, these developments have led to the reality that, through digital

networks, the answer to a problem can be obtained from various participants in the collective. That is, collective intelligence is enabled and enhanced with the help of digital media such as social media (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014).

The characteristics of participatory culture and collective intelligence have led scholars of strategic communication to recognize the importance of strategic communication between stakeholders (i.e., between participants and participants) and how to create shared meanings. Sternvad and Wendel (2009) made research on the use of social media by the American Red Cross shows that an organization can serve different stakeholders more quickly by utilizing social media. It can also use the positive and negative feedback received from the media platform to improve the work. Further, social media is considered an ideal communication platform as it allows an organization to connect with stakeholders who share similar values, beliefs and interests.

With the growth of Web 2.0, user-generated content (UGC) and social media have also become increasingly important (Borel & Christodoulides, 2016). On the one hand, contemporary consumers spend a lot of time on digital consumption (Vasile et al., 2021). Consuming virtual content through browsing the Internet and social media platforms has become part of their daily lives (Russo, 2012). On the other hand, through the Internet and social media, consumers are being given more control over their information and they are able to create their own sales experience (Lewis, 2009). Tactful strategic communication practitioners and marketing professionals acknowledge this reality and explore a genuine way to engage customers in their branding communication: online marketing or mobile marketing. Online marketing communication is about establishing a solid relationship with consumers through websites, online advertising and video, as well as social media and other platforms or carriers (Darley, 2016). Mobile marketing refers to “any marketing activity conducted through a ubiquitous network to which consumers are constantly connected using a personal mobile device” is called mobile marketing (Kaplan, 2012 p.130).

An increasing number of enterprises and brands have also noticed this reality and explored new marketing methods and new products to adapt to consumers habits and relevant changes in the digital era. The participatory approach is being considered by an increasing number of corporations and brands, and is being applied in specific business practices. For example, Build-A-Bear toy stores (www.buildabear.dk) invite consumers - children to participate in the creation

of products to increase the value of products to consumers (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014 p.340). Therefore, consumers are increasingly given an important role, such as in product innovation (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014 p.341). Brands and companies have also noted that publicity from other customers and communities of interest to customers is sometimes more important than publicity from companies to brands, such as consumers creating ads for brands and uploading them to public social media platforms (Borel & Christodoulides, 2016). Customers no longer only act as receivers of brand-related information products, but participate in brand interaction and make active contributions in the process (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). In brief, the marketing activities carried out by the brand through the omnipresent network, affect the consumer experience in the process of consumer decision-making, establish and strengthen the relationship between the brand and consumers, and further transform passive loyal customers into active loyal customers (Darley, 2016).

2.2 Consumer engagement

2.2.1 Consumer engagement and social media

In the digital era, social media is transforming people's daily lives and communication patterns through its “communal”, “collaborative”, and “user-centered” characteristics (Tsai & Men, 2017 p.2). The topic of “engagement” has received extensive attention from an increasing number of academic disciplines, such as social psychology and organizational behavior (Hollebeek et al., 2014). This transformation affects the practices and research in the field of marketing as well. Due to the application of Web 2.0 technologies, consumers, especially the young generation proficient in digital technologies, are enabled to become influential gatekeepers and producers of brand-related content (Muntinga et al., 2011). As a result, both consumer engagement and social media have become top priorities for research at the Marketing Science Institute and Consumer engagement has been theorized as an important strategic imperative to create competitive brand advantages and strengthen consumer relationships, especially in the age of social media (Ferreira et al, 2020; Tsai & Men, 2017). Many researchers continue to focus on improving the concept of engagement and developing better ways to measure it in the field of marketing. Generally speaking, the study of consumer engagement aims

to contribute to the brand management field by exploring how to build and maintain a strong relationship between consumers and brand (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Ferreira et al., 2020).

According to the reality mentioned above, social media is transforming people's daily lives and communication patterns through its “communal”, “collaborative”, and “user-centered” characteristics in the digital age (Tsai & Men, 2017 p.2). Consumers, especially the digitally tactful younger generation, become influential receivers and producers of brand-related content (Muntinga et al., 2011). Accordingly, organizations also communicate with consumers through ICTs in an interactive and dynamic process (Chen, 2018). On the one hand, with advanced ICTs introducing both new opportunities and challenges to the interaction between organizations and consumers, organizations have to investigate approaches for fostering consumer engagement. This is essential for gaining profound insights into how target consumers respond to information or interactions on specific media platforms (Chen, 2018). On the other hand, actively engaged consumers have a significant positive impact on tangible and intangible assets of enterprises, which has been verified (Chen, 2018). Therefore, consumer engagement has received increasing attention from the academic and practical circles, such as social psychology and organizational behavior, practice and research in the field of marketing (Hollebeek et al., 2014). In the field of marketing science research, consumer engagement has been theorized as an important strategic requirement for creating competitive brand advantages and strengthening consumer relationships, especially in the age of social media (Ferreira et al., 2020; Tsai & Men, 2017).

There is no a common view of consumer engagement in the existing literature of consumer engagement. The conceptualization of consumer engagement can be approached from two main perspectives: the multidimensional perspective and the unidimensional perspective (Ferreira et al., 2020). In the field of marketing research, consumer engagement is generally defined as a multi-dimensional concept, including cognitive, emotional and/or behavioral dimensions (Brodie et al., 2013; Chen, 2018). From the multidimensional perspective, consumer engagement is regarded as one psychological state that strengthens the behavior intention and emotions of consumers (Brodie et al., 2011; Xiao et al., 2023). Brodie et al. (2011) referred to the three dimensions of participation described in the organization management literature, which includes cognitive dimension (thoughts), emotional dimension (feelings), and behavioral dimension (action or interaction), and incorporated these three dimensions into the consumer engagement concept (Borel, & Christodoulides, 2016). Brodie et al. (2011) gave one arguably comparative

definition about consumer engagement that “consumer engagement is a psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal agent/object (e.g., a brand) in focal service relationships. [...] It occurs under a specific set of context dependent conditions generating differing consumer engagement levels; and exists as a dynamic, iterative process within service relationships that co-create value.” (p.11). In addition, these three dimensions influence and promote each other in the process of consumer participation. For example, Kang (2014) found that consumers' emotional engagement with a business contributes to their level of cognitive or behavioral engagement with a business, while Hollebeek et al. (2014) found the impact of cognitive engagement on behavioral engagement.

Other scholars adopt the unidimensional perspective to study consumer engagement. In this perspective, consumer engagement mainly focuses on the behavior aspect (Wu et al., 2023). Van Doorn et al. (2010) conceptualized consumer participation from a behavioral perspective. They defined the concept of customer engagement behavior (CEB) as “the customers’ behavioral manifestation towards a brand or firm, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers” (Van Doorn et al., 2010 p.254).

2.2.2 Consumer engagement under the Chinese context

Chen (2018) examines Chinese academic literature concerning consumer engagement in the Chinese content. As a result, Chen (2018) summarizes the characteristics of Chinese consumer engagement derived from Chinese social media content, along with the underlying factors. Chinese corporate Weibo messages or posts are categorized into four types (i.e., hedonic, optimistic, emotional, and interactive), which facilitates the investigation of Chinese consumers' engagement actions, such as likes, shares, and comments (Wang et al., 2015, as cited in Chen, 2018). The research findings indicate that Chinese consumers have a similar level of preference for these four types of messages. However, interactive messages (i.e., the blog posts that initiate interaction through questions or incentives) exhibit a higher number of comments and shares. Consumers who prefer hedonic messages (i.e., the blog posts that make people fun and relaxed) are more inclined to share. Consumers are more likely to click likes or make comments on emotional messages (i.e., the blog posts that evoke individuals' recent memories and resonate with their life experiences.) than share them. The study also found that hedonic, optimistic, and interactive messages spread more widely. Consequently, interactive posts help to establish a

dialogue with consumers and effectively spread the brand message. While, emotional messages help to foster consumer identification with the brand or the brand's social media community.

Chen (2018) believes that the above distinct characteristics and trends of Chinese social media participation are the result of the influence of Chinese social media environment and collectivist culture. On the one hand, China's mainstream media is controlled by the authoritarian regime so that Chinese citizens have to seek other social media platforms representing Chinese grassroots culture to gain more freedom of speech (Li, 2010, as cited in Chen, 2018). Chinese citizens heavily rely on social media to evaluate discussions and information that are not officially endorsed by the government or authorities through viewing, posting, sharing, and commenting (He, 2008, as cited in Chen, 2018). This has fostered a culture of co-creation in the circle of Weibo that generates a large number of Weibo posts and subsequent comments. Second, it fosters a culture of wordplay, using complex contextual cues to produce innovative content that can be understood by users of online communities while avoiding censorship, a social media engagement strategy. This has fostered a co-creation culture within the Weibo community. Additionally, it encourages a culture of wordplay. These online contents are produced by contextual cues that can be understood by users of online communities, consequently forming a social media engagement strategy. On the other hand, the collectivist culture-oriented Chinese culture influences Chinese consumers are more dependent on social media in general, showing a higher level of social media engagement with brands (Tsai & Men, 2014, as cited in Chen, 2015).

2.3 Meme marketing

Internet memes have been one of the new popular cultures wildly applied by the people in digital era. Compared to traditional marketing, internet memes have their unique advantage of the ability to replicate and imitate oneself, that is, they can be deconstructed, imitated, and recreated, internet memes can trigger higher click rates on social media and promote a higher degree of customer participation (Razzaq et al., 2023; Malodia et al., 2022). Marketing practitioners also notice the booming phenomenon led by internet memes and they have already applied internet memes as “a new consumer language” and one effective marketing communication tool to their brand marketing practices (James, 2017; Vasile et al., 2021).

2.3.1 Overview of meme evolution

By reviewing the existing literature on meme advertising and meme marketing in the past, Malodia, et al., (2022) have summarized four stages in the conceptualization process of memes. Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins made groundbreaking contributions to memetics. Dawkins introduced the principles of biological evolution into his understanding of the processes of cultural and social development, where he firstly coined the term “meme” in his 1976 book “*The Selfish Gene*”, to refer to the fundamental unit of cultural replication, the replicators (McCrae, 2017; Malodia, et al., 2022; Fomin, 2019). According to Dawkins, the term ‘meme’ originates from “mimema” which is a Greek word referring to something which is imitated and he believes that memes, like genes, promote the dissemination and replication of social thoughts among humans. Therefore, in the first stage, memes are considered units of imitation (Razzaq and Quach, 2023; Malodia, et al., 2022).

In the second stage, the meme has evolved into a unit of cultural transmission, and its concept has been used to explain the process of cultural communication (Davis et al., 2015; Malodia, et al., 2022). This has led to "memetics", which uses genetic evolution principles and models (e.g., genetics) to study the dissemination of cultural information (Benaim, 2018; Malodia, et al., 2022).

In the third stage, with the advent of the Internet era, memes have evolved into a unit of online culture, known as Internet memes. According to the study of Zulli and Zulli (2020), internet memes refer to an idea or concept that spreads quickly among internet users through replication and transmission (Malodia, et al., 2022). Internet memes are widely used for communication on social media and online forums, and have become a leading element of participatory Internet culture (Vasquez & Aslan, 2021).

In the fourth stage, the meme has been evolved into a new form and a component of linguistic discourse (Zenner & Geeraerts, 2018). Semiotics scholars criticize the definition of replicator in memetics and notice the reality that the creation of new memes can be achieved through the transformation of words. Sebeok criticized the concept of meme, and for the first time linked memetics with semiotics (Deacon, 2004; Fomin, 2019). He criticized the concept of memes as replicators: Genes and memes are replicates not replicators and they are “not the locus of the replication process, nor are they somehow the functional unit of information” (Deacon,

2004 p.22). Kalevi Kull (2000) also proposed a concept about memes and signs: “the objects of copying are memes, whereas the objects of translation are signs” (as cited in Fomin, 2019 p.332). Therefore, at this stage, the concept of memes is enriched to include a “word”, “phrase”, “expression”, “iconic imagery” or “recognizable reference” (Cannizzaro, 2016 p.563). Furthermore, given the reality that memes are often used to establish relationships with like-minded people, marketers also use memes as online and viral communication strategies to communicate and establish relationships with customers or consumers (Sharma, 2018; Malodia, et al., 2022).

In summary, the meme is a cultural unit of communication that passes from one person to another (Vasile, et al., 2021). The innovation in Web 2.0 technology and emergence of social media have promoted the further development and enrichment of memes, namely internet memes. Internet memes are often use humor and satire to convey a particular idea or message (Brubaker et al., 2018; Shifman, 2013). According to Malodia et al. (2022), internet memes can take various forms, including animation, GIFs, images, text, videos, and tags.

Scholars of strategic communication also notice the development and effects of internet memes. The current studies and research of strategic communication focus on public relations at the political level. For example, Guenther et al. (2020) studies the impact of using internet memes on the strategic framing of the German Identity Movement on Facebook. The research has found that posting negative meme posts (i.e., anti-immigrant emoticons) on Facebook, can trigger more spread. Additionally, Kulkarni (2017) researches on how internet memes are utilized to communicate political satire in India. The result of the research shows that internet memes play a positive role in political engagement among digital natives.

2.3.2 Definition and conceptualization of meme marketing

Considering that past research has not systematically conceptualized meme marketing, Razzaq, et al., (2023) clarified the definition of internet memes as a marketing method for the first time by drawing on Speech Act Theory (SAT) and Consumer Value Theory to conceptualize meme marketing.

Razzaq et al., (2023) believe that meme marketing is a multimodal marketing approach, which refers to the use of visual and linguistic combinations of models or forms. As two independent speech acts, image and text have communicative functions. In the practice of social

media communication, the two complement each other to form a common meaning (Shifman, 2014). Therefore, in the study of meme marketing, images and text need to be viewed as a whole, rather than that in isolation. In addition, in order to define meme marketing more comprehensively, Razzaq et al. (2023) also considered how internet memes convey brand intent and provide content-based value to customers, as well as the determinants of the effectiveness of internet memes from a consumer perspective.

In analyzing how internet memes convey brand intentions, Razzaq et al. (2023) referred to the SAT and adopted Searle's five categories of speech acts (i.e., assertive, direct, expressive, declarative, and committal). Then Razzaq et al. (2023) identified “assertive”, “directive”, and “expressive” speech acts for performing meme marketing through digital qualitative content analysis (p.7). Razzaq et al., (2023) also found that meme marketing uses single or combined speech acts as its marketing strategy, with the combined speech acts being mostly a combination of assertive and direct acts, as well as a combination of assertive and expressive acts.

In researching how meme marketing creates value for consumers, Razzaq et al. (2023) adopted the theory of consumption value, and examined three types of value perceptions that are relevant to meme marketing content (curvature, novelties, information); emotional value perception (positive feelings such as fun, escapism, entertainment); and social value perception (community building, group identification). Besides, in order to explore how consumers understand the meaning of meme marketing content, Razzaq et al. (2023) introduced the concept of contextual knowledge that meme marketing includes two types of consumer situational knowledge: "general social cultural knowledge" and "meme specific knowledge" (p.9)

Overall, via a process of combining previous research and literature from interdisciplinary fields of marketing and communication, and by analyzing and integrating key conceptual elements of multimodality, speech acts, consumer value, and situational knowledge, Razzaq et al. (2023) have concluded the following definition for meme marketing:

“Meme marketing is a brand-initiated multimodal online communication strategy, executed through imitated and original memes, conveying speech acts through which consumers extract epistemic, emotional, and social values dependent on the contextual knowledge to persuade and engage customers”. (p.9)

2.3.3 The factors and conditions of creating and spreading viral memes in marketing

In the process of reviewing the current literature on memes and related advertising, Malodia et al. (2022) found gaps in the types of content of potential viral memes, the reason that people are willing to focus, follow and share internet memes, and the role of media-related factors affecting the internet memes. Therefore, in order to measure the meme virality, Malodia et al. (2022) have identified three antecedents for viral memes in their study based on these three gaps, which are “content-related factors”, “customer-related factors” and “media-related factors” (p.1777).

According to the study of Malodia et al. (2022), content-related factors include “relevance”, language structure with “iconicity”, “humor” and “spreadability”, aiming to better disseminate memes and help brands generate strong awareness, engagement, and recall (p.1784). Customer-related factors are based on the exploration of needs of consumer gratification. Malodia et al. (2022) drew on the three types of satisfaction of Use and Gratification Theory (UGT) to determine the three types of satisfaction that memes can satisfy consumers, namely, "escapism gratification", "social gratification", and "content gratification" (p.1787). Media-related factors are external drivers that affect viral memes, including the strategies of seeding and distribution. Seeding refers to the initial placement of a meme to encourage further sharing and distribution, while distribution refers to the process of spreading the meme across different platforms. Malodia et al. (2022) suggest that understanding these external drivers is critical for creating successful viral memes that can engage and resonate with consumers.

Chapter 3 Theoretical framework

3.1 Content-related factors of viral memes

As mentioned above, content-related factors of viral memes proposed by Malodia et al. (2022) include relevance, iconicity, humor and spreadability. The factor of relevance means the content of memes must be topical and popular among target groups. At the same time, the target group must find that the content is familiar, relevant to themselves, and contemporary and uncontroversial (Malodia et al., 2022). In addition, due to the fact that consumers are active participants in the construction and dissemination of memes, the memes created by marketing practitioners need to enable consumers to deconstruct and reconstruct the hidden meanings therein. This means that successful internet memes of brands have high iconicity (Malodia et al., 2022). Through observation of interviews, Malodia et al., (2022) found that these memes have extremely simple but complete sentences and fewer dangling elements. Besides, for internet memes, humor is a factor that cannot be ignored. Because humor is not only a fundamental element of memes itself, but also a fundamental element that allows memes to be transmitted virally (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015). Finally, for the factor of spreadability, Malodia et al. (2022) drew on the research of Mils (2012) to identify two characteristics of spreadability, which are likeability (the degree to which content can stimulate the recipient's interest) and shareability (whether the recipient is willing to further disseminate the content). These four factors will guide the coding procedure and analysis in research question one.

3.2 Theory of Semiotics

Signs take the dominant position in human communication in both verbal form and non-verbal form (Paraskevaidis & Weidenfeld, 2021). In the study of language, semiotics is a science of studying the sign. In the development process of studying signs, there are two main approaches used to understand and research semiotics which are the Saussurean school and the Peircean school.

The semiology of Saussurian or European tradition rooted in the theory of structural linguistics, was developed by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913). Due to the opinion that language is a system of signs expressing ideas, Saussure argued semiotics was an

extension of linguistics (De Lencastre & Côrte-Real, 2010). Consequently, Saussure firstly made a dialectical distinction between *language* (or “langue” in French, which refers to “the abstract language-system” or the structured system of rules and signs) and *speech* (or “parole” in French, which refers to “individual utterances” in daily situations) (Hawkes, 2003, P.9). Furthermore, based on the characteristic of sign which is made up by concept and sound/image, Saussure gave academic concepts with the dialectical relationship that one linguistic sign consists of signifier and signified. Signifier refers to the physical or material form of the sign, such as the sound /tree/. Signified refers to the concept or meaning that the signifier refers to, such as a mental image of the tree) (Hawkes, 2003). This argument shows that sign is a dyadic entity and the related studies of signs developed by Saussure have created a theoretical basis for a science of signs.

The semiotics of the Peircean school developed by American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), is based on philosophy and the physical sciences, and also takes the study of signs as the central position in the research. However, Peirce proposes a triadic structure model of signification including three elements: (1) representamen, (2) object, and (3) interpretant, which is different from Saussure’s the binary model of sign.

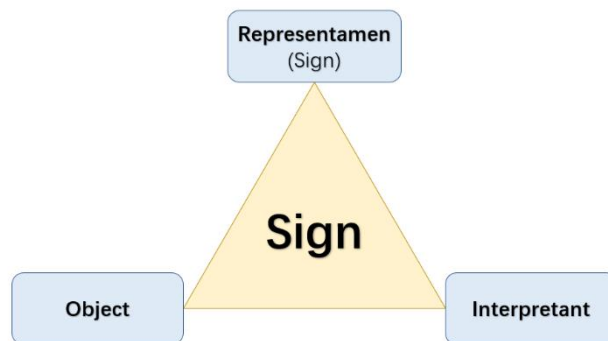


Figure: Three elements of sign of Peircean semiotics

In the triadic model of Peircean semiotics, “sign” is regarded as a synthesis of representamen (sign), object, and interpretant (Peirce, 1932, as cited in Zhang & Sheng, 2017, p.3). The representamen is something that “stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity” (Peirce, 1932, as cited in Zhang & Sheng, 2017, p.3), which is roughly analogous to Barthes’ signifier and has the function as the sign. The object refers to the thing which the

representamen stands for. The interpretant refers to the sense led by the sign in the interpreter's mind, that is a response, reaction or interpretation (Mick & Oswald, 2006). Peircean semiotics is also often applied in advertising analysis, such as representamen usually referring to advertising text, while object usually refers to products, services, company image, and even the ideology conveyed in the advertisement. Interpretant usually refers to the ideas generated in the minds of the public or consumers (Lestari, 2016).

In terms of understanding the generation of meaning, Peirce proposed a different viewpoint from Saussure, which is to represent sign as a non-stationary ternary relationship between representamen, object, and interpretant, rather than the signifier and signified. "Interpretant" within this triadic model is one core term of Peircean semiotics that differs from Saussurian semiotics (Zhang & Sheng, 2017). Peirce emphasized that not all signs produce the same "representamen" (an object or concept that a sign represents), and not all interpretants (a person's interpretation of a sign) produce the same sequence of representamen (Stephan & Akyuz, 2022). The introduction of the concept of the interpretant makes it possible to make a sign interpreted with different meanings, which can trigger infinite connotations (Raaphorst et al., 2017, p.122).

In meme marketing, internet memes are integrated into marketing strategies by brands to communicate and establish connections with consumers, enabling them to play a positive role in brand communication and customer engagement (Malodia et al., 2022; Razzaq et al., 2023). These internet memes typically are presented in various forms such as an image, text, video or a combination of them, so as to work together to convey specific messages or ideas. While these forms of internet memes were originally meaningless. they become memes or signs only when they were given meanings by people and interpreted as the meanings beyond themselves. So in this research case, in order to explore how the name of the marketing campaign, "KFC Crazy Thursday", becomes a widely circulated internet meme on the Chinese internet, it is necessary to explore its meanings or significance. Therefore, Peirce's triadic model of semiotics will be used in the analysis chapter to explore how the sign of "KFC Crazy Thursday" becomes an internet meme within the context of KFC's advertising texts.

3.3 Uses and gratifications theory

Uses and gratifications theory (UGT) is a popular theoretical method used to explain and understand people's psychological reasons and motivations for using specific media. Papacharissi, (2002) described the UGT as a means of determining important factors in media selection and use motivation, and media use outcomes. In 1944, psychologist Herta Herzog began studying the earliest forms of use and satisfaction. Herzog interviewed the fans of soap operas to analyze the reasons why they watched soap operas, and identified three types of satisfactions: “emotions”, “wishful thinking”, and “learning” (as cited in Egede & Chuks-Nwosu, 2013, p.206). Her research lays the theoretical foundation for UGT, which is to understand why people actively seek specific media to meet specific needs (Kujur & Singh, 2020). The UGT theory was early applied to research on the reasons for audience participation in various forms of traditional mass media and related media behaviors, such as newspapers, radio, and television (Wimmer & Dominick, 2000; Leung & Wei, 2000). Later, with the rise and development of the Internet and communication technology, UGT is also significantly applied to research about social media. For example, Quan Haase (2012) demonstrated the applicability of UGT to social media research by testing its adaptability to Facebook usage. In the field of marketing, UGT is used to explore how social media marketing meets consumers' internal needs, such as knowledge growth, entertainment and relaxation, social interaction and satisfaction such as rewards or rewards (Ko, Cho, & Roberts, 2005).

The focus of the UGT theoretical framework is to study individuals' use of media and what they gain from using social media. Katz et al. (1974) argue that ““Uses and Gratifications theory asserts that people are active users of media and select how they will use it ” (as cited in Egede & Chuks-Nwosu, 2013, p207). UGT is based on two basic principles: “(1) the consumer is an active and self-conscious contributor in media choice; (2) the consumer is driven by social and psychological needs and therefore, seeks out a media that could fulfill his goals” (Kujur & Singh, 2020, p.33).

According to Katz, Gurevitch, and Haas (1973), the factors of gratification for any mass media are categorized into five needs, which include cognitive needs, affective needs, personal integrative needs, social integrative needs, and tension release needs. Therefore, UGT is considered as a suitable structure to be used by this research to assist in designing the interview

questions required for the focus group and to explore and analyze the motivation of Chinese consumers participating in KFC's meme marketing campaign.

Chapter 4 Methodology and research design

4.1 Research paradigm: social constructivism

The main purpose of this study is to fill the gaps of textual internet memes in the field of meme marketing. Specifically, this study aims to inductively explore the characteristics of viral textual memes in meme marketing, the generation of meanings behind the sign of textual memes and explore motivations of consumers participating in meme marketing campaigns dominated by these textual memes. Therefore, this paper aims to study individuals' understanding of textual internet memes and the process of constructing meaning around the textual memes from the perspective of consumers. Interpretive qualitative research assumes that reality is socially constructed, while a single, observable reality does not exist (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). However, an event has multiple realities or explanations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In the worldview of constructivism, individuals develop a variety of subjective meanings in the process of seeking an understanding of the world of life and work, and these subjective meanings are often “formed through interaction with others (hence social constructivism) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals’ lives” (Creswell, 2013, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p.9). Therefore, this study adopts the research paradigm of social constructivism within the interpretive tradition to conduct qualitative research on meme marketing.

4.2 Research design

As a type of qualitative research, the case study allows researchers to closely examine a bounded research field and explore new and unknown phenomena within it (Starman, 2013). According to Starman (2013), the case study is not limited to easily quantifiable variables or pre-existing, well-defined datasets, so it is considered very suitable for the inductive identification of additional variables and exploration of new hypotheses due to heuristic purposes. Therefore, the case study is used by researchers to thoroughly analyze different phenomenon with complexity and specificity, and to explore more variables (Willis, 2014). In addition, since the context and background conditions of the research subjects are considered as an indispensable part of the study, a case study helps to understand complex problems in real-life environments and is used

to understand participants' perspectives under these specific conditions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Therefore, based on the research purpose of this study, this article selects the case of KFC's virtual textual meme marketing for the qualitative case study. The KFC case is a typical marketing case about virtual internet memes, to the extent that it provides detailed contextual information for the study of textual internet memes. And this research uses qualitative content analysis to analyze and summarize the features, functions and meanings hidden in the textual memes.

4.3. Sample selection and data collection

The research questions in this study focus on two main objects of analysis: the representative viral meme texts in the KFC Crazy Thursday case, and the consumers who participated in this case.

4.3.1 The First Part: selection of marketing materials

The research object of this thesis is the textual internet memes, and all textual materials are sourced from online social media. In this study, Sina Weibo was selected as the online platform for collecting textual memes of KFC Crazy Thursday. This is because Weibo is characterized by a platform covering all media content forms (such as text, images, and videos). So these core functions of Weibo can fully meet the needs of content producers and consumers, leading to the reality that content production and consumption on Weibo remain highly active (Cao, 2020). In addition, it is also one of the most popular social media platforms in Chinese public daily online social interactions (Cao, 2020). Therefore, Sina Weibo is regarded as one significant and popular data source in China. In this research, relevant internet meme content is scraped and collected on Weibo based on the keyword "肯德基疯狂星期四 (KFC Crazy Thursday)". Besides, 集搜客 (Gooseeker) is applied as the web scraping software to scrape the relevant posts as the textual data.

According to Baidu Index (<https://index.baidu.com/v2/index.html#/>), a Chinese data sharing and statistical analysis platform based on user search behavior data, it was found that the average search volume retrieved on April 6th, 2023 for "KFC Crazy Thursday" from November 1, 2018 to April 6, 2023 was 978 times per day. The daily average search volume from February 15th,

2022 to January 16, 2023 was higher than the average search volume. This indicates that during this period, the number of searches for "KFC Crazy Thursday" was relatively higher than other times, and the public's attention to the marketing campaign "KFC Crazy Thursday" maintained a high level. Therefore, text data was collected and filtered during this period from February 15th, 2022 to January 16, 2023. In the first round of data collection, 784 posts containing the keyword of "肯德基疯狂星期四 (KFC Crazy Thursday)" have been scraped by the software of 集搜客 (Gooseeker). Considering the large size of data, this study uses purposive sampling to collect advertising textual meme copies. The collected text materials are further filtered and selected based on the following criteria:

1. The selected data of text memes are framed in text form;
2. The blog posts with pure videos or images are excluded;
3. To solve the problem of duplication content within posts, reserve posts with high likes and comments among the same content;
4. The posts with the label of “热门 (trending topics or posts)” are reserved. (The label of “热门” on Weibo including most the popular and widely discussed topics, which refers to the section based on Weibo's algorithms and user engagement metrics);
5. To avoid interference factors, eliminate posts related to lottery activities and co-branding activities (KFC cooperates with other brands). This is because such posts receive high attention may be due to the attractiveness of prizes or other brands, rather than KFC's textual memes themselves.

Applying the above criteria, a total of 92 items have been filtered and selected as the research samples. These items are considered representative of the study. The length of Weibo posts typically ranges from approximately 20 to 190 Chinese characters. Then, typical case sampling, one of the purposive sampling methods, is chosen as the method to further study the general patterns/characteristics and meanings/significance of textual memes related to KFC Crazy Thursday textual memes on Weibo.

4.3.2 The Second Part: the focus group discussion

In the second part of this qualitative research, the data on consumer engagement motivation are collected and analyzed through focus group discussion. Focus group is one interview method that is a form of interview with several interviewees (Bell et al., 2022). Focus group is considered an

effective way to gather information because it provides an environment for open discussion and allow and welcome variously different points of view (Biden, n.d.). The method of focus group strengthens interactions within the group as well as promotes the generation and sharing of a greater diversity of viewpoints, which is beneficial for this research to explore the motivations of Chinese consumers engaging the KFC Crazy Thursday meme marketing. In this section, the recruitment of respondents for this study follows the principle of purposive sampling to select consumers who have the experience about engaging in KFC Crazy Thursday marketing activity, so as to obtain their in-depth insights on the motivation, engagement experience and reaction of the activity.

Focus group respondents are recruited through the Chinese social media app WeChat. In order to select a representative sample, the following recruitment criteria are set:

1. Chinese consumers aged 18-30;
2. Chinese consumers who regularly use Weibo;
3. Chinese consumers who get familiar with KFC Crazy Thursday activities;
4. Chinese consumers who buy KFC products regularly.

In the process of conducting the focus group discussion, a semi-structured approach is adopted, that is, some questions were pre-determined around research question 3 so as to form a general framework for the focus group discussion and guide the group discussion (see Appendix 2 for the question list). The questions of focus group meeting were formulated under the guidance of UGT. Questions revolve around five needs: cognitive needs, affective needs, personal integrative needs, social integrative needs, and tension release needs, including both targeted questions and open questions.

Finally, 7 people are recruited to participate in focus group interviews. This focus group consists of Chinese students studying at the Helsingborg and Lund campuses. This focus group was held on May 2nd 2023 in Helsingborg through an offline meeting, with the investigator serving as the moderator. The meeting lasted for 50 minutes. The following form shows the interviewees' information, which can be allowed to disclose. The interview content was recorded through the mobile phone recording application, and then transcribed through the transcription function of the software "飞书" (Feishu).

Name	Gender	Age	Occupation
Z.L	Female	25	Free occupation
X.K	Female	27	Employed
Q.XH	Male	26	Employed
Q.X	Female	25	Student
L.MY	Female	30	Employed
J.ZX	Female	26	Student
L.JJ	Male	28	Free occupation

4.4 Analysis procedures

Qualitative content analysis as one of the research methods used to study text data, focuses on the contextual meaning of communication (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Hsieh and Shannon (2005) defined it as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (p.1278). I referred to the conventional content analysis proposed by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) for the process of textual memes data coding, which directly obtains information from the data without imposing preconceived theoretical views. Firstly, I obtained my initial impression of the textual memes data by repeatedly reading it, and made notes about it for subsequent code acquisition. Then, based on the recorded first impressions, thoughts, and preliminary analysis, the data were processed to obtain codes for KFC text content in terms of content structure (e.g., reversal structure), content elements (e.g., trending topics on Weibo), literary genres (e.g., melodramatic story and social gossip adaption), frequency of certain Chinese characters or phrases appearing (e.g., first-person perspective “I”), and emotional effects generated by the text (e.g., humor). Finally, through referencing viral memes’ content-related factors of Malodia et al. (2022), these codes are further classified and integrated for subsequent analysis.

The processing of interview content data refers to the directed content analysis method which is also proposed by Hsieh and Shannon (2005). The purpose of this method is to validate or expand on an existing theoretical framework or theory (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Within the focus group, the process of formulating interview questions is guided by the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), which subsequently facilitates the coding procedure. In the coding

stage, I initially employed the five needs of UGT as the primary coding categories to code the interview content. In terms of certain content data which did not align with the initial five categories, new coding categories were introduced.

4.5. Translations

This qualitative research includes two parts of data, one is KFC Crazy Thursday's textual memes from Weibo platform, and the other one is from focus group interviews. Because both parts of the data were collected in Chinese, Chinese was still used in the encoding process. While, in the Chapter 5 Findings and analysis of this study, the selected objects for analysis, such as posts and respondents' answers, were translated into English by Baidu Translation APP and presented and quoted by the researchers.

4.6. Reflection

Reliability (which involves whether the research results are repeatable) and validity (which refers to the completeness of the conclusions drawn from a research) are important standards (Bell et al., 2022) for research. However, most of discussions about reliability and effectiveness mainly focus on quantitative research, not qualitative research (Bell et al., 2022). In order to deal with this problem, some authors carry out the practice and exploration of applying the concepts of reliability and effectiveness to qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) put forward five terms and concepts to evaluate qualitative research: creditability, transferability, dependability and conformability. This qualitative case study is designed and organized according to the above five standards.

First of all, in order to establish the credibility, with reference to triangulation method (Denzin, 1970, as cited in Bell & Harley, 2022), this research collected and used two sets of data sources to assist in this qualitative research. A data set was collected by web scraping software by grabbing related posts from Weibo, a social platform. Another data group was obtained through a focus group. In addition, I tried my best to gain the trust of respondents and establish a good relationship by referring to the respondent validation approach. As the researcher, my keen interest in social media and its internet memes, along with the strong comprehension of relevant online culture, helped me effectively grasp respondents' perspectives and create a comfortable

and friendly communication environment. In the process of data collection and analysis, negative cases or negative comments were also considered in this qualitative research.

Secondly, in order to realize the standard of transferability, this qualitative case study referred to the approach of thick description (Geertz, 1973, as cited in Bell & Harley, 2022). The case background was introduced in detail in the introduction chapter. At the same time, the chapter of methodology also gave clear selection criteria for sample screening.

Thirdly, in order to establish the dependability of this paper, this research will save some necessary research records, such as a list of interview questions.

Fourthly, in the interview process, in order to establish the certainty of the research, as a researcher, I tried my best to keep an objective attitude and position and avoid personal values or theoretical tendencies from obviously affecting the progress and results of the research. In focus group discussions, any respondent was encouraged to interact and share their motivations, experiences, and opinions. In addition, the discussion data obtained through the focus group was combined and compared with the data obtained from Weibo in order to fully understand the motivations of the participants.

Finally, in order to realize the standard of authenticity, as a researcher, I will try my best to ensure that the respondents participate in the discussion fairly in the focus group, actively listen to the opinions expressed by the respondents, and ask some leading questions that may support my hypothesis based on the interpretation of KFC text memes.

In addition, ensuring the anonymity of the respondents is an important moral integrity issue for the research. On the one hand, this study will sign an ethical consent form with the respondents who participated in the focus group to safeguard their anonymous rights and inform them about the interview process and other matters. On the other hand, after transcoding and analyzing the interview content, the recording will be destroyed to further ensure the anonymity of the respondent.

Chapter 5 Findings and analysis

This article aims to explore the characteristics of the viral textual internet memes. Secondly, from a semiotic perspective, this article takes the meme of online text "KFC Crazy Thursday" as a sign and analyzes its implicit meaning to explore the nature of online memes. The further aim is to study how Chinese consumers interpret the internet memes of brands, construct meaning, and thus participate in brand's meme marketing through this case study. This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section is the qualitative content analysis of the characteristics of the textual meme copies of KFC Crazy Thursday. Secondly, the sign of KFC Crazy Thursday will be placed in the typical posts selected in the first part to analyze so as to explore the hidden meanings through Peircean semiotics. Finally, the construction of the meaning of Chinese consumers and their motivations for participating in the meme marketing of KFC, will be analyzed and concluded by the respondents' answers in the focus group.

5.1 Characteristics of KFC textual memes

RQ 1: What are the characteristics of KFC's viral textual internet memes?

5.1.1 Concise and similar content structure

All the collected posts are the contents consisting of verbal texts, and the simplicity is an intuitive and obvious feature of all collected posts, during the initial stage of reading through the entire data to do initial coding. Such a feature of simplicity is reflected in two aspects: short length and simple wording. Among the collected posts, the longest one contains 187 Chinese characters, while the shortest one only has 21 Chinese characters. These contents are composed by words which are composed of simple morphemes (Chinese characters) to form simple phrases. These simple phrases then form simple and complete sentences, ultimately forming the simple and easily understandable copies of KFC Crazy Thursday marketing. In addition, most of the KFC textual copies own one highly similar content structure, which combines the beginning in various genres with a conclusive ending about KFC Crazy Thursday campaign. Take figure 1 as the example. After the pitiful self-introduction finished, the main idea sentence of "Today is KFC Crazy Thursday event, who can treat me to eat?" Following that, the intention of the post

can be figure out simply by readers, which is to buy the products of KFC Crazy Thursday activity.

5.1.2 Attractive openings in various genres

Advertising text as the product of advertising, has the prevailing commercial purpose of attracting the recipients' or consumers' attention and encouraging them to respond positively to the brand's product or service (Makarova et al., 2018). By classifying and summarizing 92 samples of advertising copies of KFC Crazy Thursday, one can find that KFC's advertising copies use various genres to present the beginning which makes the whole textual content interesting and attractive. These genres are categorized into five categories which is based on my classification, mainly including melodramatic story (see figure 2), artistic short poem (see figure 3), personal thoughts and experiences sharing (see figure 4), social gossip or current event adaptation (see figure 5), adaptation of allusions (see figure 6). These plentiful elements and genres provide diversity and novelty for KFC Crazy Thursday advertising text, which can prevent consumers from feeling monotonous or even bored due to repetitive content.

These contents with various genres conform to the public trends of the digital era and can meet the different reading tastes and preferences of different people. Due to the rise and wide application of Web 2.0 technology, digital media provides an unprecedented media consumption mode for the audience, that is, the audience's unprecedented choice and control over media consumption (Webster, 2005; Webster and Ksiazek, 2012). This has led to the trend of fragmentation of the audiences, which refers that the public attention is distracted by various media, making it difficult to concentrate on a certain content (Webster and Ksiazek, 2012).

Therefore, in order to compete for public attention, producing and providing media content that meets the preferences of the audiences has become one of the main measures (Webster and Ksiazek, 2012). When a large number of KFC Crazy Thursday copies in these genres is posted on Weibo, consumers are more likely to be attracted by these contents with the genres or elements that they are already interested in. For example, those people who enjoy the novels of the plot "bossy CEO falling in love with me" will be attracted by the copy in figure 2. And those who are passionate about following current social events and hot topics will be triggered the interest to read the post figure 5, whose content is adapted from real incident of a Chinese rapper embarrassing himself on the red carpet in a fashion show.

Overall, combining various genres in advertising copies increases the diversity and novelty of the KFC advertising content, helping to maintain a sense of innovation within the textual copies themselves. And such advertising copywriting content can gain more public attention by catering to their personal preferences when facing audiences with different interests.

Figure 2: melodramatic story²

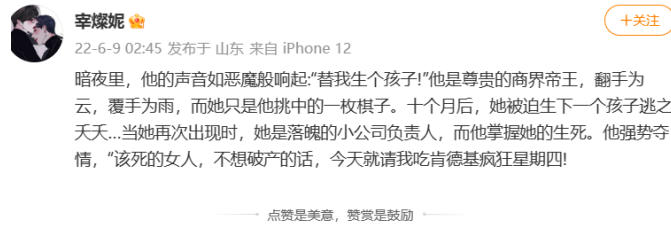


Figure 3: artistic short poem³



² Translation: In the dark night, his voice sounded in her ear like a demon: "Give birth to a child for me!" He is a distinguished business tycoon, like an emperor, with the ability and power to control everything, and she is just a pawn he picked. Ten months later, she was forced to give birth to a child and then ran away. When she reappeared, she became the head of a down-and-out small company, and he could control her life and death. He said strongly, "Damn woman, if you don't want your company to go bankrupt, treat me to KFC crazy Thursday today!"

³ Translation: I know all about it. I understand all about it. I'm option E. I'm plan B. I'm expired milk. I'm a broken kite. I'm a sunflower discarded at will, and I'm a taciturn child. So can you transfer me 50 CNY, because it's KFC crazy Thursday? (I'm kidding)

Figure 4: Personal thoughts and experiences sharing ⁴

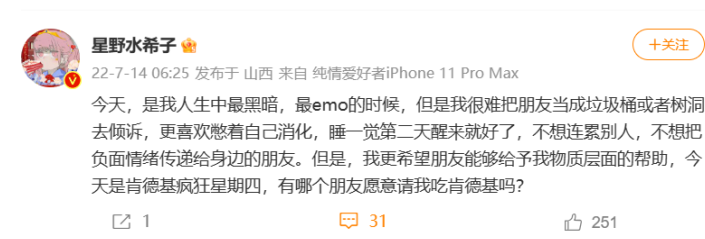


Figure 5: Social gossip or current event adaptation ⁵

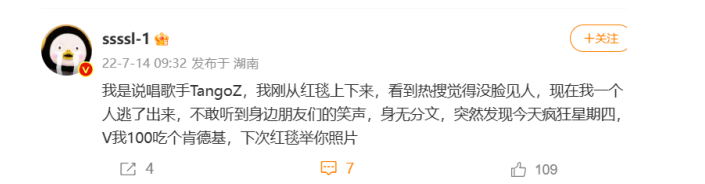
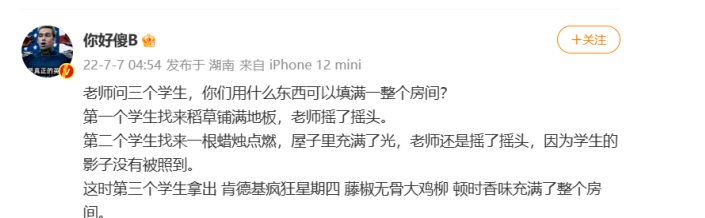


Figure 6: Adaptation of allusions ⁶



5.1.3 Unexpected reversal as ending

In addition to above mentioned structural feature of attractive beginning of KFC's textual copies, another structural feature of KFC Crazy Thursday copies is unexpected reversal.

According to Chiu et al. (2012), reversal refers to “a climax and a turning point in a story”

⁴ Translation: Today is the darkest and most emo (sad) time in my life. But it's hard for me to talk to my friends as trash cans or tree holes. On the contrary, I prefer to suppress these emotions and digest them by myself. I thought I'd sleep and wake up the next day and everything would be fine. I don't want to involve others, and I don't want to pass on negative emotions to my friends around me, either. However, I really hope my friends can give me material help. Today is KFC crazy Thursday. Would any friends like to invite me to eat KFC?

⁵ Translation: I'm the rapper TangoZ. I just came down from the red carpet fashion show, and I felt ashamed to see the hashtag on Weibo. Now I have escaped from the catwalk alone, and I dare not hear the laughter of my friends around me. I'm broke now, but suddenly I find that today is KFC crazy Thursday. Please transfer me 100 CNY so as to eat KFC, and I'll take your photo next time I join the next fashion show.

⁶ Translation: The teacher asked three students: What do you think can fill a whole room? The first student found straw all over the floor and the teacher shook his head. The second student found a candle and lit it. The room was full of light. The teacher still shook his head, because the student's shadow was not taken. At this time, the third student took out the fried chicken bought from KFC Crazy Thursday, and the smell of fried chicken filled the whole room.

(p265). It marks the tense situation intensified in the story, which leads to a change in the development or outcome of the story as well.

Frye proposed a common plot pattern for the comedy story structure: a U-shaped plot (Ressegue, 2019). This pattern describes a story structure that begins with the situation that “a state of equilibrium” is disrupted by a problem or disaster. As the story progresses, the storyline is propelled by negative elements (such as “adversity”, “misunderstanding”, or “rebellion”) downward to the trough like the bottom of the U. Then, with the introduction of a positive turning point, the story ultimately returned to a new equilibrium state (Ressegue, 2019, p20). The reversal of the stories presented in KFC Crazy Thursday's copies also follows this pattern of a U-shaped plot. With the introduction of the turning point related to "KFC Crazy Thursday", the negative state caused by various difficulties is changed, that is, difficulties or disasters have been solved or disappeared.

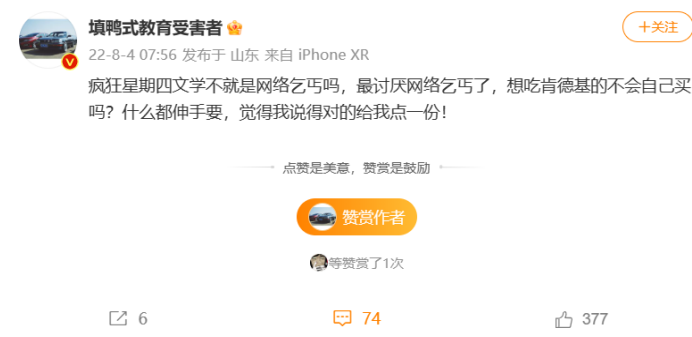
Take figure 2 as the example. In such a type of story with the plot of “bossy CEO falling in love with me”, the difficulties and threats (such as the threat of company bankruptcy) brought by the bossy male protagonist to the female protagonist, are predicted to be resolved, as the male protagonist says to the female protagonist that " Damn woman, if you don't want the company to go bankrupt, treat me to KFC Crazy Thursday's products today". In the copy showed in the figure 6, the first two students' solutions (who uses straw to cover the floor and lights candles to illuminate the room) fail to answer the teacher's question (“how can you do to fill the entire room?”). This leads to a deadlock. However, the turning point occurs, when the third student takes out the Thursday's KFC fried chicken so that the aroma of fried chicken fills the entire room, which solves the teacher's question.

In the post presented in figure 7, the term 'Crazy Thursday Literature' is initially associated with a form of 'online begging literature,' carrying satirical and derogatory implications. This indirectly critiques the idea that only individuals lacking effort would resort to asking others to purchase KFC products on Thursdays. But with the blogger using a humorous tone and saying, "I think I'm right, please invite me to KFC" as the ending, there is a sharp contrast with the critical attitude at the beginning, bringing an unexpected sense of reversal to readers.

To sum up, the reversal enriches the storyline and plays a role in preventing KFC advertising copies from appearing dull and tedious. And this reversal reveals the best way to solve problems or obstacles, which is to eat Thursday's KFC special offers. And it cleverly

transitions to KFC brand advocacy. This also implies that if readers face the same challenge, they can take corresponding actions (i.e., to purchase KFC products) (Casebeer 2008). Therefore, the reversal of advertising helps consumers understand the benefits of the product (Chiu et al., 2012). Compared to unresolved outcomes, a positive outcome after solving a problem can alleviate tension and attract more favor from the audience or readers (Zillmann et al., 1975). In addition, the positive ending presented in the story and the positive emotional experience brought to readers by the entire story are conducive to triggering consumers' sharing behavior (Berger & Milkman, 2012).

Figure 7 ⁷



5.1.4 Integrating trending topics

Through qualitative content analysis of 92 collected KFC posts, it is found that 27 of them integrate trending topics and social events on the Chinese social media during that period. The fact that nearly one-third of KFC advertising copy contents are related to topical social popular topics or events highlights the topicality as a prominent feature of KFC Crazy Thursday textual meme copies. The contents of these copies mostly draw on and reserve the elements or characteristics these trending topics at the time, and create meme stories via comminating these trending topics' features with KFC Crazy Thursday campaign. Take the example of figure 8, which integrate the current trending topic of Chinese Valentine's Day into KFC advertising text. This copy makes up the story that Yuelao (a Chinese immortal similar to Cupid) asks others for

⁷ Translation: "KFC Crazy Thursday Literature is just online beggar literature! Internet beggars are the most annoying. Wouldn't those who want to eat KFC buy it themselves? They just reach out for everything. Someone who thinks I'm right can order me a KFC!"

products of KFC Crazy Thursday on Chinese Valentine's Day. The copy in figure 9 adapts the international political event in which the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was shot, and invents a scenario that the gunman changed the plan of shooting the Japanese Prime Minister to Friday in order to eat KFC on Thursday, so as to skillfully combine this political event with KFC's crazy Thursday campaign. Another example presented in figure 10 is adapted from a current popular Chinese idol drama (*CangLanJue*), which fictionalizes the plot of the male protagonist in this idol drama threatening others to demand KFC Crazy Thursday's products.

The strategy of retaining and adapting the characteristics of these trending topics has played a positive role in promoting the “noticeability” and “visibility” of KFC Crazy Thursday's related copywriting (Manzanaro et al., 2018, p.376). Because consumers have been used to use social media platforms to obtain the information and its related development of various topical events around the world in the digital (Hermida et al. 2012; Voorveld et al. 2018). This raises the reality that “being topical and newsworthy” are crucial for digital content on social media (Mazerant et al., 2022, p.1414). Therefore, the KFC copies combining the information of KFC Crazy Thursday with various instant trending topics, indicate that the KFC brand is also paying attention to the world that consumers are currently concerned about. These advertising copies that integrate social hotspots events are also considered newsworthy by consumers. Furthermore, KFC brand establish connections and relevance with the Chinese public through such copywriting, while also receiving positive reactions from consumers. Indeed, there are studies that indicate that topical advertising combining brand messages with trending topics the public concern is positively correlated with consumer response and can trigger more positive consumer reactions (Angel et al., 2019; Borah et al., 2020).

In addition, these KFC topical meme texts are also creative. KFC meme texts' copywriters use popular topics and events to cleverly tell stories that combines KFC Crazy Thursday with a variety of trending topics in A more widely accepted approach for the public, which stories are new but not unfamiliar for the Chinese public. This gives the copywriting originality, that is, the degree to which the information is “novel”, “distinctive”, and “fresh” (Mazerant et al., 2022, p.1416).

Figure 8⁸



Figure 9⁹

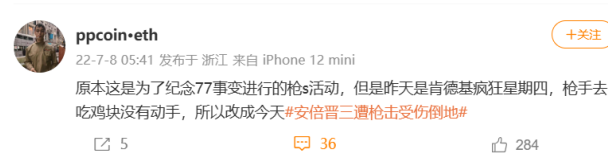


Figure 10¹⁰



5.1.5 Intertextuality

One can find that KFC Crazy Thursday copies have the feature of intertextuality, namely many KFC copy texts not only have similar relations in structure (mentioned in above section), but also have similar relations in textual content. The term "intertextuality" is coined by Julia Kristeva in the 1960s to express the relationship that text depends on other texts whether structurally or in content (Panigrahi & Chandra, 2013). Kristeva's (1980, as cited in Dore, 2020),

⁸ Translation: Hello everyone, I am Yuelao (A Chinese immortal similar to Cupid). Today is Chinese Valentine's Day, and also KFC Crazy Thursday. Due to the limited salary provided by the Government of the Heavenly Realm, I cannot afford to eat KFC Crazy Thursday's products. Therefore, as long as someone transfers me 50 CNY, I will bless her favorite couple for having sex tonight.

⁹ Translation: This was originally planned as a shooting event to commemorate the 77 Incident, but due to KFC Crazy Thursday yesterday, the gunman went to eat KFC, so that the event did not take place. The shooter then changed the plan to today, and as a result, #Shinzo Abe was shot, injured, and fell to the ground#.

¹⁰ Translation: I am Dongfang Qingcang (a protagonist idol drama). Today is KFC Crazy Thursday, with a little golden crispy meat costing 9.9 yuan. I am 50, please eat it, otherwise I will destroy the world, destroy the earth, hide the little flower demon, and let you not see the scene of our love.

gives the definition of intertextuality that "any text is constructed of a mosaic of quotations: any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (p.103). Gerard Genette defines intertextuality as "as quotation, plagiarism and allusions that occur inside a text" (as cited in Panigrahi & Chandra, 2013, para. 12).

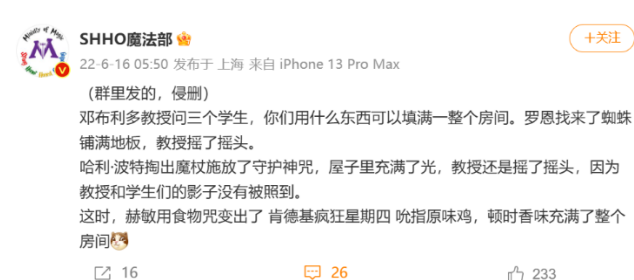
Modern advertisers, in order to make it easier for audiences to understand complex types of advertising text and related product information, will set up some features or elements similar to previous advertising texts or the real world in their advertisements (Panigrahi & Chandra, 2013). In the case of KFC Crazy Thursday, its content of copy often draws on past copies in which the intertextual relationship is established with existing advertising copywriting. Take the example of the posts in figures 4 and figure 11. Through comparison, it can be found that the meaning and structure of the two texts are completely the same. The only change making different is the way the language is presented, that is, the Chinese copy (figure 4) has been translated into Japanese (figure 11). Due to the intertextuality, consumers will not feel unfamiliar when they see the copy in Japanese. Even if the readers or consumers do not understand Japanese, they know that this is a copy about KFC Crazy Thursday, which has achieved KFC's marketing goals. By comparing the posts in figures 6 and figure 12, it can also be found that this intertextual feature exists between these two posts. Except for the only difference being the subject or protagonist of the copies, the meaning and structure of the two copies are completely the same, thus forming an intertextual relationship between the two copies.

Summarily, adopting the method of intertextuality to adapt and create the advertising texts is helpful for the audiences or consumers to understand the content of the copy. Quoting what they are familiar with can help them reduce the possibility of losing interest, because of their unfamiliarity about the narrative content in the process of reading and understanding. On the other hand, for the audience with creative enthusiasm, these intertextual copies can inspire them to imitate creation. Because the difficulty of creation has been reduced.

Figure 11¹¹



Figure 12¹²



5.1.6 First-person perspective: “I” as the subject

One can find that out of the 92 collected KFC Crazy Thursday posts, 68 of them used the personal pronoun “I” as the subject for advertising content construction. More than two-thirds of the KFC copies adopt a first-person perspective, indicating that the first-person narrative perspective is another significant characteristic of KFC Crazy Thursday advertising textual meme copies.

KFC copies which adopt “I” as the subject can be divided into two categories from the perspective of the characters referred to by “I”. One kind of first-person copies often starts the whole story with “I am a someone...”. This character comes from a well-known culture or event, and has extraordinary abilities that are different from ordinary people. For example, the copy

¹¹ Translation refers to figure 4

¹² Translation: Professor Dumbledore asked three students: what could you use to fill the entire room? Ron used spiders to cover the floor, but the professor shook his head. Harry Potter took out his wand and cast the Patronus Charm to fill the room with light. However, the professor still shook his head, as he explained the shadows were not captured by the light. Then, Hermione used a Food Spell to conjure up fried chicken of KFC Crazy Thursday, and the aroma filled the entire room.

presented in Figure 5 starts with "I am rapper TangoZ..."; The copy of figure 8 starts with "Hello everyone, I am Yuelao (the Chinese god of love) ..."; In the post presented in figure 10, the beginning is "I am Dongfang Qingcang (the male protagonist of an idol drama) ...". Such a kind of texts helps to reduce the psychological distance with readers (Libby et al., 2005).

In the second type of copies, "I" refers to the blogger, who shares personal experiences and thoughts in the identity and tone of an ordinary person. For example, in figure 4, the post starts from "Today is the darkest and saddest moment in my life...". Figure 7's copy begins with "KFC Crazy Thursday Literature is beggar literature, and I hate online beggars the most...". The copy in figure 8 starts with "Damn, I really can't bear to watch news about the suffering of kind elderly people...". The first-person perspective adopted by KFC advertising texts can not only reduce the psychological distance from the readers, but also increase the authenticity of the text, because the use of "I" makes the copy content similar to people's daily communication behavior of expressing real ideas, making the copies sincere (Grice, 1989). Furthermore, these copies' content read more like the sharing of personal content information, weakening the factor of advertising marketing, thereby reducing the psychological exclusion of consumers or viewers from reading such marketing related posts.

5.1.7 Social interaction attributes

KFC Crazy Thursday advertising texts has the characteristic and functions of the first-person narrative perspective pointed out and analyzed in the last section. The attribute of being able to trigger social interaction. On the one hand, this attribute of social interaction benefits from the use of the first-person perspective. Because the use of the first-person perspective as the carrier of emotional information and needs, can convey more personal details, as well as generate a sense of intimacy by reducing the psychological distance from readers (Libby et al., 2005; Stern, 1991;). Secondly, directly using the personal pronoun 'I' gives the impression that the copywriter is directly communicating with recipients, thereby creating an interpersonal relationship between the copywriter and the recipient. Third, most of the stories with first-person perspective use "Today is KFC Crazy Thursday, give me 50 and invite me to eat".

In addition, 56 of the 68 first-person stories end with the sentence "Today is KFC Crazy Thursday, who invites me to eat KFC" (see the example of figure 4, figure 5, figure 13). This kind of catchy language organized a questioning dialogue between the author and readers around

KFC Crazy Thursday activity. As everyone builds awareness of KFC Crazy Thursday advertising texts, this sentence gradually forms a form of online social culture. In the post presented in figure 13, the blogger directly quotes and rewrites the sentence as "Today is KFC Crazy Thursday, I went out to eat KFC. Is anyone going with me?" and shares it on her own account to interact with her followers. The language used in this post is informal and conversational, which create a sense of familiarity and approachability and increase the possibility for others to respond and participate in the invitation.

figure 13¹³



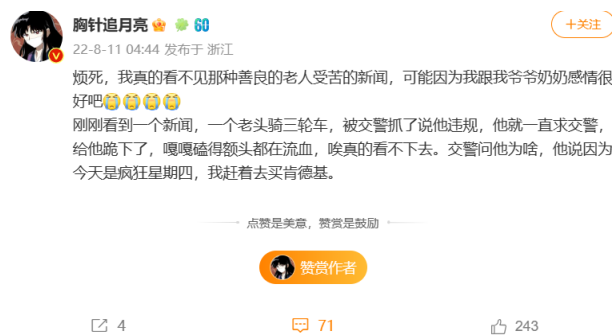
5.1.8 Humor with incongruity

The style of humorous is an important feature of KFC Crazy Thursday textual meme copies. The comedic effects of these copies are usually achieved in an incongruous manner which are led by going against common sense or is caused by logical disharmony in the content. The comic effect of these KFC copies is usually realized in an uncoordinated way. According to Carroll (2014), the key of comic amusement is "a revolution from some pre-supported norm", that is, comic amusement dominates people's original cognition and understanding of the world through differences or incongruities, and even comes from the subversive expression of this framework (P17). Take the example in figure 2. In this story, the way to get the female protagonist out of the threat of the bossy male protagonist and prevent the company from going bankrupt is to invite this male protagonist to eat the KFC Crazy Thursday products. The trend of this story is completely inconsistent with the public's cognition of reality. Because the KFC products discounted on Thursday are too cheap to be accepted by a person with high power and status. Therefore, it violates people's common-sense concept. However, it is this incongruous or absurd

¹³ Today is Crazy Thursday. I went out to eat KFC. Is anyone coming with me?

feeling that brings unexpected funny and funny effects to readers. In addition, humor as one important characteristic of memes is observed by Malodia et al. (2022). Through research, Weber and Quiring (2019), find that humors as one significant element for communication, can trigger infectious communication. Once such communication behavior is initiated, it is likely to trigger the mimicked behavior of the receiver, such as actively modifying memes (Smoski & Bachorowski, 2003; Weber & Quiring, 2019; Malodia et al., 2022).

Figure 14¹⁴



5.1.9 Synthesis

Above section analyzed and identified 8 characteristics through focusing on the data of KFC advertising texts. By referencing the content-related factors of viral memes proposed by Malodia et al. (2022), these 8 characteristics are further refined and integrated into four generalized features, which includes amusement value, relevance, high iconicity and social interaction attribute (or spreadability). More details are as following:

Amusement value. Humor is an important characteristic of KFC meme copies. This incongruous humor composed of reversal content structure and storylines, brings consumers pleasant emotional experiences. In addition, KFC's copywriting also adopts various genres as the beginning of its advertising copies, which stimulates consumers' interest in reading.

Relevance. The meme contents of KFC Crazy Thursday's advertising texts are relevant. On the one hand, KFC's copies skillfully integrate various trending topics on the current Chinese internet as plot elements into various stories about KFC Crazy Thursday activity. On the other

¹⁴ Translation: Damn it, I really can't see the news of kind-hearted elderly people suffering, maybe because I have a good relationship with my grandparents. Just now I saw the news that an old man was caught by traffic police for violating regulations while riding a tricycle. The old man kept pleading with the traffic police and knelt down, kowtowing until his forehead was bleeding. Ah, I really can't keep up with it. The traffic police asked the old man why he violated the rules, and the old man said, 'Because today is Crazy Thursday, I rushed to buy KFC.'

hand, KFC's copies also have intertextuality, that is, its content is similar to previous KFC advertising texts. For example, by simply changing the protagonist of a certain previous advertising copy, a new advertising copy is created. In short, these text memes are characterized by intertextuality. It is precisely this feature of intertextuality that has inspired the audience to imitate and copy the structure and content of the text, and finally contributed to the user generated content of KFC Crazy Thursday.

High iconicity. The copies of KFC Crazy Thursday activity have their own distinct style. Firstly, the advertising texts exhibit conciseness as they employ a vocabulary consisting of simple and readily comprehensible words and sentences. In addition, most of KFC's texts adopt a relatively fixed content structure as a whole, that is, the beginning with a variety of genres is followed by an ending about eating KFC Crazy Thursday's product. Thirdly, the sentence of "Today is KFC Crazy Thursday, who can treat me to eat?" is a commonly used lingo that constantly appears in various KFC Crazy Thursday copies so as to impress the consumers.

Social interaction attribute. In addition, the text of KFC Crazy Thursday mostly adopts the first-person perspective, that is, "I" is the subject of the text. It has been proved by research that the first-person perspective can draw the psychological distance between the author and the reader (Libby et al., 2005). Therefore, the first-person perspective plays a role in reducing the audience's resistance to KFC's digital marketing content. The use of the first-person perspective also endows these texts with social interaction attributes. These copywriters with potential interactive attributes form a social interactive culture centered around KFC Crazy Thursday activity.

5.2 The process of KFC Thursday becoming memes

RQ 2: How does the sign of "KFC Crazy Thursday" become an internet meme?

Semiotics covers two different schools of thought. From a broad perspective, semiotics is a theory that studies symbols or signs and explains the generation of meanings (Botan & Soto, 1998). According to Saussure's semiotics of the binary concepts, linguistic sign consists of two parts: signifier (the form of the symbol, such as sound and image) and signified (the concept represented by the symbol) (Hawkes, 2003). In the case study of the KFC Crazy Thursday marketing campaign, the term "KFC Crazy Thursday" composed of eight Chinese characters is a

"signifier", and the concept of KFC launching promotional activities with discounts on Thursdays is "signified". The structural relationship between the signifier and the signified constitutes a linguistic sign. Saussure's traditional semiotics considers this relationship or signification as internal to sign, and regards the sign as the unit of information in the aspect of describing language (Botan & Soto, 1998). However, the meaning is not explained, which indicates that Saussure's semiotics has limitations in describing the process of signing and explaining meaning within the context (Botan & Soto, 1998).

According to Peirce, signification is "a result of a process internal to the sign system" as well as "a process of interpretation in the mind of the interpreter" (Botan & Soto, 1998, p.31). Peirce proposes a triadic model involving three inseparable elements (representamen, interpretant and object) of meaning, which can provide a more comprehensive framework in explaining the complex meaning system and the meaning variation in different contexts. This chapter will explore the reason and process of the sign of "KFC Crazy Thursday" becoming an internet meme through Peircean triadic model. The sign of "KFC Crazy Thursday" will be placed in the context created by eight posts which are mentioned in above section.

5.2.1 Analysis through triadic model

According to Peircean triadic model, representamen of the sign of "KFC Crazy Thursday" is the phrase of "肯德基疯狂星期四(KFC Crazy Thursday)", which consists of 8 Chinese characters. Objects refers to the KFC's promotional activities with discount on every Thursday launched in mainland China. The interpretant refers the understanding and idea of "KFC Crazy Thursday" based on different contexts formed in the minds of interpreters, which indicates the interpretant may change in different KFC advertising texts. Therefore, the following analysis focuses on the interpretation section.

In the context showed in figure 2, the male protagonist is set as a bossy CEO who holds supreme control over the female protagonist. Influenced by the unilateral oppressive power of the male protagonist, the female protagonist is forced to have a child and her life and death are constrained by the male protagonist, which gets the female protagonist into extreme weakness and passive situation. But as the plot develops, the male protagonist said that if the female protagonist invites himself to eat KFC Crazy Thursday's products, it can help the company where the female protagonist works not go bankrupt. The sign of "KFC Crazy Thursday" is introduced

into the context and can be interpreted to have another meaning. This indicates that "KFC Crazy Thursday" is an effective tool to help the female protagonist alleviate current difficulties and get rid of them.

In figure 3 and figure 4, these two texts are both personal expressions of negative emotions from the first-person perspective. The text of figure 3 uses rhetorical device of metaphor to express his/her loneliness and pain (i.e., comparing oneself to a sunflower that has been casually discarded). The text in figure 4 also uses a first-person perspective, similar to the format of diary writing, to show that he/her is in a negative state at the moment, but he/her dares not pass on negative emotions to friends avoiding causing negative effects on them. But as the ending quotes the turning point of KFC Crazy Thursday, it provides a new perspective for the interpretation of the sign of "KFC Crazy Thursday", that is, in the negative state of "me", the products of KFC Crazy Thursday activities can truly help "me" improve the mood and get rid of sadness, and it is also practical help from friends' material aspects.

In the post showed in figure 5, the central theme of the entire post is in the final section, which is that "I found out today is KFC Crazy Thursday. Give me 100 yuan to eat a KFC special offer package, so I'll show you a photo next time I go on the red carpet". This sentence indicates that the package offered on KFC Crazy Thursday is a medium with exchange value.

In the post of figure 6, compared to the first two students filling the room with straw and candles, the third student chose KFC Crazy Thursday's fried chicken, implying that the aroma of this fried chicken can fill the entire room.

In the post presented in figure 7, the blogger employs a technique of transitioning from negativity to positivity. Initially, the blogger critiques "Crazy Thursday Literature" as a type of "online begging literature," but then introduce the central theme of the post by stating, "If you think I'm right, please invite me to eat KFC." This sentence ingeniously transforms the phrase "KFC Crazy Thursday" into a means of affirming others' actions.

In the post of figure 8, wanting to buy discounted KFC products that are only sold on Thursdays is the reason for the traffic violations committed by the elderly in the story. Even if they anticipate traffic violations, the elderly should seize the time to buy KFC on Thursday, implying the huge influence of KFC's products on Thursday. The elder man in the story is willing to pay the price for it, even involving violations and life risks, hoping to get the delicious

KFC products. So the interpretation of the KFC Crazy Thursday sign in this meme story is a powerful attraction that makes people willing to pay the legal and even life price for it.

In the post of figure 9, the blogger makes up a story with a reversal plot, that is, the gunman actually changed the time of the plan to assassinate the Japanese Prime Minister in order to eat KFC's fried chicken on Thursday. This reversal setting reflects that eating KFC chicken nuggets on Thursday is more important, even more ceremonial. Because such a major plan to shoot the Japanese Prime Minister will be changed because of KFC's crazy Thursday activities. Therefore, in this post, the symbol of KFC crazy Thursday can be interpreted as a very important ceremonial event to eat KFC on Thursday.

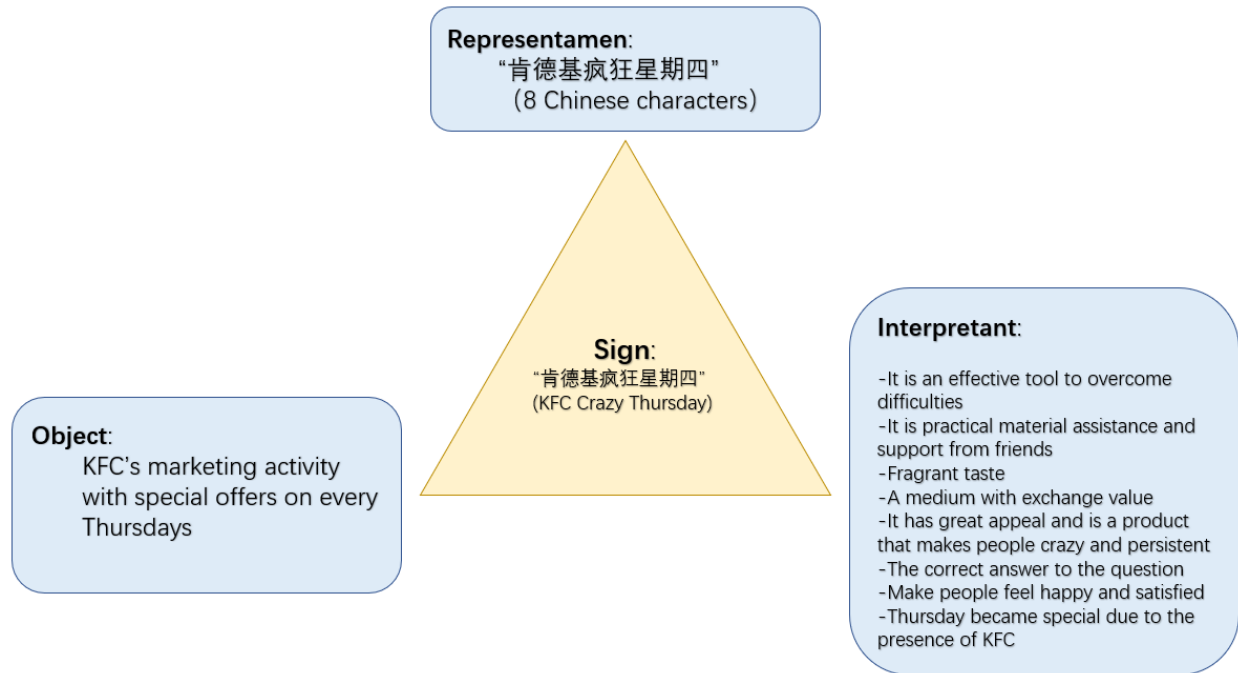
5.2.2 Synthesis

Through Peirce's semiotics analysis of the above examples, it can be drawn the conclusion that KFC Crazy Thursday as a sign is composed of object, representamen and interpretant. In these copies, there is no change in object and representamen, that is, object is a fast-food discount event held by KFC every Thursday; representamen is the presentation form of the sign "KFC Crazy Thursday", which consists of 8 Chinese characters. However, the meaning of the KFC Crazy Thursday sign in consumers' minds will be influenced by the different contexts formed by different copies, which will lead to different interpretations. After the above analysis of 7 copies, it is concluded that the interpretation of KFC Crazy Thursday's sign has the following aspects:

- It is an effective tool to overcome difficulties
- It is practical material assistance and support from friends
- Fragrant taste
- A medium with exchange value
- It has great appeal and is a product that makes people crazy and persistent
- The correct answer to the question
- Make people feel happy and satisfied
- Thursday became special due to the presence of KFC

This dynamic interaction between the consistent object and representamen (i.e., the sign of "KFC Crazy Thursday") and the diverse interpretants is what enable "KFC Crazy Thursday"

accommodate various interpretations and resonates with different online communities so as to contribute to this sign popularity and viral spread. In this way, the sign of "KFC Crazy Thursday" transforms from a simple concept or sign to a multifaceted and widely recognized internet meme.



5.3 The engagement motivation evoked by viral KFC memes

RQ3: What motivates Chinese consumers to engage in KFC Crazy Thursday meme marketing activities?

The contents of KFC memes are often presented in exaggerated texts, so providing authentic information about KFC Crazy Thursday activities is not the focus of KFC meme copywriting. So the meme of consumer participation in this aspect is not based on meeting cognitive needs. This chapter will explore people's motivation to participate in KFC Crazy Thursday meme marketing through interviews with the focus group.

5.3.1 The hedonistic space of escaping from reality

When asked about the impression of KFC Crazy Thursday advertising texts, all respondents mention the characteristic of making people laugh. Respondents generally believe that KFC's textual meme copies are humorous and comedic, which leave the most lasting impression on

them. When we are asked why KFC's copies made them feel funny, the respondents' responses are generally consistent, that is, the reversal plots make KFC's Crazy Thursday copies funny.

“The sudden turning point surprised me.”

“I initially thought it was an ordinary story. But due to the sudden appearance of the words 'KFC Crazy Thursday', I realized that it was a joke about KFC. There is a novel feeling.”

“The beginning of the story doesn't align with the ending regarding KFC Crazy Thursday, which creates a sense of unexpectedness and coherence.”

The respondents' responses also indirectly verified the previous analysis on the characteristics of KFC's incongruous humor and reversal structure. In other words, the sense of humor of KFC copies comes from the incongruity between the structure and content of the texts. This is also in line with scholars' research consequence of the characteristics of memes that using humor is one important characteristic of memes (Malodia et al., 2022).

In addition, different audiences have different perceptions of the humor of the same advertising copy. After presenting the 13 posts of KFC Crazy Thursday selected in the previous analysis section to the respondents, they presented two opposing attitudes on the post of figure 9 (the story about the Japanese Prime Minister being shot).

" I think the joke of Japanese Prime Minister being shot is a bit out of place. Although many people may think it is humorous, it makes me feel a little offensive and uncomfortable. I think it is better not to joke about things involving human life. Of course, as a China person, I can understand the feelings that everyone hates Japan. "

Another respondent expresses the opposite opinion:

" I just feel that life, work and study have already made me so tired, so I don't want to be restricted by moral things. Sometimes I just want to have a rest, relax and clear my mind. So, I just take a look at this thing just for fun."

From the feedbacks of the respondents, it is evident that individuals who express aversion to this post do so based on their own moral sensibilities. The respondents who find the post interesting and funny attribute their perspective to the significant pressures they experience in

their lives, so they do not want to consider practical issues, such as the moral issues implicit in this post. This also indicates that enjoying happiness and pleasure, as well as avoiding real-life problems, are important reasons for consumers to use the internet and social media (Korgaonkar & Wolin, 1999). These group of people are ideologically consistent with the hedonism of modern consumption. Due to emotions affecting the shopping process and consumption behavior, modern consumers are irrational simply and they will develop the desire to consume, when they feel stressed or unhappy. (Dündar & Gökalp, 2016, as cited in Uncu, 2020).

5.3.2 A way to acquire Cognition

Involving various genres and trending topics is another impression mentioned by the respondents of KFC Crazy Thursday's copies.

" Sometimes I just learn about something on Weibo hot topics list, and soon I see the KFC Crazy Thursday copies about this event."

Other respondents add:

"Sometimes I may not be familiar with that popular topic, but as a result, I learned about it from the copy of KFC Crazy Thursday."

"I had ever learned about the scandal of Ding Zeren (a celebrity in China), from the copy of KFC Crazy Thursday. I even searched for relevant information about it at that time."

It can be seen from this feedback that KFC's copies can provide consumers with some cognitive information. In addition, the elements in these unfamiliar copy contents may become a factor to attract consumers. According to the above answers, when the consumers who found KFC mentioned a star they do not know, they would be curious and be driven by curiosity to learn more about it. This is because individuals will learn to join the group driven by a sense of belonging to avoid disharmonious isolation in society (Shaw et al., 1999).

5.3.3 Social interaction currency

Through the focus group interview, it is found that the ways of respondents participating in the meme marketing of KFC Crazy Thursday include clicking likes and sharing the funny with their friends. The motivation for sharing coping with friends is to share happiness and maintain one's interpersonal relationships. One respondent explain that:

“When I find funny contents, I just want to send them to my good friends. because I also want them to experience my happiness. On the other hand, when facing less familiar friends, posting funny things can quickly create a sense of closeness, which I think.”

“Sometimes I just want to eat KFC, so I ask my friend if she/he wants to come with me, in the easy and witty way of quoting KFC Crazy Thursday copies.”

The interview responses revealed the motivation behind sharing interesting content with friends, which is to meet their social integrative needs. By sharing interesting and engaging content, individuals aim to strengthen their relationships and cultivate a sense of connection with others, which is consistent with Katz et al.'s research on social integrated needs in UGT (1973). According to Katz et al. (1973) social integrated needs refer to enhance and maintain the relationships between individuals and external world. Overall, the interview results support the view that sharing interesting content with friends is a system for social integration, relationship maintenance, and connection with like-minded individuals. This behavior reflects people's inherent desire for social interaction. Therefore, this social gratification is considered a significant factor in participating in memes marketing (Malodia et al., 2022).

Chapter 6 Conclusion and discussion

As the last part of this article, this chapter will conclude this research through summarizing the key findings related to the research aim and questions above mentioned in the chapter of introduction. Then, this chapter will discuss the contributions in the aspects of marketing management and academia strategic communication. This chapter will also review the limitations and point out relative potential topics of further research.

Based on the two gaps mentioned in the introduction chapter, this research aims to enrich academic research on viral textual memes for meme marketing and provides a relative case study within the Chinese context. It gives answers through studying three research questions based on the case of KFC Crazy Thursday campaign in China: *What are the characteristics of KFC's viral textual internet memes? How does the sign of "KFC Crazy Thursday" become an internet meme? What motivates Chinese consumers to engage in KFC Crazy Thursday meme marketing activities?*

6.1 The characteristics and influences of textual meme content

This study analyzed and summarized the characteristics of collected textual meme texts of KFC Crazy Thursday through qualitative content analysis, and identified 8 characteristics focusing on the content, including concise structure, attractive openings, reversal plots, integrating trending topics, intertextuality, first-person perspective, social interaction attribute and humor. The further analysis conducts on these 8 features to obtain general features of 4 textual memes, including amusement value, relevance, high iconicity, and social interaction attribute. These findings regarding textual meme features aligns with the results of a previous study conducted by Malodia et al. (2022) on content-related factors leading to viral memes. Therefore, the viral textual memes have similar characteristics to other forms of memes.

Viewed from a semiotic perspective, KFC Crazy Thursday is examined as a sign through Peirce's triadic model. Analysis reveals that the sign of "KFC Crazy Thursday" encompasses eight hidden meanings in different contexts. This proves advantageous in triggering consumer associations and resonance, thereby facilitating the propagation and transformation into viral network memes

6.2 The motivations of Chinese consumers engaging meme marketing campaign

In terms of Chinese consumers' engagement motivations, according to the focus group interview, it is confirmed the positive effects of the factors aligned with Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), that is, the needs of hedonism, social interaction, and cognition of information in consumers participating in textual meme marketing. Through the analysis of consumer participation motivations in this study, it was found that the entertaining and humorous nature of marketing content can trigger a great desire for consumer participation. And these humorous contents create a virtual space for consumers to temporarily escape reality such as life pressure. When consumers consume this funny information, their impression of the brand and its product activities is also deepened. Secondly, according to research, obtaining cognitive information is also a factor that can stimulate consumer participation. This understanding is not limited to the knowledge of brand products, but also includes various social or world knowledge information, such as current social events and celebrity gossips. Consumers may develop curiosity and motivation to read a complete copy due to their interests as well as their lack of understanding of these elements in the copy. The third motivation is based on social needs. Through interviews and analysis, it was found that consumers tend to spread and share copy content within their social circle due to their social interaction need to share funny contents with friends.

6.3 Contributions

Through a comprehensive literature review, it was found that meme marketing is an effective means of attracting audiences and enhancing brand awareness on social media platforms. Combining literature research and empirical analysis of the KFC Crazy Thursday case, it was found that textual memes also play an obvious positive role in expanding audience base and brand or event awareness in meme marketing. This study explores into the characteristics and functions of textual memes through case study, which provides reference example for marketers or managers to create viral content through textual memes. When marketers use textual meme marketing to promote consumer engagement, it is helpful to refer to KFC's meme marketing strategy showed in this study, such as by skillfully utilizing rhetorical devices and reversal plots, consumers are provided with a rich emotional experience primarily characterized by entertainment and humor. Additionally, the constant updating of advertising

content by integrating trending topics maintains innovation and freshness. Furthermore, the use of first-person narrative form reduces consumers' rejection of marketing content, while stimulating their desire for social interaction and engagement. When a brand adopts the marketing strategy of original textual internet memes, marketers should create different contexts as much as possible to make their textual internet meme contain different meanings, promoting it easier for consumers to associate, resonate, and spread. In the process of creating memes, marketers should pay attention to the needs of hedonism, social interaction, and recognition of information of consumers.

From a theoretical perspective, this study partly confirms the content-related factors of Malodia et al. (2022) and the needs within UGT. It also contributes theoretical framework of meme marketing through summarizing features of viral textual memes. This study provides insights based on case studies in the field of strategic communication, exploring meme marketing as a popular trend in online communication today. This further enriches the knowledge about brand communication themes and adds more content to the field of strategic communication.

6.4 Limitation and future research

The purpose of this study is to explore the characteristics of textual memes in meme marketing and consumers' motivation to participate in text meme marketing through qualitative case studies. The research focuses on Mainland China, aiming to show the impact of Chinese cultural background on the characteristics and effects of textual meme marketing and the engagement of Chinese consumers. Future scholars can further conduct case studies of different regions and cultural backgrounds to enrich academic research and theoretical knowledge of textual meme marketing from a cross-cultural perspective. For example, cases of textual meme from other countries, regions, and various cultural backgrounds can be selected, and their characteristics and the process of generating symbolic meanings can be studied.

Another limitation of this study stems from the limitations of focus group respondents. The respondents participating in the offline focus group are mainly the people studying or working in Sweden. There may be deviations in the interviews on consumer participation, because they are unable to participate in KFC's offline activities in Chinese Mainland. This includes the biases and representativeness of respondents: conducting interviews with Chinese respondents abroad may introduce the possibility of selection bias and limited representativeness. There is also a

cultural background issue: Chinese respondents residing abroad may have different cultural experiences and perspectives compared to those living in China. Their cultural background and exposure to different cultural influences may affect their understanding and interpretation of marketing cases. This may bring potential limitations when capturing subtle differences in Chinese cultural background. Therefore, future research can choose to interview respondents living in Mainland China to make up for this limitation.

In the focus group, it is found that not all copies are considered interesting and funny. Some of the jokes in the copies are considered inappropriate by the respondents, especially when it comes to political event and sensitive social topics. Consumers experiencing such emotions can have some negative impacts on meme marketing, such as feeling rejected and bored with meme marketing activities. Future research can start from this practical issue and explore what the boundaries of meme content are in meme marketing, as well as how brands control the sense of boundaries in the marketing process.

Reference

- Botan, C. H., & Soto, F. (1998). A semiotic approach to the internal functioning of publics: Implications for strategic communication and public relations. *Public relations review*, 24(1), 21-44. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111\(98\)80018-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111(98)80018-0)
- Brodie, R. J., Hollebeek, L. D., Juric, B. & Ilic, A. (2011), “Customer engagement: conceptual domain, fundamental propositions, and implications for research”, *Journal of Service Research*, 14(3): 252–71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094670511411703>
- Berger, J., & Milkman, K. L. (2012). What makes online content viral?. *Journal of marketing research*, 49(2), 192-205. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmr.10.0353>
- Borel, L. H., & Christodoulides, G. (2016). Branding and digital analytics. In *The Routledge companion to contemporary brand management* (pp. 287-300). Routledge.
- Benaim, M. (2018). From symbolic values to symbolic innovation: Internet-memes and innovation. *Research Policy*, 47(5), 901-910. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2018.02.014>
- Brubaker, P. J., Church, S. H., Hansen, J., Pelham, S., & Ostler, A. (2018). One does not simply meme about organisations: exploring the content creation strategies of user-generated memes on Imgur. *Public Relations Review*, 44(5), 741– 751. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2018.06.004>
- Badham, M., Luoma-aho, V., Valentini, C., & Lumimaa, L. (2022). 28. Digital strategic communication through digital media-arenas. *Research handbook on strategic communication*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Bell, E., Bryman, A., & Harley, B. (2022). *Business research methods*. Oxford university press.
- Biden, A. (n.d.). *Focus Groups or One-on-One Interviews: What’s better?* Tools4dev. <https://tools4dev.org/blog/focus-groups-or-one-on-one-interviews-whats-better/>
- Casebeer, W. D. (2008). The stories markets tell: affordances for ethical behavior in free exchange. In Paul J. Zak (Eds.), *Moral Markets: The Critical Role of Values in the Economy*, Princeton University Press (pp. 3-15). <https://ideas.repec.org/h/pup/chapts/8657-1.html>
- Chiu, H. C., Hsieh, Y. C., & Kuo, Y. C. (2012). How to align your brand stories with your products. *Journal of retailing*, 88(2), 262-275. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretai.2012.02.001>

- Carroll, N. (2014). The nature of humour. *Humour: A very short introduction*. OUP Oxford.
- Chen, Y. R. R. (2018). Consumer engagement in social media in China. *The handbook of communication engagement*. John Wiley & Sons
- Cao, Y. (2020, November 11). Airui: Gonggu Neirong Shengtai Youshi, Guominji Yingyong Weibo Yiran Nianqing. Iresearch:
<https://report.iresearch.cn/content/2020/11/346815.shtml>
- Deacon, T. W. (2004). Memes as signs in the dynamic logic of semiosis: Beyond molecular science and computation theory. *International Conference on Conceptual Structures* (pp. 17-30). Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Berlin Heidelberg.
- De Lencastre, P., & Côte-Real, A. (2010). One, two, three: A practical brand anatomy. *Journal of Brand Management*, 17, 399-412. <https://doi.org/10.1057/bm.2010.1>
- Davis, C. A., Heiman, J. R., & Menczer, F. (2015). A role for network science in social norms intervention. *Procedia computer science*, 51, 2217-2226.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.procs.2015.05.499>
- Darley, W. K. (2016). Brand building via integrated marketing communications. In *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary Brand Management* (pp. 233-249). Routledge.
- Dore, M. (2020). Intertextuality and failed taboo humour in advertising. *The European Journal of Humour Research*, 8(3), 99-114. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7592/EJHR2020.8.3.Dore>
- Ding, Y. (2022, April 13). ‘Kendeji “Fengkuangxingqisi”, Chengle Yingxiaojie Tianhuaban? CBNDdata: <https://www.cbndata.com/information/241907>
- Erragcha, N. O. Z. H. A., & Romdhane, R. (1970). Social networks as marketing tools. *The Journal of Internet Banking and Commerce*, 19(1), 1-12.
<https://www.icommercecentral.com/open-access/social-networks-as-marketing-tools.php?aid=37961>
- Egede, E. A., & Chuks-Nwosu, E. (2013). Uses and gratification theory and the optimization of the media in the privatization of state owned enterprises in Nigeria. *Journal of Economics and Sustainable Development*, 4(16), 202-212.
<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/234646116.pdf>
- Fomin, I. (2019). Memes, genes, and signs: Semiotics in the conceptual interface of evolutionary biology and memetics. *Semiotica*, 2019(230), 327-340.

- Falkheimer, J., & Heide, M. (2014). Strategic communication in participatory culture: From one- and two-way communication to participatory communication through social media. In *The Routledge handbook of strategic communication* (pp. 361-374). Routledge.
- Ferreira, M., Zambaldi, F., & Guerra, D. D. S. (2020). Consumer engagement in social media: scale comparison analysis. *Journal of product & brand management*, 29(4), 491-503. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPBM-10-2018-2095>
- Grice, Herbert Paul (1989), *Studies in the Way of Words*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Guenther, L., Ruhrmann, G., Bischoff, J., Penzel, T., & Weber, A. (2020). Strategic framing and social media engagement: Analyzing memes posted by the German Identitarian Movement on Facebook. *Social Media+ Society*, 6(1), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119898777>
- Hawkes, T. (2003). *Structuralism and semiotics*. Routledge.
- Hsieh, H. F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative health research*, 15(9), 1277-1288. DOI: [10.1177/1049732305276687](https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687)
- Hermida, A., Fletcher, F., Korell, D., & Logan, D. (2012). Share, like, recommend: Decoding the social media news consumer. *Journalism studies*, 13(5-6), 815-824. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1461670X.2012.664430>
- Hollebeek, L. D., Glynn, M. S., & Brodie, R. J. (2014). Consumer brand engagement in social media: Conceptualization, scale development and validation. *Journal of interactive marketing*, 28(2), 149-165. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1016/j.intmar.2013.12.002?journalCode=jnma>
- He, D. (2023, January 8). Kendeji Fengkuangxingqisi, Shi Ruhe Chengwei 2022Nian Poquan Yingxiao Toupai De? *FoodTalks*: <https://www.foodtalks.cn/news/40507>
- James McCrae, (May 8, 2017). Meme Marketing: How Brands Are Speaking A New Consumer Language. *Forbes* <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescommunicationscouncil/2017/05/08/meme-marketing-how-brands-are-speaking-a-new-consumer-language/?sh=31ab0bf937f5>
- Katz, E., Haas, H., & Gurevitch, M. (1973). On the use of the mass media for important things. *American sociological review*, 38(2), 164-181. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2094393>

- Korgaonkar, P. K., & Wolin, L. D. (1999). A multivariate analysis of web usage. *Journal of advertising research*, 39(2), 53-68.
<https://eds.s.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=6819c6d7-f5b4-4634-8bc7-2a2f8d07da60%40redis>
- Ko, H., Cho, C. H., & Roberts, M. S. (2005). Internet uses and gratifications: A structural equation model of interactive advertising. *Journal of advertising*, 34(2), 57-70.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2005.10639191>
- Kelly, L., Kerr, G., & Drennan, J. (2010). Avoidance of advertising in social networking sites: The teenage perspective. *Journal of interactive advertising*, 10(2), 16-27.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15252019.2010.10722167>
- Kaplan, A. M. (2012). If you love something, let it go mobile: Mobile marketing and mobile social media 4x4. *Business horizons*, 55(2), 129-139.
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0007681311001558>
- Kulkarni, A. (2017). Internet meme and Political Discourse: A study on the impact of internet meme as a tool in communicating political satire. *Journal of Content, Community & Communication Amity School of Communication*, 6, 13-17.
https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3501366
- Kujur, F., & Singh, S. (2020). Visual communication and consumer-brand relationship on social networking sites-uses & gratifications theory perspective. *Journal of theoretical and applied electronic commerce research*, 15(1), 30-47. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4067/S0718-18762020000100104>
- Lincoln, Y. S., and Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Leung, L., & Wei, R. (2000). More than just talk on the move: Uses and gratifications of the cellular phone. *Journalism & mass communication quarterly*, 77(2), 308-320.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900007700206>
- Libby, L. K., Eibach, R. P., & Gilovich, T. (2005). Here's looking at me: the effect of memory perspective on assessments of personal change. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 88(1), 50-62. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/15631574/>
- Lewis, B. K. (2009). *Social media and strategic communication: Attitudes and perceptions among college students* (Doctoral dissertation).

- Lestari, H. P. (2016). *A Semiosis process analysis on KFC advertisement posters using CS peirce's theory* (Bachelor's thesis).
- Mick, D. G., & Oswald, L. R. (2006). The semiotic paradigm on meaning in the marketplace. *Handbook of qualitative research methods in marketing*, 31, 1-25. <https://marketingsemiotics.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/SemioticParadigm.pdf>
- Muntinga, D. G., Moorman M., & E. G.Smit. (2011). "Introducing COBRA as Exploring Motivations for Corporate-Related Social Media Use." *International Journal of Advertising*, 30 (1), 13–46. <https://doi.org/10.2501/IJA-30-1-013-046>
- Makarova, A., Soluyanov, N., Gozalova, M., Loseva, E., Kobeleva, O., & Gazilov, M. (2018). Verbal Component of Advertisement and the Problem of its Perception. *European Online Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*, 7(2), pp-478. <https://european-science.com/eojnss/article/view/5381>
- Manzanaro, L., Valor, C., & Paredes-Gázquez, J. D. (2018). Retweet if you please! Do news factors explain engagement?. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 24(4), 375-392. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13527266.2018.1428818>
- Malodia, S., Dhir, A., Bilgihan, A., Sinha, P., & Tikoo, T. (2022). Meme marketing: How marketers can drive better engagement using viral memes? *Psychology & Marketing*, 39(9), 1775–1801. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21702>
- Mazerant, K., Willemsen, L. M., Neijens, P., van Schooten, E., & van Noort, G. (2022). Topical advertising in enduring events: the role of timing and creativity in engagement with social media brand messages during COVID-19. *International Journal of Advertising*, 41(8), 1411-1432. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02650487.2022.2074119>
- Papacharissi, Z. (2002). The self online: The utility of personal home pages. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 46(3), 346-368. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1207/s15506878jobem4603_3
- Panigrahi, D., & Chandra, N. D. R. (2013). Intertextuality in Advertising. *Language in India*, 13(9). <https://eds.p.ebscohost.com/eds/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=74639587-efaf-4f0d-b9b8-d984b4f8ae8e%40redis&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBIPWlwLHVpZCZzaXRIPWVkey1saXZlInNjb3BIPXNpdGU%3d#AN=90154042&db=cms>

- Paraskevaidis, P., & Weidenfeld, A. (2021). Perceived and projected authenticity of visitor attractions as signs: A Peircean semiotic analysis. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 19, 100515.
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2212571X20301372>
- Pinpaiyiti, (2023, January 15). 2022 Niandu Shida Pinpai Guanjianci, 8000Zi Shendu Jiexi. *DIGITALING*: <https://www.digitaling.com/articles/882496.html>
- Quan-Haase, A. (2012). Is the uses and gratifications approach still relevant in a digital society? Theoretical and methodological applications to social media. *Journal of Mass Communication & Journalism*. 2(7), 1-3. <https://www.hilarispublisher.com/open-access/is-the-uses-and-gratifications-approach-still-relevant-in-a-digital-society-theoretical-and-methodological-applications-to-social-media-2165-7912.1000e124.pdf>
- Russo, G. (2012). The Identity of consumers in Social Networks. Italian Internet Users and New Experience of Consumption. *Polish Sociological Review*, 179(3), 401-412. <https://polish-sociological-review.eu/The-Identity-of-Consumers-in-Social-Networks-nItalian-Internet-Users-and-New-Experience,125714,0,2.html>
- Raaphorst, K., Duchhart, I., Van Der Knaap, W., Roeleveld, G., & Van Den Brink, A. (2017). The semiotics of landscape design communication: towards a critical visual research approach in landscape architecture. *Landscape Research*, 42(1), 120-133.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01426397.2016.1257706>
- Resseguie, J. L. (2019). A Glossary of New Testament Narrative Criticism with Illustrations. *Religions*, 10(3), 217. <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/10/3/217>
- Razzaq, A., Shao, W., & Quach, S. (2023). Towards an understanding of meme marketing: conceptualisation and empirical evidence. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 1-32.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/ref/10.1080/0267257X.2022.2158906?scroll=top&role=tab&aria-labelledby=refs>
- Razzaq, A., Shao, W., & Quach, S. (2023). Towards an understanding of meme marketing: conceptualisation and empirical evidence. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 1-32.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0267257X.2022.2158906>
- Sheth, J. N., Newman, B. I., & Gross, B. L. (1991). Why we buy what we buy: A theory of consumption values. *Journal of Business Research*, 22(2), 159–170.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/0148-2963\(91\)90050-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/0148-2963(91)90050-8)

- Stern, B. B. (1991). Who talks advertising? Literary theory and narrative “point of view”. *Journal of advertising*, 20(3), 9-22.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00913367.1991.10673344>
- Shaw, D. L., McCombs, M., Weaver, D. H., & Hamm, B. J. (1999). Individuals, groups, and agenda melding: A theory of social dissonance. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 11(1), 2-24. <https://academic.oup.com/ijpor/article/11/1/2/834480?login=true>
- Smoski, M., & Bachorowski, J. A. (2003). Antiphonal laughter between friends and strangers. *Cognition and Emotion*, 17(2), 327–340.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02699930302296>
- Shifman, L. (2013). Memes in a digital world: Reconciling with a conceptual troublemaker. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 18(3), 362–377.
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/jcc4.12013>
- Shifman, L. (2014). *Memes in Digital Culture*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Sharma, H. (2018). Memes in digital culture and their role in marketing and communication: A study in India. *Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture*, 9(3), 303–318.
<https://app.dimensions.ai/details/publication/pub.1109949692>
- Stephan, M., & Akyuz, D. (2022). Semiotics from a Social Constructivist Perspective. *International Journal of Science and Mathematics Education*, 20, 1499–1519. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10763-021-10212-y>
- Sternvad, F., & Wendel, J. (2009). Bloggar—Organisationernas Heliga Graal? En kritisk diskussion kring organisationers möjlighet att uppnå dialogbaserad kommunikation genom bloggar. *Unpublished master's thesis. Lund, Sweden: Lund University. Retrieved from*
<https://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordId=1465317&fileId=8961004>
- Sohaib, M., Safeer, A. A., & Majeed, A. (2022). Role of social media marketing activities in China's e-commerce industry: A stimulus organism response theory context. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 1-16.
<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.941058/full>

- Sun, M. (2022, November 24). "Fengkuangxingqisi" Jiudeliao Kendeji Ma? V Wo 50 Gausu Ni Da'an. *Finance.Sina*: <https://finance.sina.com.cn/tech/internet/2022-11-24/doc-imqqsmrp7395988.shtml>
- Taecharungroj, V., & Nueangjamnong, P. (2015). Humour 2.0: Styles and types of humour and virality of memes on Facebook. *Journal of Creative Communications*, 10(3), 288–302. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0973258615614420>
- Tsai, W. H. S., & Men, L. R. (2017). Consumer engagement with brands on social network sites: A cross-cultural comparison of China and the USA. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 23(1), 2-21. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13527266.2014.942678>
- Uncu, G. (2020). HEDONIST ADVERTISEMENTS THROUGH WOMAN BODY: MAGNUM ADVERTS. *Kesit Akademi Dergisi*, 6(24) , 1-22. <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/kesitakademi/issue/58243/838540>
- Van Doorn, J., Lemon, K. N., Mittal, V., Nass, S., Pick, D. N., Pirner, P. & Verhoef, P. C. (2010), "Customer engagement behavior: theoretical foundations and research directions", *Journal of Service Research*, 13(3): 253–266. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094670510375599>
- Voorveld, H. A., Van Noort, G., Muntinga, D. G., & Bronner, F. (2018). Engagement with social media and social media advertising: The differentiating role of platform type. *Journal of advertising*, 47(1), 38-54. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00913367.2017.1405754>
- Vasile, S., Mototo, L., & Chuchu, T. (2021). Using "Memes" As a Marketing Communication Tool in Connecting with Consumers Within the Age of Digital Connectivity. *International Review of Management and Marketing*, 11(3), 30–35. <https://econjournals.com/index.php/irmm/article/view/11313>
- Vardeman, C. (2022). *Memes, Minds, & Marketing: How Generation Z Perceives and Processes Memetic Advertisements* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Colorado at Boulder).
- Wimmer, R.D. and J.R. Dominick (2000) *Mass Media Research: An Introduction*, 6th edn. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

- Webster, J. G. (2005). Beneath the veneer of fragmentation: Television audience polarization in a multichannel world. *Journal of Communication*, 55(2), 366-382.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2005.tb02677.x>
- Webster, J. G., & Ksiazek, T. B. (2012). The dynamics of audience fragmentation: Public attention in an age of digital media. *Journal of communication*, 62(1), 39-56.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2011.01616.x>
- Willis, B. (2014, July 5). The Advantages and Limitations of Single Case Study Analysis. *E-International Relations*: <https://www.e-ir.info/2014/07/05/the-advantages-and-limitations-of-single-case-study-analysis/>
- Weber, M., & Quiring, O. (2019). Is it really that funny? Laughter, emotional contagion, and heuristic processing during shared media use. *Media Psychology*, 22(2), 173–195.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2017.1302342>
- Wu, L., Dodoo, N. A., & Choi, C. W. (2023). Brand anthropomorphism on Twitter: communication strategies and consumer engagement. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPBM-12-2021-3787>
- Xiao, L., Li, X., & Zhang, Y. (2023). Exploring the factors influencing consumer engagement behavior regarding short-form video advertising: A big data perspective. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 70, 103170.
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0969698922002636>
- Yu, F., Wenhao, Q., & Jinghong, Z. (2022). Nexus between consumer's motivations and online purchase intentions of fashion products: a perspective of social media marketing. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13.
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9257183/>
- Zerfass, A., Verčič, D., Nothhaft, H., & Werder, K. P. (2018). Strategic communication: Defining the field and its contribution to research and practice. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(4), 487–505.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1553118X.2018.1493485>
- Zenner, E., & Geeraerts, D. (2018). One does not simply process memes: Image macros as multimodal constructions. In E. Winter-Froemel, & V. Thaler (Eds.), *Cultures and Traditions of Wordplay and Wordplay Research* (pp. 167– 194). De Gruyter.

Zulli, D., & Zulli, D. J. (2020). Extending the Internet meme: Conceptualising technological mimesis and imitation publics on the TikTok platform. *New Media & Society*.

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1461444820983603>

Zhang, X., & Sheng, J. (2017). A Peircean semiotic interpretation of a social sign. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 64, 163-173.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S016073831730049X>

Zillmann, D., Hay, T. A., & Bryant, J. (1975). The effect of suspense and its resolution on the appreciation of dramatic presentations. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 9(4), 307-

323. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/0092656675900057>

Appendix 1

Informed Consent Form

Invitation to Participate

This research studies the textual memes' feature in meme marketing and motivations of consumers. The research is conducted by Shuqiao Yang to qualify for the master's degree in Strategic Communication at Lund University in Sweden.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to present qualitative research analyzing textual memes' features and consumers participating motivations.

Research Method

If you decide to participate, I will invite you to participate in a focus group interview in Helsingborg. For example, you will be asked: What is your impression of these copies? Your answers will be reported together with data from other research participants.

Benefit

By participating, you will contribute to a better understanding of the knowledge about motivations about consumer engagement.

Confidentiality - Anonymity - Security

If you decide to participate, your identity as a participant in this study, and any other personal information gathered about you during the study, will be kept strictly confidential and will never be made public. All data containing personal information from which you could be identified will be deleted after the data analysis. Electronic data will be password protected. When the study is completed, all data containing personal information will be destroyed. The published results of the study will contain only data from which no individual participant can be identified.

Voluntary participation

You are being asked to make a voluntary decision whether or not to participate in this study. If there is any part of the information that is not clear, please feel free to ask for clarifications. If you would like to consult with someone not associated with this study that will be all right, too. If you decide not to participate, or if you later decide to discontinue your participation, your decision will not affect your present or future relations with the researchers or Lund University. Upon request, a copy of the information, data, and results will be made available to you. You will always be free to discontinue participation at any time, and all data collected up to that time as a result of your partial participation will be destroyed without being used in the study. If you decide to participate, please provide your signature as indicated below.

What Your Signature Means

Your signature on this Consent Form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in this research project and agree to participate. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without any consequences. Your continued participation should be informed as your initial consent so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Signature of Participant

Date

Print Name:

Signature of Investigator

Date

Contact Information:

Shuqiao Yang

Shuqiao0714@outlook.com

Appendix 2

Ficus group questions list:

1. How do you know about KFC Crazy Thursday is?
2. Have you seen the copies of KFC Crazy Thursday on social media platforms?
3. What are your impressions of these copies for KFC Crazy Thursday?
4. Would you be happy to see these textual copies on social media? Why?

cognitive needs

1. Do you look at KFC Crazy Thursday copies to understand what information this activity itself contains?
2. What information did you obtain from these copies? (KFC's marketing activities? Social attributes?)

affective needs

1. Do you feel happy when you see these copies? Why?
2. What types of copies leave a deep impression on you?
3. Do you think the copy of KFC Crazy Thursday will tell you about the trending topics?
4. Do you think KFC Crazy Thursday Literature represents a trend?

social integrative needs

1. What comes to mind when you come into contact with these cops? Or why do you want to like or comment?
2. Do you cite the meme 'KFC Crazy Thursday' in your daily life or on social media?
3. For what reason would you like, comment on, and share meme content like this?
4. When you share these copies with friends, do you have a need to showcase your personality? I am quite trendy. Like a manifestation of one's own personality?
5. Will these copies affect your behavior of purchasing KFC in daily life? Would you associate it with KFC and purchase it on Thursday?
6. Do you like, comment on, or even create your own emoticon pack for KFC Crazy Thursday?
7. Do you think these copies are valuable to you?
8. What role did these copies play in your interactions with others?
9. Do these copies bring you any other associations?
10. Do you use these copies in your daily life? Under what circumstances will it be referenced? Or what time period does it refer to? What platform was referenced?

tension release needs

1. Do you feel that some of the content in the copy is a bit offensive? Do you feel a sense of escapist pleasure when browsing this type of content?
2. Do you agree that the advertising text for KFC Crazy Thursday will bring you a sense of pleasure? Why?

Appendix 3

	User id	link	Release time
Figure 1	5824884094	https://weibo.com/5824884094/LEnnSn1im?refer_flag=1001030103_	2022-7-28
Figure 3	2388054827	https://weibo.com/2388054827/LwSKte2Km?refer_flag=1001030103_	2022-6-9
Figure 4	1183929802	https://weibo.com/1183929802/LEnhcFyJD?refer_flag=1001030103_	2022-7-28
Figure 5	2176497885	https://weibo.com/2176497885/LCe926Qys?refer_flag=1001030103_	2022-7-14
Figure 6	5662909615	https://weibo.com/5662909615/LCfmU22wx?refer_flag=1001030103_	2022-7-14
Figure 7	6556259695	https://weibo.com/6556259695/LB9yJs9vB?refer_flag=1001030103_	2022-7-7
Figure 8	5824884094	https://weibo.com/5824884094/LAycEwnbX?refer_flag=1001030103_	2022-7-3
Figure 9	5752739628	https://weibo.com/5752739628/LFsCToRbg?refer_flag=1001030103_	2022-8-4
Figure 10	6612036333	https://weibo.com/6612036333/LBjiaiCBT?refer_flag=1001030103_	2022-7-8
Figure 11	6568610189	https://weibo.com/6568610189/M0rZT04UV?refer_flag=1001030103_	2022-8-11
Figure 12	7618923072	https://weibo.com/7618923072/LCghh9066?refer_flag=1001030103_	2022-7-14
Figure 13	6016162796	https://weibo.com/6016162796/LxXWVfb3V?refer_flag=1001030103_	2022-6-16

