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The “Madness” of Chinese Younger Consumer Marketing

*An Applied Cultural Consumer Insight Analysis of Chinese
Brand Marketing’s Ludic Turn*

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Abstract

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Mad literature has become one of the leading digital Chinese youth subcultures since 2022. Rooted from this, Mad marketing as Chinese special brands practices have achieved millions of attentions and discussions in social media. This thesis aims to utilize one of the leading e-commerce platforms in China, Taobao’s golden peach award ceremony, together with another two related mad marketing practices of brands Spes and Florasis, conducting applied cultural analysis and consumer insight research through case studies and semi-structured interviews with Chinese younger consumers to explore the root of “Mad Marketing”, consumers’ perception of the success or failure of this marketing performance beyond quantitative data in social media and serve as an inspiration for brands in China. Huizinga's play theory, Foucault's theory related with speech control, madness and power, and Applbaum’s critics theory towards the classical pleasure-pain consumption principle are entangled and applied in this thesis to assist in illuminating the complexity and pursuits behind Chinese younger generation through this unique consumption behavior.

The findings suggest the need for brands to move beyond mere mimicry and engage authentically with modern youth culture, understand the desires, frustrations, and aspirations of Chinese youth. The Mad Literature subculture offers valuable insights into the power of madness, rebellion, play, and authenticity in connecting with younger consumers. The findings suggest that brands that can authentically tap into these values stand to build meaningful, long-lasting relationships with their audience.

Keywords: Mad Marketing; Mad Literature; Consumer Ethnography; Foucault; Play Theory; Pleasure-Pain Consumption Principle

摘要

中国式发疯营销：对中国品牌营销游戏化转向的消费者洞察及应用文化分析

邱倬伊

自 2022 年以来，“发疯文学”已成为中国青年亚文化中最主要、最持久的数字文化之一。在此基础上，作为中国特色品牌实践的“发疯营销”，在社交媒体上获得了数以百万计的关注和讨论。本文旨在利用淘宝网的金桃奖颁奖典礼，以及与之相关的另外两个也进行发疯营销的品牌——诗裴丝和花西子，通过案例研究和对中国年轻消费者的半结构式访谈，进行应用文化分析和消费者洞察研究，探讨发疯营销的文化根源，以及在社交媒体量化数据之外，增加消费者对这一营销行为的质性成败感知，期望能启发在中国的品牌。文章将赫伊津哈的游戏理论、福柯的话语控制理论、疯狂与权力论述、阿普尔鲍姆对快感-痛苦消费原则的批判理论相结合，分析和揭示中国年轻一代消费行为背后的复杂性和追求。

研究表明，品牌需要超越单纯的对青年亚文化的模仿，真实地参与现代青年文化，了解中国青年的欲望、挫折和期冀。透过发疯文学亚文化，有助于读者对疯狂、反叛、游戏和真实的力量产生深度共鸣，与年轻消费者建立深度联系，与受众建立有意义的、持久的关系。

关键词：发疯营销；发疯文学；消费者民族志；福柯；游戏理论；快感-痛苦消费原则

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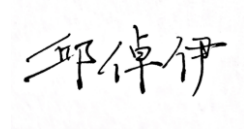


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The sudden bursts of life, the random gestures and words, the wind of madness that suddenly breaks lines, shatters attitudes, rumples draperies-while the strings are merely being pulled tighter.

----- Foucault, 1988: 34

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

“Mad Literature” is a modern Chinese youth online subculture. It usually manifests in writing, as a style known for using non-logical grammar, annoying phrases, massive repetitive short sentences, emojis or videos to release the stress of the younger generations and express their dissatisfaction towards the reality or present their state on the verge of collapse. In 2022, this subculture expanded through a user in Douban platform, which is a Chinese online database and social networking service that allows registered users to record information and create content related to film, books, music, recent events, and activities in Chinese cities. This user urged the e-commerce customer service to send the product quickly: *“I know I don’t deserve the early shipment, while everyone else has received their goods, not like me -- so carefully when I hasten the shipment and become a ridiculous joke. Reality does not go well, everyone treated me with cold indifference, even on the Internet I know I do not deserve to reach the threshold of early shipment*” During the double eleven (11.11)¹, many consumers imitate the mad literature style to urge shipment in the e-commerce platform, and share them in social media. These actions resulted in #mad literature and other related hashtags virally spread among social media users. #Mad Literature so far has reached 150 million views and 114k interactive discussions in Weibo², not counting other social media platforms. Derived from #mad literature, “#the mental state of college students and Gen-Z” has reached more than 100 million views on Weibo. Since the start of the Mad Literature in 2022, until now it has become an expression style for the younger generation to express themselves in the digital world and has not been weakened during the dissimilation process after one year.

In addition, in Douban platform, citing one single mad literature discussion group as an example, the number of the articles and discussions posted since its establishment in 2023 February 21st have exceeded 18,000 (see figure 1 and 2 below). The users in the community posted short or long articles about their daily life, topics ranging from complaints about their

¹ Double 11: Chinese unofficial holiday and shopping season. Chinese people often view this discounted shopping season as a self-reward opportunity to purchase a lot of consumer goods they dare not to buy on other days.

² Weibo: a Chinese microblogging website and app. Launched by Sina Corporation and is one of the biggest social media platforms in China.

study, teachers, work for a long time but without holidays, frustrations on losing weight, stupid leaders at work, etc. (see some examples in figure. 3)

The screenshot shows a Douban group page for "发疯文学鉴赏小组" (Crazy Literature Appreciation Group). The group was created on 2023-02-21 by Jiang Ting (姜婷) and is categorized as "Leisure" (闲趣). The group's description explains that "crazy literature" is a style of writing where words and sentences are combined to evoke strong emotions, similar to Qiong Yao's dramatic novels. It notes that every word in this style screams madness and that the language art is quite extreme. The group's purpose is to provide a space for people who are tired from work and school to vent and speak freely. A quote from the group states, "Crazy is also an art" (疯子也是一种艺术). The group rules section, updated on 2023-02-22, prohibits posting content not allowed by the community guidelines. The page also features a list of members, including users like 烧仙草 (Burnt grass jelly), omom星 (omom star), Max_sharkE, ioio ioio, 狂奔小乌龟 (Running little turtle), 小冬瓜 (winter melon), and momo momo momo. A large red banner for FLYERALARM is visible at the bottom right of the page.

Figure. 1 & 2 – Screenshots of one mad literature discussion group in Douban

consumers. Two brands, Spes and Florasis, stood out by utilizing Mad Marketing practices to attract consumers online and raised tremendous discussion, positive or negative brands awareness and brand exposure. (They will be introduced separately in more details in the methodology case studies part as supplement material.)

Then in November 2023, Taobao, as one of the biggest e-commerce platforms in China, launched a video in Bilibili³ about a “Golden Peach” Award Ceremony for top seller brands in Taobao. In this video, most of the brands appear on the stage and interact with each other through their brands’ Anthropomorphic toys (see figure. 4), and only one brand’s CEO appears on the stage through recorded video (see figure. 5). All the toys walked towards the stage and some received the awards, performing their best in very “abnormal” style (see figure. 6) , (because normal brand toys in China for a long time act seriously in a low-key style, which will not let themselves stand out) or fight with each other on stage or off stage (see figure. 7) together with the ugly peach host’s (see figure.5) introduction or comment lines.



Figure. 4 – Brand toys sitting in the audience area; Figure. 5 – The CEO of Ji Xiangju’s speech

³ Bilibili: A Chinese video-sharing website and app. It began by hosting videos related with ACG (anime, comics, games) and now has spread to wider range of contents.

brands Spes and Florasis, conducting applied cultural analysis and consumer insight research in China to figure out the root of Mad Marketing, the success and failure of this marketing performance beyond quantitative data in social media. Huizinga's play theory, Foucault's madness and speech control theory, and Applbaum's critics theory towards the classical consumer and marketing cultural studies are entangled and applied in this thesis to assist in illuminating the complexity and pursuits behind the Chinese younger generation through the consumption behavior.

1.3 Overview of Thesis Structure

The thesis is structured in five sections. The previous research section provides the research progress in China about Mad marketing and Mad literature, leading to the research gaps and the values this thesis can contribute to, then followed by the theoretical framework, which provides analytical tools and perspectives to support the analysis of the data from the fieldwork. The third section is methodology, where a thorough description of the fieldwork, further details of case studies will be provided. The fourth section is the analysis of the empirical data, which is composed of three steps: the cultural analysis of the root of mad marketing, the success points in the award ceremony related mad marketing practices, and the failure points or room for improvement for future brand marketing. Lastly, a conclusion will be drawn to highlight the key findings and indications for future research.

2. Previous Research

As this thesis is mainly focused on the case study of a Mad Marketing campaign as a brand rejuvenation in China targeting younger consumers, the previous research will be first centered around Chinese brands' rejuvenation, and explore mad marketing as one of the strategy branches, and lastly the youth subculture behind this marketing strategy.

2.1 Chinese Brands' Rejuvenation

The studies towards Chinese brands rejuvenation are centered around the explanation of specific old brands' revitalization, reposition and reinforcement processes, which are further

focused on the rejuvenation on brand’s position, brand’s image and brand’s communication strategies. However, the systematic theoretical analysis towards traditional enterprise brands are mostly absent.

For example, when it comes to the reposition of old brands, Cui (Cui Tingting, 2023) took the successful Guizhou Maotai alcohol brand rejuvenation strategy as a case study example, analyzing the three driving forces towards younger consumers, which are “products innovation, co-branding marketing and channels’ digitalization (Cui Tingting, 2023: 191).” In addition, Guo (2023) also conducted case study of Guizhou Maotai⁵, yet adding insights of “scenario marketing, turning products into Intellectual property (IP) symbols, co-branding with other famous IPs (Guo, 2023: 85)” that are popular among youth cultures.

Regarding brand image rejuvenation, Li (2009) pointed out China began the brand rejuvenation era, defining the concept of brand rejuvenation. Hu (2018) applied 5W model, E-IMC⁶ (Network Integrated Marketing) theories, demonstrating the trends and necessity of brand image rejuvenation. Tan and Mao (2019) from a brand marketing angle, analyzed the reasons behind the decline of old brands’ market share, which mainly included outdated brand image, monotonous product forms, old marketing channels, etc.

The brand communication studies are closely related with dynamic and changing consumer culture. Zhu (2020) applied theories in Jean Baudrillard’s *Consumer Society* to study brand rejuvenation practices in China, concluding a strategy framework for old brands’ revitalization, which represents by six consumer cultures: “symbolization of brand positioning, visualization of brand image, aestheticization of product packaging, idolization of brand endorsers, the symbolic feature of communication forms and the experiential feature of communication channels (Zhu, 2020: 63).” Wei (2019) pointed out the importance of producing entertaining and youth-catering contents under the digital era, analyzing the successful brand rejuvenation cases of communication practices utilizing online subcultures to conduct brand

⁵ Maotai: a style of baijiu made in the town of Maotai, Guizhou Province, China. Maotai is made from sorghum, a wheat based qū, and water from the Chishui River, and it uses traditional Chinese techniques of fermentation, distillation, and aging, to produce a spirit with a unique nutty, grain forward, and in many ways savory aroma and flavor.

⁶ E-IMC: The concept of integrated marketing communication (IMC) was introduced in the 1980s by Schultz and Schultz and has since changed the way communicators and marketers interact and conduct business. The American Marketing Association defines IMC as “a planning process designed to assure that all brand contacts received by a customer or prospect for a product, service, or organization are relevant to that person and consistent over time.”

story-telling. Wang (Wang Hui, 2022) targeted Chinese domestic makeup brands, applying structured interviews to explore their marketing influence and consumer feedback, analyzing the pros and cons of strategies. He (He Tingting, 2022) applied Lasswell's 5W model⁷ and SWOT⁸ analysis framework, which analyzed “New Domestic Brands”, and used “user participation formula” to quantitatively analyze typical cases, concluding that innovation of marketing channel and product design should focus on contents and services that can enhance experience on consumer personification, consumer engagement, etc. Beyond above, Yang (2023) from post-subculture theory framework, stated the key of brand rejuvenation lies in brands through communicating brands’ value proposition to “acquire the acknowledgement and resonance from the younger consumer community (Yang, 2023: 11).” He also analyzed the motivations of contemporary youth groups to turn in social environment, living space and identity, and presented a turning trend of “interest convergence, empathy integration and digital production (Yang, 2023: 14)”, so as to sort out the theoretical background of the circle expansion of mainstream culture, leaving insights for future studies of approaches for mainstream business culture towards younger consumer cultures.

2.2 Chinese Brands’ Mad Marketing Strategy

As Mad Marketing just arises in 2023, the studies inside China and outside of China are all in shortage. There are some consumer insight reports or comments in Chinese social media, yet lack in-depth consumer ethnography and consumption studies perspectives. For example, Wang Xr (2024) represents the typical interpretation manner in Chinese social media from marketers or brands perspective, list out and analyze briefly about the successful Mad marketing campaigns, suggesting brands should “provide emotional values in a more easy-going and authentic manners to get closer to Chinese younger consumers (Wang Xr, 2024: 79)”. However, this explanation merely regarded the product sales number as the influence of the marketing

⁷ 5W: Lasswell's model of communication is one of the first and most influential models of communication. It was initially published by Harold Lasswell in 1948 and analyzes communication in terms of five basic questions: "Who?", "Says What?", "In What Channel?", "To Whom?", and "With What Effect?".

⁸ SWOT analysis: (short for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) is a business strategy tool to assess how an organization compares to its competition. The strategy is historically credited to Albert Humphrey in the 1960s, but this attribution remains debatable.

campaigns, without inquiring consumers face-to-face, thus lacking more in-depth exploration of the consumer behavior and reasons behind the successful mad campaigns.

2.3 Chinese Youth Subculture - Mad Literature

As Mad Marketing is rooted from the Mad Literature Youth Subculture, which is a unique cultural phenomenon in China, previous research is mostly conducted within China, most of them interpreting from communication studies, literary history and linguistic studies perspective.

From linguistic angle, Wu (2023) analyzed the three main features of the mad literature style to explain the reason behind its popularity, featured as “output of large number of words to make the reader feel that the speaker has serious attitudes; deliberate omission of logic and punctuations to make the reader feel overwhelmed; intimidating and exaggerated tone to make the reader feel being interrogated (Wu, 2023: 115).”

From a literary history perspective, Jia (2023) compared the performativity of Mad literature Style with the authentic mad language features, “the purest, most total form of *qui pro quo*; it takes the false for the true, death for life, man for woman, the beloved for the Erinnys and the victim for Minos (Foucault, 1971: 33)” mentioned by Foucault. “Mad Literature is rational, deliberate and ludic. Though when reading word by word the grammar collapses, yet the ideographic meaning is still understandable, with even stronger expressiveness of emotion, which are the totally opposite features of mad language (Jia, 2023: 45).” Jia claimed also that the writers of the mad literature are actually not mad, but apply a “Kayfabe” mad performance. Here “kayfabe” indicates portraying events and characters as real in professional wrestling despite being scripted. Originally it’s a code word within the industry, it helped keep the scripted nature hidden from the public. Wrestlers often remain in character outside the ring to preserve this illusion of authenticity. According to Jia, Mad Literature is utilized as a solution to the “the exacerbated anxiety of self-subjectivity and the split selves under the gaze from the other in the social media era (Jia, 2023: 45).” Beyond above, from communication studies perspectives, Wang Zy (2023) used Erving Goffman’s *Dramaturgical Model* and Bakhtin’s *Carnivalesque*, the former one is a sociological perspective that uses the analogy of theatrical performance to analyze everyday social interactions, categorizing them into "actors," "audience," and "front" and

"back" stages; while the latter one describes the carnival as a ritualistic spectacle that suspends traditional power structures, where kings can become paupers and vice versa. In literature, the carnivalesque refers to works that subvert dominant power structures through humor and chaos. Wang Zy interpreted that Chinese younger generation view Social Media Platforms as their "frontstage of life, a carnival plaza where they can perform and live out of their own wills and find sense of belonging by resonating with others; while the reality is the backstage, restricted by the social framework and norms (Wang Zy, 2023: 94)."

In addition, Zhang and Zhao (2023) use Randall Collins' *Interaction Ritual Chain Theory*, which aims to develop a radical microsociology and suggests that successful rituals generate symbols of group membership and boost individuals' emotional energy, whereas failed rituals deplete emotional energy. Zhang and Zhao analyzed the motive and mechanism of the dissemination of "Mad Literature" among young people using social media as the interactive field, concluding that the "dissemination goes through boundary establishment, emotional catharsis and collective revelry, turning individual user's emotional release to collective emotional resonance, and finally reinforced both the subcultural community identity and self-identity recognition (Zhang & Zhao, 2023: 52)." Similarly, by utilizing Dawkins's *Memetics theory*, which suggests that cultural evolution follows Darwinian principles, with memes as the units of culture. Biologist Richard Dawkins coined "meme" to explain this idea within "Universal Darwinism." Evolutionary processes involve information being copied, varied, and selected, known as variation with selective retention. In biological evolution, genes are the replicators of this information. Rao (2023) analyzed the Mad Literature's "replicated, alienated, and selective (Rao, 2023: 134)" dissemination process. Apart from analyzing the production mechanism, Shen (2023) warned that "Mad Literature as an aggressive language Meme Youth Subculture, its rebellious and critical nature can be taken advantage of to dissolve the Chinese mainstream ideology or lead the Chinese youth culture to the morbid point of triviality by turning everything into entertainment (Shen, 2023: 111)."

Chen (Chen, 2023) used *Social Safety Valve Theory* by Lewis Coser, who proposed that the safety valve rationale philosophically justifies protest by allowing citizens to express displeasure with government policies on controversial issues. Chen viewed the Mad Literature functioned as an "emotion transfer station online (Chen, 2023: 48)", transforming the "youths' abnormal and rebellious emotion state into a new normality (Chen, 2023: 50)" to resist the

discipline from societal serious and hypocrite reality; transforming the “virtual fields with a new power hierarchy to resist the youths’ disadvantaged societal relationship in reality (Chen, 2023: 49).”

In short, the previous research in China has had fairly in-depth analysis into the Mad Literature youth subculture yet lacks first-handed consumer ethnography to study Chinese younger social media users as consumers and Mad marketing campaigns. How to maximize the applicability of combining Mad Literature Youth Subculture with consumer marketing? How can brands both from home and abroad really listen into Chinese younger consumers’ hearts from their unique subcultures for one time, instead of from thousands of similar and indifferent consumer insight reports and meetings? Hope the following will give the answers.

3. Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this section is to assemble a theoretical toolbox that can be used in analysis. Other perspectives will also be added throughout the paper to help deepen analysis. Foucault’s *speech control* theory (Foucault, 1971) and *madness and civilization* studies (Foucault, 1988), Huizinga’s *Play Theory* in his book *Homo Ludens* (Huizinga, 1980), Applbaum’s *Pleasure-pain principle* (Applbaum, 1998) in consumption are the three main theoretical framework I will focus on. In the analysis section, first, I will begin by outlining Foucault’s theories to study Mad literature’s cultural root, then, connecting it to Huizinga’s Play theory to study the ludic turn of the award ceremony; lastly, Applbaum’s pleasure-pain principle in consumption field will be utilized to examine the success and failure of this mad marketing performance according to informants’ perception.

3.1 Foucault: Madness and Speech Control Theory

In his book “Madness and Civilization (Foucault, 1988)”, Foucault traces the cultural evolution of the concept of insanity (madness) in three phases: the Renaissance, the Classical Age and the Modern era. This historical archeological approach inspires author to also analyze the cultural root of Mad Literature Youth Subculture by tracing back to the ancient Chinese cultures and continues to develop until the modern era. however, this thesis’s analysis will be mainly focused on Foucault’s discussion in the Modern era.

In the late 18th century, it was witnessed that the establishment of “medical institutions (Foucault, 1988: 45)” aimed at confining the mentally ill, overseen by medical professionals. These institutions emerged from two primary societal motivations: the desire to provide treatment for the mentally ill outside of impoverished “family (Foucault, 1988: 252)” settings, and the longstanding practice of “segregating or morally purifying (Foucault, 1988: 259)” socially undesirable individuals to safeguard the broader community. Over time, these dual purposes became “obscured (Foucault, 1988: 275)”, despite adopting a more humane approach to clinical care for the mentally ill, these modern medical establishments retained a degree of coercive control reminiscent of medieval approaches to madness. As seeing the doctor's ability to cure madness, patients increasingly “self-surrendered to the doctor's authority (Foucault, 1988: 275)”, viewing them as both “divine and sinister (Foucault, 1988: 275)”, possessing powers beyond human understanding. Foucault, in the preface to the 1961 edition of “Madness and Civilization,” remarked upon this continuity: “*In the serene world of mental illness, modern man no longer communicates with the madman: on one hand, the man of reason delegates the physician to madness, thereby authorizing a relation only through the abstract universality of disease; on the other, the man of madness communicates with society only by the intermediary of an equally abstract reason which is order, physical and moral constraint, the anonymous pressure of the group, the requirements of conformity* (Foucault, 1988: x).”

Apart from above, Foucault also discussed the “Order of Discourse” (*L'Ordre du discours*) in a lecture delivered in French at the College de France in 1970. In order to interpret the reason why people in society often feel “anxious (Foucault, 1971: 8)” about the “danger (Foucault, 1971: 8)” of their discourse, he hypothesized that “in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures (Foucault, 1971: 8)”, whose role is to eliminate powers and dangers and contain random events in this production, “to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality (Foucault, 1971: 8).”

To achieve the goals above there are external procedures to conduct speech control, which operate externally and serve as exclusionary systems, particularly concerning discourse involving power and desire. The three major systems of this nature are: the prohibition of certain words, the identification of madness, and the will to truth.

For prohibition it involves the delineation of what can be expressed within specific contexts, and there are mainly three types: “covering objects, ritual with its surrounding circumstances, the privileged or exclusive right to speak of a particular subject (Foucault, 1971: 8).” These prohibitions “interrelate, reinforce and complement each other, forming a complex web, continually subject to modification (Foucault, 1971: 8).”

When it comes to the identification of the madness, the “folly versus reason (Foucault, 1971: 9)”, it’s not defined as prohibition but a “division or rejection (Foucault, 1971: 9),” where the madman's speech differs from that of others; it is either disregarded as insignificant or imbued with extraordinary powers, such as the ability to foresee the future. The words of a madman were either “totally ignored or else were taken as words of truth” (Foucault, 1971: 9). Their utterances either vanished into obscurity, a “void” (Foucault, 1971: 9) dismissed the moment they were uttered, or they were interpreted as embodying a simplistic or shrewd logic, a “rationality more rational than that of a rational man” (Foucault, 1971: 9).

The Will to Truth, which was categorized as a “historically constituted division (Foucault, 1971: 10)” by Foucault, is “reliant upon institutional support and distribution, tends to exercise a sort of pressure, a power of constraint upon other forms of discourse (Foucault, 1971: 10)”. Namely, it influences discursive and knowledge production through the pressure exerted by institutions surrounding it.

3.2 Huizinga: Homo Ludens – The Play Theory

Throughout his academic career, Huizinga strived to explain how culture is formed, how it fades, and how it is maintained. He ultimately used the concept of “Homo Ludens (the human who is playing) (Huizinga, 1980)” to explain the progression of human culture. In his book *Homo Ludens*, he elevated the status of play to an unprecedented level, “civilization is, in its earliest phases, played. It does not come from play like a babe detaching itself from the womb: it arises in and as play, and never leaves it ” (Huizinga, 1980: 173). Here he emphasized that civilization arises and develops through play, asserting that play reveals its unique charm in all aspects of social structure and human cultural activities. Huizinga focused on group play, or “social play (Huizinga, 1980: 47)”, which he believed was closely linked to rituals, religion, and other collective activities. He repeatedly defined play, with some variations in detail, but

generally through the characteristics and processes of play, also indicating its function and status: "Play is a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious,' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means (Huizinga, 1980: 28)."

From the most classical idea in this book, he saw play as serving something beyond itself, with its purpose being the act of playing itself rather than any subsequent goals. Thus, he avoided psychological and biological descriptions of play's functions and instead emphasized its inherent features to define it, identifying five essential characteristics of play from his definitions.

First, Play is in fact "freedom (Huizinga, 1980: 8)", "a voluntary activity (Huizinga, 1980: 7)." Play is an optional activity that can be easily set aside. It is considered unnecessary, and its urgency only arises from the pleasure it brings. Play can be postponed or stopped at any time without consequence. It is never compelled by physical needs or moral obligations; it is never a chore. Rather, it occurs during "leisure (Huizinga, 1980: 8)" time, when one is free to engage in it. Only when play serves a "recognized cultural function (Huizinga, 1980: 8)", such as in rituals or ceremonies, does it become tied to "notions of obligation and duty (Huizinga, 1980: 8)."

Second, play exists outside the realm of "ordinary or real life (Huizinga, 1980: 8)." Instead, it represents a departure from reality into a "temporary sphere of activity (Huizinga, 1980: 8)" with its own distinct disposition. Every player understands that they are "only pretending or doing something just for fun (Huizinga, 1980: 8)." This inherent quality of play, its "pretend" nature, reveals an awareness of its inferiority compared to seriousness, a feeling seemingly as fundamental as play itself. However, this consciousness of play being mere pretense does not prevent it from being pursued with the utmost seriousness, often leading to absorption and devotion that can border on rapture, temporarily dispelling any sense of inferiority. Any game has the potential to completely captivate its participants. The boundary between play and seriousness is "fluid (Huizinga, 1980: 8)", with the inferiority of play constantly countered by the "corresponding superiority of its seriousness (Huizinga, 1980: 8)."

Play can even reach “heights of beauty and sublimity (Huizinga, 1980: 8)” that overshadow seriousness. It presents itself initially as an “interlude (Huizinga, 1980: 9)” in our daily lives. However, as a regularly occurring relaxation, it becomes an integral part of life, serving as both an individual life function and a societal necessity due to its “cultural significance, expressive value, and spiritual and social associations (Huizinga, 1980: 9).”

In addition, the concept of the “magic circle (Huizinga, 1980: 11),” as described by Huizinga, delineates a space and time separate from everyday life where play unfolds under distinct rules and conventions. This boundary allows for the creation of artificial conditions that promote fairness and equal opportunity within competitive games. Huizinga emphasized the importance of “maintaining the integrity (Huizinga, 1980: 208)” of the magic circle, suggesting that its preservation is essential for ensuring the safety and enjoyment of players. Yet, Rodriguez questioned this perspective, proposing that blurring the boundaries of play “can lead to new experiences and forms of social interaction (Rodriguez, 2006).” These experimental approaches to play offer insights into how games can intersect with everyday life and confront the “unpredictability (Rodriguez, 2006)” of real-world events.

Third, play has “secluded-ness”, and “limitedness”, which is “played out within certain limits of time and place and contains its own course and meaning (Huizinga, 1980: 9).” Spatially, play exists within designated realms, whether physical or conceptual, each a sanctified space governed by its own “special rules (Huizinga, 1980: 10).” “Repetition and alternation (Huizinga, 1980: 10)”, inherent in its essence, forms the backbone of play, from simple games to complex rituals. From arenas to stages, these playgrounds carve out temporary worlds within the ordinary, dedicated to their unique performances. Play unfolds, reaching a decisive conclusion, embodying movement, change, and connection. Yet, within its temporal bounds, it solidifies into a cultural artifact, a creation of the mind, cherished and transmitted through “tradition (Huizinga, 1980: 10)”.

Fourth, Play “creates order, and is order (Huizinga, 1980: 10).” It thrives on absolute order, even the slightest deviation spoils its essence, rendering it worthless. The deep connection between play and order explains why play often resides in the realm of aesthetics. Play tends “to be beautiful (Huizinga, 1980: 10)” because it “inherently seeks orderly form (Huizinga, 1980: 10)”. Play captivates us; it enchants with qualities like “rhythm and harmony (Huizinga, 1980: 10).” Tension is a key aspect of play, representing “uncertainty and the desire for resolution

(Huizinga, 1980: 11).” The essence of play lies in overcoming challenges and achieving success. Rules are fundamental to play, defining what is permissible within its confines. Any breach of these rules shatters the play-world, bringing the game to an end and “collapse (Huizinga, 1980: 11).”

Last, a “play-community generally tends to become permanent even after the game is over (Huizinga, 1980: 12).” According to Huizinga, not every game or gathering leads to forming a club, but the sense of being “apart together (Huizinga, 1980: 12)”, sharing something special and breaking from norms, continues to hold magic even after the game ends. While not all social groups are directly linked to play, it's challenging to separate “permanent social structures (Huizinga, 1980: 12)” from the realm of play, especially in traditional cultures with significant customs. Inside the game, ordinary rules and customs don't apply; it's a different world. This “suspension of normalcy (Huizinga, 1980: 12)” is evident in ceremonial games of primitive societies. And this temporary break from everyday life is seen in various cultures, including “saturnalian and carnival traditions (Huizinga, 1980: 12).” The secrecy and uniqueness of play are epitomized in dressing up, where individuals take on different roles, “blurring the lines between reality and fantasy (Huizinga, 1980: 13).”

3.3 Applbaum: The Sweetness of Salvation in Consumption

In “The Sweetness of Salvation: Consumer Marketing and the Liberal-Bourgeois Theory of Needs (Applbaum, 1998)”, Kalman Applbaum discussed about the Pleasure-Pain Principle in consumption, and the novel marketer-consumer relationship apart from the idea of power governance.

First, the theoretical exploration of the “Pleasure-Pain Principle” in consumption is built upon the follow-up to Marshall Sahlins's “The Sadness of Sweetness: The Native Anthropology of Western Cosmology (Sahlins, 1996).” It provided a distinct perspective within the broader context of Western cosmology, and hypothesized the process “whereby professional marketers and consumers, via their practical disposition toward each other in the mutually constituted sociocultural field of the market, help perpetuate the Western cosmological duality of suffering and salvation (Applbaum, 1998: 323).” Sahlins's analysis centers on the pleasure-pain principle as it is understood within the Judeo-Christian cosmological framework, which has historically

permeated Western economic and social thought. Sahlins posits that the Western conceptualization of life is fundamentally oriented towards the “pursuit of happiness and the avoidance of pain (Sahlins, 1996: 415)”. This principle is not only central to social behavior but also profoundly influences economic activities, particularly consumption patterns in 18th-century Western society. “At a certain period in Western history all of human society and behavior came to be perceived, popularly as well as philosophically, through the master trope of individual pleasures and pains (Sahlins, 1996: 415).” Sahlins's perspective underscores the idea that the pursuit of satisfaction, which equates to the alleviation of pain, is a cornerstone in Western anthropology and social sciences. This approach provides a lens through which human behavior and societal structures can be understood, suggesting that the dynamics of pleasure and pain are intrinsic to social and economic interactions.

Building upon Sahlins's foundational ideas, Applbaum develops a theoretical framework that further investigates the pleasure-pain principle in the realm of contemporary consumption, extending the discussion to encapsulate the emotional and psychological dimensions of consumption. Applbaum's work is deeply informed by the Western cosmological “duality of suffering and salvation (Applbaum, 1998: 339)”, proposing that this duality significantly influences consumer behavior. According to Applbaum, “in the free-market cosmology, we are all agents of free choice. Consumer free choice, like Christian free will allows and enables us to transform ourselves, to transcend suffering and our needs. The marketplace can only offer a secular salvation, but this salvation is no trivial one; it makes life sufferable, even enjoyable (Applbaum, 1998: 336).” Individuals engage in consumption activities not merely to satisfy material needs but also to seek pleasure and gratification as a means of mitigating perceived suffering or dissatisfaction. This framework posits that consumer behavior is driven by a “complex interplay (Applbaum, 1998: 330)” of rational needs and emotional, psychological factors related to pleasure and pain. In Applbaum's framework, the act of consumption is situated within a broader “existential (Applbaum, 1998: 337)” context where the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain are pivotal. By linking consumption to the cosmological themes of suffering and salvation, Applbaum emphasizes the multifaceted nature of consumer motivations and the significant role of pleasure and pain in shaping marketplace interactions.

In short, the theoretical frameworks provided by Sahlins and Applbaum offer a comprehensive understanding of the pleasure-pain principle in consumption. Sahlins provides

the historical and cultural context of Western cosmology's influence on social and economic behavior, while Applbaum extends these insights to contemporary consumer practices. Together, their contributions underscore the importance of the pleasure-pain dynamic in consumer behavior, revealing the intricate relationship between cultural, psychological, and economic factors in shaping consumption patterns.

Secondly, when it comes to the relationship between consumers and marketers, according to Applbaum, it involves complex power dynamics and mutual influence. Applbaum's critique of power in marketing and consumer behavior builds upon the foundational theories of Lefebvre and Baudrillard, offering a nuanced perspective on the interactions within the marketplace.

Applbaum delves into the dynamics between marketers and consumers, suggesting that their relationship is characterized by “Mutual Intelligibility (Applbaum, 1988: 344)” and even agreement. He views marketers and consumers as partners engaged in a mutually constituted and intelligible relationship. However, Applbaum also acknowledges that marketers employ various strategies to “manipulate consumer perceptions (Applbaum, 1988: 330)” and behaviors. Through advertising, branding, and product positioning, marketers influence consumer choices and preferences, demonstrating the power they hold in shaping consumer behavior.

A key aspect of Applbaum's analysis is the role of “Symbolic Associations (Applbaum, 1988: 328)”. Marketers extract these associations from consumers to affix profitable sign values to their products, understanding consumer desires and crafting marketing messages that resonate with their symbolic meanings and aspirations. Applbaum's insights align with Baudrillard's emphasis on the symbolic nature of consumer culture and the manipulation of sign values: “there is entangled with that order an order of consumption, which is an order of the manipulation of signs (Baudrillard, 1988: 33).” Baudrillard critiques the commodification of objects and the saturation of consciousness with sign values in capitalist systems, highlighting the role of media and advertising in shaping consumer culture. He introduces the concept of the hyperreal, where politics and economics are replaced by simulations in a postmodern society: “The content of the messages, the signifieds of the signs are largely immaterial. We are not engaged in them, and the media do not involve us in the world, but offer for our consumption signs as signs, albeit signs accredited with the guarantee of the real. It is here that we can define the praxis of consumption (Baudrillard, 1988: 34).” However, Applbaum builds on these ideas yet offering a more nuanced view of marketers’ extraction of associations from consumers, indicating a more win-win

economic exchange lens instead of marketers’ power manipulation towards the consumers: “Power is thus not the main generative impetus behind the recreation of the capitalist cosmology, meaning and the practices associated with economic exchange are (Applbaum, 1988: 332).”

Similarly, Applbaum's perspectives resonate with Lefebvre's critique of modern consumption. Lefebvre views the modern society a “Bureaucratic Society of Controlled Consumption (Lefebvre, 1971: 60)”, which “operated at the level and based on everyday life (Lefebvre, 1971: 60).” He views consumption as a central feature of modern life and critiques the bureaucratization and rationalization of everyday life processes. “Before/for us daily consumption assumes its dual aspect and its basic ambiguity. Taken as a whole, quotidian and non-quotidian,... it is complete (tending towards a system of consumption based on the rationalized organization of everyday life) and incomplete (the system is forever unfinished, disproved, threatened, unclosed and opening on to nothingness). (Lefebvre, 1971: 142)” He emphasizes the role of social structures and how the “blurring of class distinctions and of ideological values (Lefebvre, 1971: 58)” in shaping consumer tastes and behaviors. Lefebvre examines the interplay between production and consumption, highlighting how societal norms and values influence consumer practices. Applbaum acknowledges these social structures and cultural practices, exploring the cultural and symbolic dimensions of consumption and the power dynamics in marketing. However, he focused more on the cultural construction of needs and identities of consumers in the marketplace.

In short, According to Applbaum, “marketers do constitute a semiautonomous institutional front for some purposes, but such institutions have no authority over consumers. Marketers and consumers participate together in the molding of cultural consciousness (Applbaum, 1988: 332).” The power relationship between marketers and consumers is multifaceted, involving mutual intelligibility, manipulation, and strategic engagement.

4. Methodology

As the video of the award ceremony received lots of discussion on Bilibili and Xiaohongshu⁹, I selected the top liked comments below the video in Bilibili and three related

⁹ Xiaohongshu: a social media and e-commerce platform. It has been described as "China's answer to Instagram", and as such, is sometimes referred to as "Chinese Instagram".

consumer discussion articles in Xiaohongshu for analysis, which provides the direction for the making of the semi-structured interview question list. The methodology applied in this thesis mainly involves online semi-structured one-on-one interviews and case studies.

4.1 Online interviews and Real-Time Go-along Reaction

To collect qualitative empirical data, I recruited through my own Xiaohongshu social media account, and conducted interviews lasting around 14 hours with 12 Chinese younger social media users and 1 Swedish younger social media user aged between 20 - 25 (see figure 8 below). The interview was designed in the form of semi-structured interview, because the diverse professional, educational and private histories of the informants “precluded the use of a standardized interview schedule (Barriball, 1994: 334)”; and in order to explore deeper with respondents’ ideas, clarify interesting and relevant issues, gather comprehensive information, and delve into sensitive topics in a respectful manner, “some freedom to probe was essential (Barriball, 1994: 334).” Therefore, my semi-structured question list was dynamically adjusted according to the previous informants’ feedback, and thus the last Swedish informant is in fact not recruited according to the initial plan. But due to later need for specific question clarification related to western perspectives raised by previous Chinese informants, I conducted the second recruitment procedure and that's why I have a non-Chinese informant in my list.

In addition, as Xiaohongshu is a platform where female users take up to 70% in the user gender proportion until 2024, the result of the gender proportion of my recruitment is also mostly female informants. The author did not initially consider gender as one of the most essential factors or variables in this research, thus did not intentionally control the gender proportion during the recruitment.

To ensure the ethical integrity of this study, the author explicitly stated in the recruitment article that the purpose of the interviews is solely for academic writing, and all related audio recordings and transcripts will be deleted after formal submission of the paper to Lund University. During the interviews, all personal information pertaining to the interviewees will be anonymized. All interviewees have the right to suspend or withdraw from the interview at any time without obstruction, and they will have the opportunity to review the final draft and provide feedback before publication.

In order to make sure informants’ memory and impression about the selected articles and video are vivid and thus can provide richer discourse for me to analyze afterwards, around five minutes before the interview, all informants were asked to view the three short, selected articles in Xiaohongshu and shared their feelings or ideas with me in the beginning of each interview. After the ice-break process, they were asked to watch the 14-minute-long award ceremony video and shared screen with me online. In the meantime, I suggested them to share with me their thoughts and reactions in real-time by pausing the video out of their own will. Here I was inspired by the Go-along interview methodology, in which the ethnographers follow the informants’ steps offline instead of sitting still in one limited environment. According to Kusenbach, this “can sensitize ethnographers to the idiosyncratic sets of relevance that govern their informants’ environmental experiences... provide independent, empirical evidence of a phenomenon which is difficult to access and substantiate by other means (Kusenbach, 2003: 469).” Therefore, in this way can I capture their real-time reaction and behavior and gather richer non-verbal data beyond the recording and verbal transcriptions. As requested by most of the informants, due to the analysis part mentioned about the speech control procedure in Chinese language, ethically I have reached an agreement with informants that I will keep their anonymousness. Thus, I name all of them with numbers P1-P13, and in the meantime do not replace them with any coined English names, as there are two informants who do not wish to be called or appear in the thesis with any other forms of names.

Fig. 8 - Informants Demographics Table

The “Madness” of Chinese Consumer Marketing

Number	Age	Nationality	Gender	(University Location) Education Background	Job Title
P1	23	China	Female	(Australia, China), Visual Design	Student
P2	24	China	Female	(China, Sweden), Law	Student
P3	24	China	Female	(China), Translation Studies	Student
P4	23	China	Female	(Britain, China), Finance	Student
P5	23	China	Female	(China), Software Engineering	E-commerce Programmer
P6	20	China	Female	(China), Arts Management	Student
P7	23	China	Female	(Britain, China) Communication Studies, Marketing	Journalist
P8	23	China	Male	(Hong Kong) Linguistics	Translator
P9	23	China	Female	(Britain, China) UX Design	UX Designer
P10	24	China	Female	(China) Environmental Engineering	Laboratory Assistant
P11	24	China	Female	(China, Japan, South Korea) East Asian Studies	Social Media Editor
P12	23	China	Female	(China) Landscape Architecture	Cross-border E-commerce
P13	24	Swedish	Male	(Sweden) Psychology	Student

4.2 Case studies

Apart from Taobao’s golden peach award ceremony video, one of the brands participating in the ceremony stood out as one of the most successful cases when it comes to marketing performance. Spes, a young Chinese local shampoo and hair protection brand, founded in 2020, received sales increase from zero to four billion RMB in two years in China. Before the golden peach award ceremony, Spes failed to reach the sales goal of one million products to pass the threshold of the award ceremony. However, its official social media started multiple accusations and complaints towards Taobao in mad literature style (see Figure. 9 and 10, combinedly literal translated into English): *I don’t give a fuck about the golden peach trophy. I have already sold 980k products, why don’t you wait for me Taobao!!! That trophy just looks like a butt, I don’t give a fuck. I am only obsessed with you no, yet you only give me not the trophy. I walked 98 steps, why should I miss you Taobao, I am just an idiot, how dare I complain, ha! Sincere congratulations from Spes who sold out 900k+ hair sprays this year, to those brands who got nominated! Dear Tao(bao), when you see this letter, I am already on my way to the airport. Please forgive me for my leaving without saying goodbye, because I have to depart to seek for a miracle-working doctor. just yesterday I was diagnosed with an incurable*

*disease: pink eye*¹⁰. Hahahaha, this is a world where only Spes gets hurt! Hahaha, this is a world where only Spes gets hurt! (omitting the rest of 9 times repetition of the same sentences in the screenshots)



Left, middle Figure. 9 & 10 -- Spes’s mad literature examples in Weibo;

Right Figure. 11 Spes attacking Taobao with its hair growing spray in the award ceremony video

As a result, Spes became the only brand who did not reach one million sales but still received a “980k trophy for comforting” in the award ceremony. This bold, confident and abnormal attitude without self-complaints dealing with its failure of not receiving an award attracted lots of Chinese younger social media users.

On the contrary, as lots of informants mentioned during the interviews, the Chinese local makeup brand Florasis also utilized mad literature style in its official social media account during its public relation crisis, yet their campaign became a failure. The cause was its collaboration with one of the most famous e-commerce live streamer¹¹, who claimed that “the eyebrow pencil of Florasis is only 79 RMB, not expensive at all! Reflect upon yourself, so many years, have you been working hard enough?” This drastically irritated the consumers and

¹⁰ Pink Eye: In Chinese also used to refer to someone who is jealous of someone else or something.

¹¹ E-commerce Live Streaming: It is the fusion of online shopping and live streaming. It’s the process of selling products online and checkout via live video, often performed by the sellers or in collaboration with influencers or creators. Live commerce goes by many names—live selling, live stream shopping, live shopping, live stream e-commerce—and falls under the larger category of shoppable video. It has become very popular in China since 2018.

touched the nerves of younger Chinese consumers under the period when the Chinese economy was still recovering from the negative effects of the pandemic, and the majority were weary and tired of finding job opportunities or supporting their families. The problem here is not that the price of the eyebrow pencil is misinformation or false advertising, but that the expression “only” and “not work hard enough” hurt the masses recklessly from a rich and successful celebrity’s perspective. In short, this sentence shattered the dissatisfaction and repression feeling accumulated for a long time about the income gap between the poor and the rich in modern China.

In face of this crisis, the e-commerce live-streamer apologized immediately in his own social media account in Weibo, yet no consumers were convinced and comforted.

In this backdrop, Florasis started to post articles in Weibo in a mad literature style and defended itself by explaining how much cost they have been invested during production, how eager and hard they want to be a top local makeup brand, etc. For example, in Weibo Florasis posted “*I, Florasis, 6.5 years old, I have a dream, to become a world-class high-end brand based on local culture.*” (see the screenshot figure 12: the picture means: a positive mindset decides Florasis’ life, while the phrase Florasis is used in smaller font. Here is actually an imitation of a meme popular in 2023 that “a good mindset decides dog body’s life”) in defense of the accusation of their high price from the consumers. Here, imitating the dogbody's meme and claiming itself is only 6.5 years old shows that, the social media operator behind this public relation crisis is trying to show his/her self-comfort or seek for sympathy when facing so many criticisms online from the consumers. “I should have a good mindset even though facing so much criticism.”

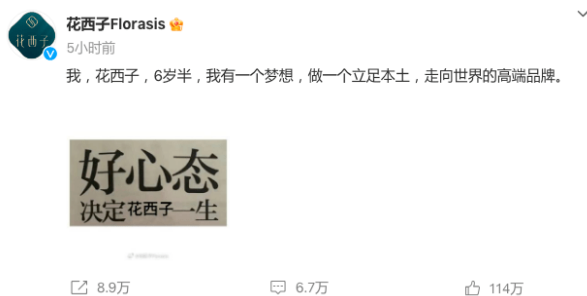


Figure. 12 – Florasis showing ambition to become a world-class high-end brand in mad literature style

However, within 24 hours after these posts, related #Florasis mad literature topic in Weibo received more than 0.5 billion views. However, the consequence of the high exposure and discussion did not bring positive brand image spreading, instead with its e-commerce live stream exposure increasing 2 to 3 times, purchase transition rate declined drastically.

One of the top liked comments from the younger social media users in Weibo said: *“Florasis thinks itself can get closer to the younger consumers by using humorous mad literature yet reveals its arrogance on pretending to be mad to defend itself and distract social media users’ attention from the real issues. Young people use mad literature to relieve stress from reality, while Florasis didn’t care about the consumers at all and did not answer the price issue as pain points raised by consumers.”*

The three cases mentioned above are all Chinese local brands’ mad marketing practices that received top discussion during 2023, and thus will be utilized as case study embedded in the analysis of the empirical data in the following.

5. Mad Youth Subculture: The Mad Literature’s Evolution

In *The Sadness of Sweetness*, Sahlins (1996) discussed certain major long-term anthropological themes of Judeo-Christian cosmology relevant to Western consumption issues in the 18th century, in which presented the “pleasure-pain principle of human action” -- the anthropology of consumer need, the “idea of an irresistible and egoistical human nature underlying social behavior” – the anthropology of consumer biology, the “sense of society as an order of power or coercion” – the anthropology of consumer and capitalism power relationship, and a “confidence in the greater providential value of human suffering figure among these anthropological themes (Sahlins, 1996: 395)” – consumers’ sadness of sweetness.

In Chinese context also, the mad marketing campaign roots deeply from the consumption issues from ancient history to modern society reality, from Confucianism’s political philosophy of “Li (礼)”, “restrain yourself and follow social norm” that governed ever since the spring and autumn period (B.C. 770 - 476) till nowadays, Neo-Taoism’s romantic spirit of “Feng Liu (风流)”, meaning “a lifestyle of freedom and ease (Feng, 1948: 424)”; to a feeling of confinement living in modern China, jaded about disciplined life and witnessing the rebellious practice in

Western societies, resulting in the Mad Literature youth subculture production in digital space, attempting to form a new normality and rules of the Youth.

5.1 In Ancient History – Mad Scholars and Confucius’ “Li”

A: I think the mad literature is related with our ancient history. For example Confucianism, we are taught since elementary school that we should obey Li and be a good citizen, this kind of conformity is kind of engraved into our gene... – (P12, 02.12.24)

Confucianism is one of the philosophy schools that have the biggest impact on Chinese cultures and norms. The “three *kang*¹² and five *Ch’ang*¹³ (三纲五常)”, with three *kang* meaning the ethics of the society, the “sovereign is the kang of his subjects, the husband is the master of his wife, the father is the kang of the son (Feng, 1948: 362)”; while five *Ch’ang* meaning the virtues of an individual, “*jen* (human-heartedness), *yi* (righteousness), *li* (propriety, rituals, rules of proper conduct), *chih* (wisdom) and *hsin* (good faith) (Feng, 1948: 362)”. After Confucius (551-479 B.C.), Hsun Tzu (298-238 B.C.) further developed Confucianism, emphasizing “social control (Feng, 1948: 264)” by utilizing *li* to set a limit to the satisfaction of one’s desires, and “he who acts according to the *li* acts morally, he who acts against them acts immorally (Feng, 1948: 270).” Namely, he who is rational know when to cease, he who cannot control ones’ own desire or act out of social norm is irrational and mad. The three *kang* together with five *Ch’ang* become the morality and moral laws in general in olden times, in which *li* (Rules of proper conduct) has a long-lasting impact till modern China, appearing in all schools’ textbooks and intermingled with Chinese social norms and morality systems.

B: Chinese ancient history has been through so many different periods, though Confucianism did govern people’s minds and disciplines for the longest time. We also

¹² Kang (纲): A major cord in a net, to which all the other strings are attached.

¹³ Ch’ang (常): A norm or constant.

have a lot of poets and famous celebrities in ancient time, that are often viewed as mad or crazy. However, in my opinion, this is also very romantic, isn't it? – (P8, 02,03.24)

Nevertheless, in Chinese ancient history, Confucianism did not govern all the time. During the Wei Jin Southern and North Dynasty (220-589), a period in Chinese history that lasted for more than 300 years, during which Dynasties changed rapidly, multiple regimes coexisted, and the North and the South were in confrontation for a long time. In this backdrop, as the Han Dynasties' kingdom collapsed, the ideology that governed for a long time also retreated, Confucianism as a respected moral model became the object being abused and criticized by the people long suffered from the discipline of *li*. In this case, Neo-Taoism's idea of “*fang dan* (absurdity, 放诞)” became the new fashion, the celebrities in that period “used the absurdity of speech to deconstruct the hypocrisy of seriousness, used the indulgence of behavior and cynical attitudes to break through the rigidity of the spirit and moral rules (Dai, 2019: 230).” The old moral principle lost its authority, the new moral authority was yet to establish, the absurdity of people's speech and behavior was the “result of not knowing what to do, thus doing anything that they know that is not moral (Dai, 2019: 231).” However, the first intention of the movement of *fang dan* is to rebel the societal and political turbulence and get close to human good nature, yet later twisted into a collective indulgence of absurdity and denial of humanity, for example, lots of scholars walked naked on the streets and claim it was a new fashion to get close to nature and follow the human barbarian instinct; praising a celebrity who felt proud of having infidelity in marriage, claiming it was the act of follow one's own heart and pursuit of true love, etc.

These two schools of philosophy, Confucianism and Neo-Taoism, both have profound effects on Chinese history and culture, entangled with the complexity of Modern China political standpoints and ideologies, creating a breeding ground of Mad Literature as a youth subculture, which will be discussed in more details in the following.

5.2 In Language Nature – The Internal Limited Power of Expressing Emotion

A: I think the Chinese language is not very good at expressing emotions. For example, if you say to your mom, “I’m glad you praised me”, it’s so weird! But it’s very common in English. I always feel that my emotions are a bit suppressed, and when I want to express something, I feel that my language is not enough. – (P5, 02.01.24)

The informant’s feeling about the limits of the modern Chinese language is not alone. Lu Xun, the leading figure of modern Chinese literature once also commented that modern Chinese language has serious deficiencies in expressing emotions, which mainly display in the “relative shortage of accurate phrases expressing substance and spiritual phenomenon, together with the rough and vague grammar rules (Wang Binbin, 2022: 65).” Thus, one would often face a limit and restriction passively when trying to express emotions in a direct way. Most of the emotion expressions in modern simplified Chinese language are through rhetorical or indirect phrases. This limitation is further clarified by informant P5:

B: There was a virtual Swedish youtuber with many fans in China. They often comment with some mad literature below the live stream: “Will you be my husband?”, “I already took off my pants!” I thought it was very funny and shared it with my Swedish friend and he didn’t find it funny at all. Then I suddenly realized that I found it funny because I knew the fans were trying to be sarcastic and not serious, they use extremely exaggerated manners but subtle expressions to show one’s love in Chinese. But for him, there is no such language repression in his culture, he cannot understand why ones’ richer emotions have to be expressed through the meaning hidden in the words. – (P5, 02.01.24)

Here, “language repression” is an expression worthy to be further discussed. According to Foucault, in every society, the production of discourses is controlled through external or internal procedures, in which the internal procedures start from the “speech itself with the function of classifying, ordering and dictating its distribution (Pereira, 2020),” and the external procedures’ prohibition feature, which defines “taboo of the object, ritual of the circumstance and privileged or exclusive right of the speaker (Pereira, 2020)”. Namely, the power of using Chinese to express one’s emotion is internally controlled by the language nature, the discourse themselves

exercise their own control and surveillance of the speaker, and in the meantime externally also disciplined by the social norms. Due to ethical consideration of political correctness, the social norms externally will not be further clarified, yet it can be said that the reason behind Mad Literature Subculture’s creation on the “Mad language”, is closely related to the suppressed power of young individual’s emotion expression in modern Chinese language.

5.3 In Modern Society – The Alienated Everyday Life

A: These years Asian people are like a clockwork working endlessly under huge pressure. Mad literature as an impulsive and expressive language style releases their stress and has a comforting and empathetic effect: others are also this mad, then I am not that mad yet. In this backdrop, I feel that daily life becomes a false concept, and many young people no longer believe the future narrative that their future will become better. They want to rebel, but don’t know to whom they should rebel, thus they are helpless and angry. They know this world has some problems, but they cannot point out where the problems come from. – (P11, 02.05.24)

B: Every culture would have its own feeling of depression, yet only Chinese young people would use this Mad Kayfabe with rational boundary without disturbing the online order. On the contrary, the madness in social media in western world tend not to have this self-disciplined boundary. – (P7, 02.03.24)

Here the informant P7’s perception of “daily life as a false concept” and “young people’s disbelief of future positive narrative” demonstrate the fact that Chinese youth are conscious about the alienated modern society, where “everyday life must shortly become the one perfect system obscured by the other systems that aim at systematizing thought and structuralizing action (Lefebvre, 1971: 72)”. They do catch a glimpse of and are also jaded about the bureaucratization’s homogenizing attempts, and they do show the revolutionary potential by creating the Mad Literature Subculture as a style, in which their writings recreates the flowing images of an ideal new normality in reality, leading and attracting jaded readers into the “turmoil of a linguistic carnival, a festival of language, a delirium of words (Lefebvre, 1971: 4),” and thus

reinforcing the subcultural sphere. Between this festive and rebellious writing style and the daily rational language, stand modern man of transition with “death of style and its rebirth (Lefebvre, 1971: 38)”, with its attempts to “resurrect the Festival and gather together culture's scattered fragments for a transfiguration of everyday life (Lefebvre, 1971: 38).” The massive depression and anguish produced by the disciplined and alienated everyday life need an outburst, and in this case kayfabe madness performance is a style of linguistic carnival to confront the enemies indirectly in a playful way.

Nevertheless, according to informant P11, Chinese youth “do not know whom to rebel”, which became a hindrance to the evolution of the revolution. A war without an opponent is dangerous, either it will become an arbitrary invasion or a domestic conflict. And in Chinese context, the long lasting impact of five Ch’ang and virtues from Confucianism, together with the external speech control and exclusion procedures mentioned in 5.2, lead the linguistic war to the latter one, which may not cause much harm to the deserved target, instead according to informant P7 said, may become a new form of rational “self-discipline” under the layer of the speech control procedures.

5.4 In Contrast – Witness Rebellious Practice in Western Societies

A: One good thing about western policies is that they do not suppress the problem in society that much, but transfer them to another problem field, kicking the can down the road. The dynamic process may more or less release the negative emotion in public. The Chinese government’s logic is that they have to solve the problem on the spot, which takes a long time, stagnated and cannot make everyone satisfied, which made majority numb, indifferent and silent. It’s not that they don’t know the situation, it’s that they don’t want to think about the problems cuz they know it’s useless; or they have thought about it, but they dare not to express. They just become silent, both in mouth and mind. Modern China is like a volcano that has not erupted. – (P9, 02.03.24)

B: Young people in western society believe they can change the world, and they believe rebel can boost the problem's solution progress. They love their country as Chinese do but not the government. They are educated that individuals have the power and right to

be heard, and their opinion matters. Maybe in reality neither this and nor the Chinese solution can solve the real problems, but western ways create illusion to young people to resist the madness trend. – (P13, 03.15.24)

The Mad literature originated from a customer complaint towards online e-commerce service, and got replicated into more diverse and larger scale during COVID, during which the young college students were quarantined in campus and faced multiple restrictions in everyday life, and thus started a campaign of “(scream)(twisted) umbrally crawling” together on the playground in campus (see Figure. 13 below). Before COVID the Chinese youth are like western youth, believing the narrative that they can change their life and create a better future by sparing no efforts studying and working hard, which is an illusion to help them endure the huge pressure from work, education, etc. After COVID however, the illusion was shattered by the repressed economic condition and during quarantine the explicit turn of previous implicit social control. According to informant P13 and P9, together with the general problem solution logic of the Chinese government, which is out of responsible good will yet inefficient and suppressed approach, which caused a stagnated situation.



Figure. 13 – College students crawl in the campus playground together at night as a way to release stress and outburst of anger being quarantined for long time, screenshot from Xiaohongshu APP

In the meantime, Chinese youth have access to the western social media, witnessing the different explicit rebellious practices. They find the western youth don't need kayfabe madness, they can go mad without many concerns of potential strict social control. From this perspective lots of Chinese youth wish for this freedom, yet on another hand they are also critical and alert about the explicit rebel from western youth, who in fact act under the illusion created by the western politicians and capitalism and do not realize that their success is mostly in vain – the thought that “maybe in reality neither western and nor the Chinese solution can solve the real problems” may lead to a Nihilism or accumulation of depression, in which the Chinese youth

become either rationally desperate or cynically rebellious, and all these become a hotbed of cultivating Mad Literature in the digital world.

5.5 In Virtuality – Limited Triumph on Establishing New Rules So Far

There are lots of reasons why mad Literature got popular, one is that emotion spreads the fastest online and form an emotion cultural sphere. Second is that we have been suppressed for too long, our nationality internally has this feeling of depression related with our history and culture. When getting mad online we did not get banned cuz we performed like an abnormal person, this is our way to rebel the discipline, which is kind of like rock music – you choose not to touch the pain points, instead you wreak out your emotion in other topics that are not prohibited. We dare not say this or say that in reality, but if I am a mad person in digital world, it becomes reasonable – this is in fact pessimistic. – (P9, 02.03.24)

As Foucault described, in the Middle Ages the madness got banished to fortress of confinement, after which "reason reigned in the pure state, in a triumph arranged for it in advance over a frenzied unreason (Foucault, 1988: 64)." Nevertheless, in this Mad Literature Subculture, according to informant P9, Chinese Youth transform the field of reason and normality into a new madness, and also transform part of the digital world into a field as the confinement of order and discipline from reality. Multiple negative emotions from dilemmas and hindrance from reality got released by the mad literature. The Chinese youth attempt to showcase that their rationality is “more rational than that of a rational man (Foucault, 1971: 9),” but it's just “temporarily laid aside and covered (Chen, 2023: 50)”. The Chinese Youth know rationally that this rebellion is a triumph that is restricted in digital subculture and cannot be extended to solve the problems in reality eventually, like what P9 informant said, “this is in fact pessimistic”. However, unlike ancient Chinese scholars, who tried to “transcend the secular world or deny humanity (Dai, 2019: 231)”, the Chinese Youth bring madness into secular norms, do not confront the authority directly, but realize the virtuality and virtualize the reality. The world that thought to measure and justify Chinese youth’s madness through science or reasons “must justify

itself before madness (Foucault, 1988: 289)”, to experience the sense of otherness and alienation in a new world where the real daily life become suspended, and the new normality is established.

The Mad Literature subculture in China has emerged as a complex response to societal pressures, cultural constraints, and a desire for rebellion among the youth. This chapter explores various facets of this subculture, from its historical roots to its contemporary manifestations in the digital age. Firstly, the historical context of Chinese philosophy, particularly Confucianism and Neo-Taoism, have deeply influenced Chinese culture and societal norms. Confucian principles emphasized social control and propriety, while Neo-Taoism celebrated freedom and absurdity. These contrasting philosophies created a breeding ground for rebellion and unconventional thinking, culminating in the emergence of the Mad Literature subculture in modern China. Secondly, the limitations of the Chinese language in expressing emotions contributes to a sense of repression and frustration among Chinese youth. The language's internal constraints, coupled with external societal pressures, stifle emotional expression and create a desire for alternative means of communication, such as the Mad Literature style. Thirdly, according to the informants' perception about the differences about rebellion practices between Western younger generations and Chinese younger generations, Chinese youth feel alienated and disillusioned with societal norms, turning to the digital realm for expression and salvation. Unlike Western youth, who believe in their ability to affect change through rebellion, Chinese youth feel uncertain about whom to rebel against and are wary of the consequences of explicit rebellion. This ambivalence leads to a complex relationship with Western models of rebellion and a sense of pessimism about the potential for meaningful change. Fourthly, the origins of Mad Literature and its proliferation during the COVID-19 pandemic are explained. Quarantined college students, facing restrictions and economic uncertainty, turned to online platforms to express their frustrations and rebellious spirit. Finally, the virtual nature of the Mad Literature subculture is analyzed. Online platforms provide a space for rebellion and expression, albeit within limited confines. Chinese youth virtualize reality, suspending daily life to establish new norms and challenge the authority of reason in reality. However, this triumph remains confined to the digital realm, reflecting a sense of pessimism about real-world impact.

In conclusion, the Mad Literature subculture in China represents a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and societal factors. It is a response to the limitations of language, the

pressures of modern life, and a desire for rebellion against societal norms. While it offers a space for expression and resistance, its impact remains limited to the virtual realm, leaving Chinese youth grappling with questions of identity, agency, and the possibility of meaningful change in the real world.

6. Mad Marketing as a Success: The “Ludic” Turn of Award Ceremony

6.1 Undoing Business Ritual: Attract Voluntary Audience With Non-seriousness

I kind of like it. And if I like it, I would like to believe it does not have a script. Also, I think the reason we like this award ceremony is not about if it's true or not. Actually when watching I don't care who is the winner, all of the brands leave impression on me. When Spes said “the trophy looks like a butt”, Taobao as the ceremony host responded with humorous joking gesture, which destroyed the stereotypes and our expectation of an official brand's serious image, presenting itself with humorous and a little abnormal style. Compared with those “standard” and boring award ceremony hosts, though I know they are both performing, Taobao is much funnier and authentic. – (P4, 01.30.24)

The phrase that appeared most frequently when informants described the differences between this award ceremony and other previous ones, is “ludic vs. boring”. According to informant P4, Traditional award ceremonies always have certain rituals, which force the attendants and audience to follow, “imposed by physical necessity or moral duty”, and bound with “notion of obligation and duty (Huizinga, 1951: 8)”. This award ceremony instead, appear in one of the popular video platforms among young Chinese, in a casual and “superfluous” form, with ludic content and just for the enjoyment of the audience, which can be “deferred or suspended at any time, watched at leisure ‘free time’ (Huizinga, 1951: 8)”. This exactly applies to the “voluntary” feature of play, breaking the rules and stereotypical concepts of a serious award ceremony. In the beginning of the award ceremony, by utilizing memes and self-mock introductions, Taobao and brands that participated already announced in advance their own fakeness and hypocrisy in the later performance. This distinguished themselves from other “boring” ceremonies through authentic self-denial and betrayal of the standard cultural norm of

an award ceremony, which instead attracted a more voluntary audience with curiosity and rebellious emotion.

In the very early stage of the video, I immediately realize that this award ceremony is a marketing performance. For example, when Spes cried about “Taobao don’t you have any sympathy? Why not wait for me? I already sold out 900k dry shampoo!” I realized it’s a marketing campaign, because the number of sales, and product names all appear. However, even though I know it’s marketing, I am still willing to continue watching it. Because I am a person who always follow rules, while Spes shows an unyielding personality. When not reaching the sales goal, it does not blame itself “why can’t I be more hard-working...” like a normal Chinese, instead it shouted that “why can’t this award ceremony be held a little later?”. I have a very similar experience recently, that’s why I echo with it very much. – (P9, 02.03.2024)

Another characteristic of play is that “play is not ‘ordinary’ or ‘real’ life. It is rather a stepping out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own (Huizinga, 1951: 8).” Most informants responded that they know clearly that the award ceremony and fighting are only pretending, only for fun and not serious, while in the meantime they are fairly rational about the fact that this award ceremony is just another new form of brands marketing. Nevertheless, the ludic content, humorous and casual style did not bring this ceremony into a mere entertainment or suspicious marketing to persuade the consumers to impulse consumption. That the non-seriousness feature of play does not equal to “not serious” is interpreted successfully by some audience. As mentioned by P9 above, the “unyielding personality” though embedded in a brand’s marketing process, can represent as a role model, who are full of confident self-care and full of rage, against PUA¹⁴, against overthinking, against unfair social phenomenon in reality. It did what most young Chinese dare not to do in reality, thus resonated with them in a more profound level beyond as a marketing event, or a mere play. As Huizinga interpreted, “the consciousness of playbeing ‘only a pretend’ does not prevent it from proceeding with the utmost seriousness (Huizinga, 1951: 8),” the fluidity between play and

¹⁴ PUA, (Pick-up Artist) a popular internet slang in China, refers to someone mentally controlling you and making you lose self-confidence. This is mostly discussed online together with contexts such as in Chinese workplace from employers to employees, or in toxic relationships from men to women.

seriousness is one of the key potentials for marketers to offset the inferiority of play by the corresponding superiority of its seriousness. (Huizinga, 1951: 8)” Namely, non-seriousness does not equal to “not serious” or “stupid”, but means the players know that the play is not real or not serious, but they can still view it with a serious attitude, thus bestowing superior meaning beyond the play. Play is independent from stupidity and wisdom, “the one who view the play not seriously are the destroyer of the play (Chen, 2019: 21),” the serious attitude during playing is what exactly makes the play a play. This exactly resonated with people from the Mad Literature Subculture, who feel and believe that the dailiness of reality (the feeling and experience of everyday life) is a false concept and not real, but still attempt to add poetry and love to their daily life. The forces who treat their attempts not seriously as play will be viewed as opponents, which is one of the main reasons a lot of marketing campaigns cannot reach deeper inner lands of Chinese young consumers.

6.2 Repeating Memes and Anthropomorphism: Plant Brand Awareness

A: The best effect is not through forcing consumers to purchase the product, but through merely showing humble anticipation to let consumers to get familiar with the brand.

Talking about the brand, this action itself, even though I personally don't feel much about it in the surface of my mind, can in fact embed the brand into my sub-consciousness, and next time when I encounter with it again, I would feel familiar and have higher chance to choose this brand. – (P3, 01.28.24)

B: Since their anthropomorphism are quite successful, I already view those brands' social media accounts as humans. I was initially worried that their fighting and quarrel online would affect their relationship, yet I realized that their quarrel are in a humorous and humane style, and other brands appearing in the comment area below teasing and fanning the flames, actually help me know more new brands I don't know before. – (P11, 02.05.24)

During the whole ceremony, not a single brand shows intention of selling products to the audience but fighting through kayfabe or performing their best to present their brands'

anthropomorphism images, combining lots of internet memes or creating their own. Before the ceremony, the Kayfabe fighting already started from social media platform such as Weibo and the Red, the rules of the play gradually become “the maddest brand will win”, and during the quarrel and fighting online the participated brands co-created a stage extending from the recorded video to social media and internet memes pool.

By creating, playing and joking repetitively with the memes, these brands appeared as a new creation of the memory, the new memes that may have the potential to spread among the social media and compete for the memories in younger social media users. In the faculty of repetition “it is transmitted and becomes tradition. It can be repeated at any time...It holds good not only of play as a whole but also of its inner structure (Huizinga, 1951: 10).” Namely, as the P3 informant mentioned above, by repetitively “talking about the brand, this action itself”, the brand images are maintained and later naturally transformed into brand awareness. What's more, the memes and the cute anthropomorphism characters can shorten the distance between the consumers and the brands, and even act as symbolic triggers every time to reinforce the brand awareness in consumers’ minds, retrieving the memory back of their first and later encounters with the brand, which leave a huge room of improvement and possibility of co-creating the brands’ consumer relationship management system and their stories.

During the dissimilation of the Mad Literature subculture online, it also has gone through a repetition process of memes creation and replication, and successfully creating symbolic memes that can be repeated at any time, be reinforced each time when being mentioned and recreated. In addition, as mentioned by informant P11, “I worried about their fighting will affect their relationship, yet later I realized...” the blurry and ambiguous feature of the fights and quarrel online during this mad marketing campaign, successfully being identified as a kayfabe performance, and go through the identifying and enlightening process of “from real fights to fake fights”. Mad literature at the same time, also shares this vague boundary between real madness and kayfabe madness. This resemblance in communication process and features serves as a good and authentic example for brand marketing targeting youth subcultural groups.

6.3 Redefining Normality: Build and Expand the Rule-ordered Magic Circle

A: The CEO of Ji Xiangju appeared without a doll outfit, creating a comedic contrast with the surrounding dolls. His seriousness like traditional award ceremony is very funny in this occasion. However, his speech on stage wouldn't make people feel out of place; instead, he clearly understands young people, his language isn't so serious, more in line with the tone of Bilibili. At the same time, he controls the speech length quite well, otherwise I am sure he will be booed out of the stage. They use this Mad marketing, essentially showing they are stand on the same side with us, which is why we feel comfortable about this marketing form. They know we are playing with the memes and are willing to ask their CEO to accompany us to play these memes together. Their attitudes are good. – (P7, 02.03.24)

According to informant P7, the CEO’s seriousness looks “funny” during this mad award ceremony. However, if analyzing this perception of the informant deeper, one can witness the social norm of “normality and abnormality” in reality has been successfully changed and twisted catering for the youth mad literature subculture. The “rule-ordered” feature of play means that when we enter into play, we agree to play by explicit or implied rules that are often different to those we normally follow, and in the meantime, we agree these restrictions will only apply for a time and/or place within a “magic circle”, which isolates the game from the more serious tasks of daily living according to Huizinga (Huizinga, 1951: 10). This feature came into play, alleviating the rules within the reality champ (field) and transformed it into a mad play self-authorized champ, where madness is the new normality, and seriousness shall be marginalized, treated as a play spoiler or “booed out of the stage”, for the spoilers (if the CEO does not follow the Bilibili’s language norm and mad literature norm) will “threaten the existence of the play community, reveal the relativity and fragility of the play-world and rob play of its illusion (Huizinga, 1951: 11).” In this way, “by mocking the societal reality, a self-consistent belief system is established to resist the disciplines from the reality (Chen, 2023: 49),” and at the same time the rules created by the Mad Literature youth subculture in the digital space are “reinforced (Chen, 2023: 50).” What the “others” do “outside” of the magic circle is of no concern to us at the moment of play. “Inside the circle of the game the laws and customs of ordinary life no longer count. We are different and do things differently (Huizinga, 1951: 12).”

On the other hand, however, informant P7 did mention that the possibility that the audience's reaction towards the CEO could be totally negative, if the CEO did not follow a certain manner during the speech. Yet she did not explain further about to what extent may fail the CEO to perform in the buffer zone of the mad literature play field. In another word, whether next time in the future another CEO of some certain brands conducts a similar performance or presence may have totally different effects in different contexts. In this case, it shows the probability that the boundary of the magic circle that marks the award ceremony play off the reality rules is not sharp and clearly defined, with its rules not yet finalized, hence “the game itself would consist in the tentative and risky process of negotiating these rules and boundaries (Rodriguez, 2006).” Namely, the flexibility and the fluidity of the definitions of the “new normality” and “madness” within this youth subcultural group are still evolving, demonstrating its potential fragility.

B: Indeed, Mad Literature as a meme lives quite long, while a lot of other memes online only lived a short period in China. Mad Literature is different from our daily life. Before this meme appeared, when you act madly, you are really insane. After this meme, it provides an approach, an umbrella to protect you from performing kayfabe madness to blow off your steam pressured by reality. When someone criticizes you, you can respond that you are just playing with the meme, and mock the boring seriousness of that person haha! You cannot harass customer service during complaints of a brand that much, but you can say you are playing mad literature's memes and let go off your steam! – (P8, 02.03.24)

According to informant P8, Mad Literature as a meme bestows a new form of freedom through language usage for Chinese young people both in the societal reality field and consumerism field. “A play-community generally tends to become permanent even after the game is over (Huizinga, 1951: 12).” The screenshots, videos and memes produced by the young audience and consumers during this campaign, can be expelled out of the young consumers’ subjectivity, “maintained in the digital space and continue functioning for new normality and madness evolution (Chen, 2023: 49)”. The experience of resisting the societal reality disciplines, sense of belonging, self-consistent logics and rules may have long-lasting effects, assisting the

magic circle formed by the mad literature subculture and together with the innovative award ceremony to extend the “new normality” norm into business world, and keeps evolving to protect the young subculture to challenge the existing business marketing norm (e.g. what a marketing campaign should be like, the purpose of a marketing, etc.).

The results of Chapter 6 show that in exploring how businesses engage younger audiences by breaking from traditional norms, two key strategies emerge.

Firstly, Taobao's Golden Peach Award Ceremony successfully departs from the seriousness of conventional business events. Its playful and humorous approach, featuring spontaneous jokes and self-mockery, resonates with viewers, attracting a voluntary and casual audience. By openly acknowledging the artificiality of the event and addressing real-life frustrations, participants like Spes create a connection with viewers, fostering a deeper engagement beyond mere entertainment. This approach aligns with the rebellious spirit of the Mad Literature Subculture, valuing the infusion of poetry and love into everyday experiences.

Secondly, through the repetition of internet memes and anthropomorphizing of brands, businesses embed brand awareness subconsciously among consumers, and what's more, shortens the distance between consumers and brands, creating symbolic triggers that reinforce brand awareness every time they are encountered. This strategy aligns well with the Mad Literature Subculture, which also thrives on meme creation and the blurred lines between reality and performance. Taobao's use of playful "kayfabe" and meme creation on platforms like Weibo and Xiaohongshu engages consumers, making brand interactions memorable and relatable. This continuous, playful engagement, as highlighted by informants, helps embed brands into consumers' subconscious, increasing the likelihood of future choices. This strategy, aligned with the Mad Literature Subculture's love for meme creation and blurred reality, allows brands to authentically connect with young consumers, fostering solidarity and shared humor.

Nevertheless, this new freedom on language usage is not without restriction, which sometimes can even lead to more complicated negative effects on younger consumers. This will be discussed in the next chapter.

7. Mad Marketing as a Failure: Misinterpretation of Mad Literature

7.1 Unable to Understand Madness is Only Its Form

A: Florasis’s case is real madness. I think the definition of the boundary between real madness and kayfabe madness in business is that when the brand really starts to attempt to win more benefits from the consumers instead of for the consumers. The products of Florasis are already expensive, not catering for younger consumers’ preference, but its product quality is not that good. In this case, if it gets mad yet not to the point younger consumers want to see, for instance when it moaned about consumers not buying into its cheap price, consumers would ignore its madness performance, and assume most of their budget was invested into dazzling marketing instead of product development, or attack the price setting and product quality, which would produce the opposite effects. What’s worse, even if one is attracted by its mad marketing, if one finds that the brand’s products quality is not coherent with its brand image, I would have even negative impression about this brand. – (P1, 01.28.24)

B: This can easily get screwed up if you cannot understand and put yourself really into the consumers and laborers’ feet. For example, When we normal, ordinary people always endure and suppress our current actions, striving to ensure that every moment of our future is not spent in hardship, some celebrities instead complain that they have to work during holidays, and they are also tired as normal people. However, what they earn is far beyond what a normal employee can earn for a whole lifetime. Moaning and groaning above inequality cannot trigger sympathy but antipathy. – (P2, 01.28.24)

When discussing about the brand Spes’s successful mad marketing practices during the award ceremony, most of the informants immediately referred to another brand, Florasis’s failed mad marketing practices. As mentioned in the case studies in the methodology section, Florasis as a local makeup brand utilized mad marketing as a way to defend the criticism and complaints from consumers about the fact that it attempted to showcase itself as an international brand, yet its product quality does not match its unreasonable price. As a defense, Florasis questioned consumers in a mad literature style: “*Our eyebrow pencil is only 79 RMB, is it expensive? Is it*

expensive? I have a dream, to become an international makeup brand, rooted from Chinese culture.” Nevertheless, it did not answer directly the criticism from consumers, instead it used an ambitious dream to cover its shortages and pain points, trying to educate consumers to accept its unreasonable price and in the meantime distracting the audience from the problem through sadfishing. In this way, its “madness” become a cover of arrogance and fake authenticity, which will push its consumers even further away.

Florasis failed to understand that the essence of the mad literature is not real madness, but madness as a form to hope others to listen to what their rational pursuits behind are, when facing societal inequality or stuck in anguish. People who really know how to use mad literature are self-disciplined and reserved, not intending to attack others. As Foucault said, madness is possible when everything in man's life and development is against one's hope and will. “Madness is no longer of the order of the Fall, but of a new order, in which men began to have a presentiment of history (Foucault, 1988: 220),” where they formed an obscure relationship about consumers' agency towards the “alienation” of the marketers and brands. Namely, in this new order of normality established by Chinese youth subculture in the digital world, Chinese younger consumers become aware of this presentiment of brands and how it may affect their life through consumption, thus somewhat gaining more power and rationality in this consumer-marketer battle. As Lefebvre said, “the power of material objects is part of everyday life, that everyday life tends to merge with material objects, whereas desire does not -which is the secret of its power (Lefebvre, 1971: 118).” Florasis failed to understand that Chinese younger consumers have already become alert or against the Happiness Myth brands create, where it “promises the happiness of being a consumer (Lefebvre, 1971: 105)”. Instead, Florasis also ignored the materiality of consumer goods, which is what younger consumers nowadays truly value. Young people who know mad literature have lost faith in the illusion brands created and only look into the real product goods quality and its pragmatic value, not illusive symbols and signifiers of the consumer objects.

What's more, when claiming itself “rooted from Chinese culture”, Florasis intended to borrow existing myths about China-chic¹⁵ to stimulate the consumption of its products, attempting to “salvage and recondition (Lefebvre, 1971: 105)” its own brand myths, yet failed to

¹⁵ China-chic: A trend that is popular among the younger generation in China, about reviving traditional Chinese cultures, combining modern fashion with traditional elements, showing cultural confidence.

match its product materiality as signifier with its expected myths as signified, and also failed to realize its brand image is a consumption object to Chinese younger consumers, not a brand with illusive subjectivity, thus “uncoupling its signifiers and signified (Lefebvre, 1971:118),” which is easy to detect and cause its falling off its own imaginary pedestal, or turn itself the object to be rebelled by mad literature subculture. As a result, Chinese younger consumers’ clear awareness and pragmatism alienate Florasis’ self-indulgent practices of marketing and those think highly of themselves above consumers and turn any possible marketing tricks into jokes or ridiculous performances.

When mad literature transforms into a form of marketing, brands should be aware that when conducting mad marketing one should be cautious about its presence in front of the consumers. Value proposition can become an arrogant action of attempting to educate consumers, which will be interpreted as a form of attack and as informant P1 said, “attempt to win benefits from the consumers instead of for the consumers”. Brands who do not respect consumers and attempt to play marketing tricks shall fall. Brands who act authentically and empathize truly with consumers and solve consumers’ pain points will become consumers’ friends.

7.2 Unable to Represent the Rebellious Nature and Tragic Core Through Madness

A: When it comes to the later phase of the video I could no longer laugh, because I got tired of the condensed deliberate memes and jokes. I care a lot about the logic behind the madness. If a brand acts madly for certain logical reason from reality, especially in mad literature’s case, our motivation comes from rebellion -- the effect, I assume, will be much stronger; yet if I cannot get the reason why it goes crazy, I will only feel it strange and nonsense, and I don’t accept it, and in this case I don’t think this will be a good strategy to help the brand to get closer to the consumers. – (P5, 02/01/24)

B: Yes, it is funny somehow, and I can feel that the brands are trying authentically to get closer to younger consumers. However, when the lines about their product introduction appeared, I also felt that “is it just another trap of consumerism?” “are these brands just trying to cooperate the youth subculture into their own business culture and conduct marketing?” So in the later phase I started to get a little bit bored. – (P11, 02/11/24)

During the 13 interviews, most of the interviewees mentioned that they found the award ceremony funny in the beginning, yet after a while immediately became bored again and would not have continued to watch or would choose to speed up to watch if they encountered this video by themselves. Here the question is: why? Why could the golden peach award ceremony still not maintain the younger consumers after capturing them in the very beginning? – the answer seems simple and clear according to P5 “she didn’t accept madness without convincing logic rooted from reality.” During this award ceremony, Taobao succeeded in undoing the serious norm of traditional business award ceremony and bring in a fresh and ludic air, however, the deliberate continuation of madness and happiness from the start to the end, by using memes and ludic performances that the brands think younger consumers would like, was merely imitating the superficial “mad” form the Mad Literature represent, thus failed to realize the tragic core of mad literature youth subculture.

As Mad literature is deeply rooted from when Chinese youths face overwhelming and unbearable societal pressure, they transform direct rebel practices towards reality into seemingly harmless, weak madness in virtuality. One of the Mad Literature’s tragic features is that “its expression is linguistically empty, which becomes the protection, enabling them to continue certain rebellious actions that will not be taken seriously (Chen, 2023: 50).” In another word, people who use Mad Literature “need no external element to reach a true resolution. It has merely to carry its illusion to the point of truth (Foucault, 1988: 32).” In the madness of mad literature youth subculture, the equilibrium is established, yet which is masked beneath the illusion and the empty feature, beneath pretended disorder. Nevertheless, in this tragic and idealistic backdrop, through creating a similar mad concept of “lifestyle” or “attitudes” shown in commercials, marketers aim to imitate the lifestyle “they think” the youth desire, and try to “appeal to consumers’ aspirations to belong to more than their actual status groups and seek to isolate individuals from actual groups and encourage them to seek attachments to imagined communities instead (Applbaum, 1998: 336).” However, apparently, this cloned consumption version of mad literature lifestyle is not attractive enough, which cannot transcend the pleasure-pain consumption issue through the imagined community, but instead engulfed, digested, and spit out by the Mad literature youth subculture. When it comes to brand awareness, indeed some informants showed their interest of this award ceremony, which demonstrate the partial success of Taobao’s cooperation on mad literature youth subculture, yet most of the informants express

criticism and questioning towards the true intention behind this ceremony, and claimed that they will not be persuaded to really purchase most of the products mentioned in the video. Thus, when it comes to purchase transition rate, this marketing campaign is a failure and do not have a profound effect viewed from the 13 informants.

In addition, Taobao’s golden peach ceremony did partially present the limitedness feature by attaching its form with play, which is “played out within certain limits of time and place,” yet failed to present that it “contains its own course and meaning (Huizinga, 1951:9).” The rebellious nature of mad literature subculture is indeed restricted by reality, yet it succeeds in outburst in virtuality. Therefore, when choosing Bilibili as a virtual video platform to present this youth subculture, Taobao should have taken more consideration on the tragic core of mad literature, not just its mad form. The ludic turn of the award ceremony should not be ended the same as the beginning as merely a play, but transcend to the representation of pain points youth consumers suffer in reality. As mentioned in chapter 5, Chinese younger consumers already realized the essence of consumption is a tragic paradox, that “everyone wants to put believes he has put - his desire into every object possessed, consumed, but from every object appropriated, from every satisfaction achieved, and from every 'available' minute, the desire is already absent. All that remains is consommé of desire (Baudrillard, 2012: 152).” Namely, there is no salvation in marketing or consumption, and according to Applbaum, the consumer goods will not, according to those marketers’ urge, “embellish our social identity”, and some self-oriented products or activities cannot “make our social life more tolerable if only we use certain products (Applbaum, 1998: 337).” Chinese youth have deconstructed and alienated the future pleasure myths or narratives marketers and brands trying to create. Thus, younger consumers become more rational and pragmatic than ever, trying to escape consumerism yet cannot succeed once and for all because of their basic need of consumer goods, then in this contradictory painful paradox they can only choose to get desperate or, still hold “confidence in the greater providential value of human suffering figure (Sahlins, 1996: 395)” among the *pleasure – pain* consumption principle issues. And in this way, it leads to the following discussion about how younger consumers are trying to achieve a balance between commodity and pleasure-pain principle.

7.3 Unable to Realize Their Attempts to Find Meaning and Balance in Commodity

When I wear y2k clothes and walk on the streets, I can hear people praising my hair color and my clothes and I really felt happy and like myself. In 2023 I kept ordering clothes online and purchased more than 100, but now suddenly I no longer want to buy any cloth, that I want to control my purchase desire, I become anti-consumerism and after rethinking about the meaning of fashion, I became happy and peaceful. However, after a period I began again to buy some products from time to time, and in the meantime dislike myself. – (P1, 01/28/24)

From informant P1 (who is into the Y2K¹⁶ fashion subculture) it is witnessed that the struggle between consumerism and anti-consumerism in the younger generation. One thing notable is what she described as uncontrollable impulse of consuming and sense of guilt and self-dislike afterwards. This perspective resonates with the “mystified needs” described by Baudrillard, which have been “transformed into a totalizing, self-referential system of commodity-signs in the capitalist system (Baudrillard, 1988: 12).” For P1, wearing y2k clothes is an important part of identity making. It helps her to distinguish herself from others and bring pleasure through consumption, where categories of clothes as objects have been fetishized into categories of persons, with “stereotyped personalities, complete with a set of distinguishing values that constitute a new foundation of morality (Baudrillard, 1988: 12)”, (and in P1’s case, wearing Y2K clothes and the continuation of consumption become her morality of taking good care of herself) which make individuals have no choice but to seek to “actualize themselves in consumption (Baudrillard, 1988: 12).” However, afterwards the repetitively appeared sense of guilty and self-dislike demonstrate the pleasure – pain principle in consumption again, where “the feeling that in self-denial lies virtue, and in consumption sin, is still powerfully present (Appelbaum, 1998: 337).” Consumers are trying their best to find balance and meaning in the duality of commodity between consumerism and anti-consumerism, pursuit for salvation through “taking products and having them come to stand for oneself”, while the “garden of Eden sodded for consumers by marketers is not without its snake (Appelbaum, 1998: 336).” Either running away from their basic needs or morally self-denying could not bring true freedom to the consumers, and in the meantime, consumers have already long been immersed in an environment

¹⁶ Y2K: A fashion genre popular among Gen-Z, mostly refer to clothes with metallic and glossy textures. Clothes made from vinyl, PVC, and other shiny materials were all the rage. They give outfits a futuristic, space-age vibe.

where one’s identity has been closely attached with consumer goods. In this backdrop, mad literature youth subculture thrives:

I think during the performance there are still a lot of collaboration and subjective initiative from the performers inside the doll and the marketing operators behind the brands’ social media accounts. It’s just some dogsbody¹⁷ laborers the same in my age encountering with each other offline or online, fighting and joking together. Their action may be related with the brand’s strategy, but I don’t care about those brands’ illusory interactions, I am only attracted by the dogsbody laborers’ complaint about annoying work and their kayfabe mad mental state shown in brands’ official social media and the award ceremony — that’s where I feel related, it’s with the oppressed laborers, not with the brands. (–P3, 01/28/24)

Here the solution is, consumers separate the marketers or the performers’ identity from the commercial brands, by denying commodity, and at the same time resonating with the marketers who show themselves as a normal person just like consumers, also as dogsbody laborers who work from 9 to 5 and being oppressed by capitalism. “Freedom is realized only when the individual has experienced total alienation-when misery is transcended through the full existential realization of alienation rather than the rejection of it (Applbaum, 1998: 337).” This is another act from consumers of actively alienating consumerism, by “transcending them by becoming them, by reifying them into self-identity (Applbaum, 1998: 336).” During this exchange of identity both sides reach an agreement that the subject that sympathy, empathy, or loyalty consumers offer towards is not the brands, but the marketer who shows he/she is being oppressed. Thus, risks also unveil itself in this mad marketing strategy, that consumers can easily “betray” the brands when its marketers change position in mobility to different industries or other brands, unless brands can maintain this image of “allowing its laborers to complain, being generous and enduring consumers’ criticism”. But according to the feedback from the 13 informants, most of the brand awareness should be rather interpreted towards the dogbody laborer -- the marketers behind the brands. The 1.5 million views of the award ceremony may

¹⁷ Dogsbody: A person who has to do all the boring or unpleasant jobs that other people do not want to do. People who serve other people.

demonstrate Taobao’s success in bringing a ludic performance and entertainment to the younger consumers yet cannot prove its success in attaching consumers with brands themselves through its anthropomorphic strategy.

Here the problems the Mad Marketing concept should have been devised to solve are coding beyond the materiality, seek out “emotional need or impetus (Appelbaum, 1998: 326)”, in this case as an agent by helping consumers display the madness as an emotional outburst, during which the salvation is somehow achieved “in the meaningful construction of identity (Appelbaum, 1998: 336).” Nevertheless, as mentioned in chapter 7.2, this outburst was only showcased in a very vague and “safe” style under the surveillance of external speech control in virtuality in China, lingering on the very shallow surface of mad literature youth subculture, failed to touch upon the core tragic core or apparently show that they understand the youth’s pursuit of finding meaning through consumption.

But here's also good news for the brands, that the partial success of this mad marketing award ceremony illustrates the huge potential of the collaboration between marketers and consumers, where marketers-consumers as one of “mutual intelligibility, even agreement (Appelbaum, 1998: 332)”. Through finding the common ground that both of the marketers and the consumers are subjects being oppressed by capitalism, consumers become marketers, marketers become consumers. “Power is thus not the main generative impetus behind the recreation of the capitalist cosmology; meaning and the practices associated with economic exchange are (Appelbaum, 1998: 332).” Thus, the institutions of brands have no authority over consumers, while the marketers and consumers participate together in the recreation of future consumption in China. Brands may utilize this mutual intelligibility between consumers and marketers to go beyond the previous brands-consumers relationships, but should also be alert of the backfire of over-zealous approach to youth subculture. Because once being detected that the approach is not authentic based on good product quality and sincere and humble attitudes trying to learn and get closer to youth culture, Florasis will be an example of the possible backfire.

In sum, the most obvious finding to emerge from Chapter 7 is that successful mad marketing requires more than just adopting the superficial aesthetics of youth subcultures. For example, by focusing only on surface-level elements like memes and playful content without addressing the deeper societal pressures and authentic experiences, Florasis appeared exploitative and lost credibility among younger consumers. Mad literature highlights its role as a

subtle critique of societal norms through seemingly harmless madness, while Taobao's golden peach award ceremony attempted to leverage this concept but failed by not capturing the tragic core of mad literature, leading to a superficial portrayal that did not maintain consumer engagement. Therefore, brands must engage with the deeper motivations, frustrations, and aspirations of younger consumers shown through their subcultures. Authenticity, depth, and a genuine understanding of the societal pressures facing youth are crucial. Brands that can navigate these complexities and build meaningful, honest connections with their audience stand a better chance of sustaining engagement and loyalty. Conversely, those that focus solely on surface-level engagement risk being perceived as insincere and exploitative, ultimately failing to resonate with the critical and discerning younger consumer base.

In essence, the analysis underscores the need for brands to transcend mere mimicry and engage with the real, and more in-depth experiences of their target audience, fostering a more profound and authentic relationship with modern youth culture.

8. Conclusion

This study set out to explore the root of Mad Marketing, using case studies and applied ethnography research about Chinese younger consumers' perception of the success and failure of this marketing performance beyond quantitative data in social media and serve as an inspiration for brands targeting Chinese younger consumers. Also, this thesis aims to illuminate the complexity and pursuits of Chinese younger generation through the qualitative consumption behavior in this novel marketing phenomenon.

In Chapter 5, it was found that the Mad Literature subculture emerges from a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and societal factors. Confucian and Neo-Taoist philosophies, combined with modern societal pressures, create a breeding ground for rebellion and unconventional thinking among Chinese youth. The limitations of the Chinese language, coupled with a sense of repression, contribute to the emergence of alternative means of expression, particularly evident in the digital realm. However, despite the subculture's virtual triumphs, its impact remains confined to the digital world, leaving questions about its real-world efficacy. All above lay a solid foundation of the consumption behaviors of younger generation. They are now more rational, pragmatical and critical than ever, only conducting purchase when the products

achieve good quality and cater to their current needs. Marketing and pleasure myths created by brands are partially deconstructed by the Chinese youth, requiring brands to put more efforts on understanding more in-depth about youth subculture before claiming itself does understand.

Chapter 6 demonstrates that businesses can effectively engage younger audiences by departing from traditional norms and transiting into ludic turn. Two key strategies were identified: the use of playful and humorous approaches, as seen in Taobao's Golden Peach Award Ceremony, and the embedding of brand awareness through internet memes and anthropomorphizing of brands. These strategies resonate with the rebellious spirit of the Mad Literature subculture, fostering deeper engagement and connection with consumers.

However, as highlighted in Chapter 7, successful engagement with youth subcultures requires more than surface-level mimicry. Comparing Spes and Florasis shows that brands must authentically engage with the deeper motivations and experiences of their target audience. Failure to do so risks appearing insincere and ultimately alienating the very audience they seek to engage. Another thing notable is the novel relationship between consumers and marketers, which demonstrate Applbaum’s view that the relationship between consumers and marketers can go beyond power as addressed by Lefebvre or Baudrillard. Nowadays brands are losing more and more authority over consumers, as marketers and consumers collaboratively shape the future of consumption in China. While brands can leverage this shared understanding between marketers and consumers to transcend traditional brand-consumer relationships, they should also be cautious of the potential backlash from an overly enthusiastic approach to youth subculture.

When it comes to younger consumers, the findings suggest that less of them still indulge in the pleasure consumption myth, most of them may struggle between the pain-pleasure principle around consumerism, and more of them are trying to escape, rebel, and recreate their new normality through collaboration with marketers or denying brands.

The findings underscore the need for brands to move beyond mere mimicry and engage authentically with modern youth culture. The Mad Literature subculture serves as a lens through which we can understand the desires, frustrations, and aspirations of Chinese youth. It represents a yearning for freedom of expression, a challenge to societal norms, and a search for authenticity in an increasingly artificial world. As brands navigate the complexities of modern marketing, they must strive for authenticity, depth, and a genuine understanding of their audience. The Mad Literature subculture offers valuable insights into the power of rebellion, humor, and authenticity

in connecting with younger consumers. The findings suggest that brands that can authentically tap into these values stand to build meaningful, long-lasting relationships with their audience.

While this study attempts to provide first-hand insights from Chinese younger consumers, there are avenues for further research. First, future studies could conduct cultural comparison studies when it comes to the madness trend among younger generations between the western societies and Chinese societies, or other Asian societies such as the younger Japanese and Korean generation. As the author is writing this thesis, the madness trend is also growing in social media in TikTok, Instagram or other channels, suggesting that China is not the only country whose younger generation has chosen to follow this trend. What will be the differences and similarities between their madness practices in social media? How should brands apply different strategies when adapting different markets’ youth subculture when it comes to madness? What may be the drivers that produce these different forms of madness in different youth cultures?

Second, investigating the role of subcultural resistance in shaping broader social change could provide valuable insights into the potential impact of youth subcultures on Chinese society. Understanding how brands can authentically engage with these movements to drive positive social change represents a promising area for future research.

Furthermore, nowadays more and more marketers who used to be younger consumers graduated from university and stepped into the commercial world. Their identity is also exchanging and evolving together with younger consumers through interactions in social media or other marketing campaigns, facing together the repressing societal reality but may hope for a better future. What are the younger generation marketers thinking when having to create some consumption trap and create or replicate the pleasure myth? How do they cope and how will they feel as individuals? How does the identity exchange mechanism work for younger marketers?

In conclusion, the Mad Literature subculture offers a rich tapestry of rebellion, humor, and authenticity that brands can draw upon to connect with modern youth culture. By understanding and authentically engaging with these values, brands can build meaningful connections with their audience, driving lasting engagement and loyalty. The Chinese younger generation were born and raised under the era of rapid development of modern China, yet have encountered the realities of the pandemic and witnessed various international crises. Against a backdrop of economic downturn, issues regarding employment, education, personal

development, and a sense of confusion have contributed to the unique characteristics of Chinese youth. Their complexity deserves serious attention and research by the commercial brands.

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