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## **An Analysis of Interactive Communication of Youth Self-Deprecation Culture under the Interaction Ritual Chain Theory: A Case Study of “Lemon Head” Videos on Bilibili (Postprint)**

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### **Abstract**

This study takes the “Lemon Head” video series on Bilibili as its research object, guided by Collins’ Interaction Ritual Chain theory, to analyze the interaction rituals through which youth groups engage in self-mocking culture, and thereby investigate the dissemination characteristics of youth self-mocking culture on social media, manifestations of group interaction, and the resulting impacts.

### **Full Text**

## **An Analysis of Youth Self-Mockery Culture’s Interactive Dissemination from the Perspective of Interaction Ritual Chain Theory: A Case Study of Bilibili’s “Lemon Head” Videos**

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**Abstract:** This paper examines Bilibili’s “Lemon Head” video series as its research subject, guided by Collins’ Interaction Ritual Chain theory, to analyze the interactive rituals through which youth participate in self-mockery culture, and thereby explore the dissemination characteristics, manifestations of group interaction, and resulting impacts of youth self-mockery culture on social media.

**Keywords:** Interaction Ritual Chain, Social Media, Self-Mockery Culture, Group Interaction

Self-mockery refers to the verbal strategy employed by individuals in awkward situations to alleviate embarrassment. By diminishing their own image, self-mockers release suppressed emotions and obtain psychological comfort and

spiritual pleasure. Currently, self-mockery culture has extended beyond physical society; the rapid development of new media has transformed it from emotional fermentation in the real world to a collective trend of group self-mockery on online platforms. The popularity of internet memes such as “wage slave” and “small-town swot” demonstrates the penetration of self-mockery culture among youth. Essentially, youth self-mockery culture constitutes a form of internet subculture—a secondary culture that contends with mainstream culture. Beginning with the popularity of terms like “diaosi” (loser) and “feichai” (good-for-nothing), successive phenomena such as “Buddhist youth,” “true fragrance monster,” “lemon spirit,” and “Lemon Head videos” have emerged, profoundly reflecting contemporary online youth’s anxious and distressed attitudes toward social life. In new media contexts characterized by virtuality, interactivity, freedom, and decentralization, the 博弈 between subculture and mainstream culture increasingly demonstrates powerful expansion and influence.

## 1. The Origin of Bilibili’s “Lemon Head” Videos

“Lemon Head” videos originated from a humorous special effect called “Everything Facial Features” on Douyin (TikTok). This effect offers numerous templates, including watermelon, cat, sweet potato, and Peppa Pig. After selecting a template background, users can graft their own facial features onto the image. When applying this effect, users can manipulate the distribution of their features—such as swapping eyes left and right, choosing whether to include a nose, or placing the mouth anywhere on the face. Among the myriad effects and facial distribution possibilities, the combination featuring a lemon template background with normal facial features became the most popular, giving rise to the so-called “Lemon Head.” In most Lemon Head videos, viewers encounter a wrinkled, eye-winking lemon baring its teeth. The effect conceals the user’s real appearance completely, and even the voice can be processed through the effect. Once activated, the user becomes an anonymous, peculiar lemon head indistinguishable from others. The combination of humorous effects and eye-catching titles, unified by their “bizarre” and “funny” qualities, creates a magical “ $1+1>2$ ” effect that powerfully attracts audiences. The primary content of Bilibili’s “Lemon Head” videos features UP creators (content uploaders) using the “Lemon Head” effect to narrate their “social death” experiences or thoughts—such as melodramatic yet real experiences that seem straight out of Jinjiang Literature, unexpectedly awkward situations, unspeakable quirks, and hidden inner thoughts.

## 2. Interaction Ritual Chain Theory

American sociologist Collins proposed the Interaction Ritual Chain theory in his book *Interaction Ritual Chains* and subsequently perfected its theoretical framework. Collins argues that most phenomena in society are formed and maintained through various interaction rituals during interpersonal communication. Through high levels of mutual focus and emotional entrainment, individuals

form interaction rituals and acquire emotional energy, which in turn becomes the driving force for the next interaction ritual, thereby creating a cycle of interaction rituals [1]. The interaction ritual chain constitutes the foundation of social structure; entire society can be viewed as a long interaction ritual chain composed of countless smaller interaction ritual chains.

### 3. Self-Presentation of Youth Groups in “Lemon Head” Video Series

#### 3.1 The Anonymity Conferred by the Mask

Goffman’s dramaturgical theory, presented in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, posits that individuals perform in social activities and introduces theatrical concepts, referring to the performance space as the stage. The stage comprises front stage and back stage regions. The front stage is the specific venue for performance, where individuals typically present an idealized, socialized self [2]. Front-stage activities primarily consist of three components: setting, personal appearance, and manner. Under the “Lemon Head” effect, UP creators need not worry about social death caused by exposure of their appearance or voice recognition. The “Lemon Head” effect provides a “virtual confessional booth” where UP creators can confidently share secrets, unspeakable experiences, and emotions, or vent long-suppressed negative feelings without affecting their real-world image, thereby achieving personal narrative expression and negative emotion catharsis. Bilibili serves as such a front stage, and the “Lemon Head” effect further enhances perceived anonymity—concealing appearance and altering voice, thereby strengthening the “anonymous attribute” of the internet. Consequently, UP creators become bolder in posting their “social death” experiences online without fear of identification. Benefiting from this “anonymous” attribute of the Lemon Head effect, creators can freely narrate words and stories that are usually difficult to articulate. The masked “anonymity” of “Lemon Head” becomes armor for individual self-mockery expression, thereby facilitating the occurrence of self-mockery behavior.

#### 3.2 Novelty, Gossip, and Empathetic Warmth

Entertainment and relaxation have always been human needs, and the tense, depressing environment during the pandemic has further fueled the pursuit of entertainment. The “social death” scenes conveyed in “Lemon Head” videos not only satisfy people’s curiosity and gossip psychology but also achieve the audience’s entertainment and relaxation goals. However, novelty and entertainment are not the only factors attracting people to “Lemon Head” videos. The authentic “social death” experiences and resulting embarrassment resonate with audiences who have had similar experiences and emotions, thereby achieving mutual empathy. This “similarity” gathers individuals into a community where they huddle together for warmth and mutual comfort. The “stories” presented in “Lemon Head” videos are almost all real experiences from ordinary daily

life—though melodramatic, they are simple, direct, and heart-touching. Some viewers even “ship” couples within these stories, much like the mindless soap operas of earlier years that attracted large audiences despite their clichéd plots and storylines. Titles such as *That Time I Moved and Discovered My Ex-Boyfriend Lived Across the Hall, Then Ran into Him at the Market and Died Socially* or *That Time I Went to an Exam and Found My Ex-Boyfriend Was the Proctor* immediately capture audience curiosity through their eye-catching titles. The bizarre, absurd content resembles a real-life stand-up comedy show, attracting large crowds of onlookers.

### 3.3 Danmaku Interaction Rituals Strengthening Dissemination Effects

Collins’ Interaction Ritual Chain theory proposes that the core mechanism of interaction ritual chains is mutual focus and emotional entrainment, which forms a momentary shared reality. When participants increasingly focus on their common actions and become more aware of each other’s consciousness, they intensely experience shared emotions, thereby forming an identity associated with cognitive symbols that makes them interested and enthusiastic about participating in what they consider morally permissible activities [1]. Compared to short videos, long videos generate more danmaku (bullet comments) and higher probabilities of interaction rituals. As a signature feature of Bilibili, danmaku obviously better leverages the advantages of long videos, where the generation and accumulation of emotional energy become more frequent. The final link in the complete presentation of interaction ritual chains is the sharing of common emotions or affective experiences. In Bilibili’s “Lemon Head” videos, such interactions can be observed everywhere. At the beginning of videos, audiences leave comments like “This one is even more hardcore” to express their appreciation for the socially dead, bizarre content. Some audiences thank UP creators for providing such “social death” yet funny experiences, while others express gratitude upon realizing “I’m not the only one who has experienced such awkward moments.” Simultaneously, UP creators themselves express gratitude for the masking effect of “Lemon Head.” Through danmaku interactions, UP creators achieve the goals of sharing emotions and seeking resonance. Through repeated emotional exchanges, Bilibili’s “Lemon Head” videos gain stronger stickiness and higher activity levels.

## 4. Self-Mockery Culture in Bilibili’s “Lemon Head” Videos

### 4.1 Construction of Group Identity

In today’s knowledge economy era, unprecedented social development has spawned increasingly complex emotions, with young people facing mounting pressures in life and work. Under high-pressure workplace environments and social stress, unable to resist directly, individuals need to counteract in helpless ways. The popularity of “Lemon Head” videos represents young people with shared focus and value orientations on social media obtaining attention and

understanding through group expression. Through the use of “Lemon Head,” they establish mutual identification—their pressures and realities are not personal problems. When a group shares the same circumstances, the burden seems shared, and emotions can be relieved through finding resonance. An individual’s quirks and disappointments, narrated under the Lemon Head mask, find resolution through interesting interactions. In cyberspace, the “self-mockery culture” group subverts inherent evaluation systems, attempting to reconstruct evaluation frameworks through rebellious, decadent approaches. Through interaction with others, they form self-reflection, finding their roles and positioning. Internet self-mockery subculture forms a group style through unique identifiers and discourse, facing group dilemmas without evasion, confronting problems directly, generating emotional resonance and belonging from shared misfortunes, and achieving group identity construction. Simultaneously, through its distinctive style, it successfully distinguishes itself from other subculture groups, increasing differentiation and further enhancing group identity. This sense of group identity gives youth a feeling of “fellow sufferers,” helping reduce identity distance and alleviate the island effect of modern society, thereby promoting social harmony.

#### 4.2 Self-Mockery with an Optimistic Undertone

In contemporary society, with abundant online hostility and numerous real-world expectations, youth groups face substantial pressure. Adopting a humble civilian or even weak posture within the majority becomes a self-protective method. Compared to “mocking others,” “self-mockery” represents an extremely safe mode of self-presentation. From the perspective of spiritual life, self-mockery constitutes self-examination of real life. For subordinate groups in difficult situations, self-mockery is often considered a “stop-loss” behavior—since they already find themselves in awkward circumstances lacking value and dignity, self-mockery can provide excuses for “escaping embarrassment,” thereby building a psychological defense line for self-protection. The popularity of self-mockery in the internet era also secures a place for the “self” on the basis of self-protection. This represents a form of self-mockery with an “optimistic” undertone.

In this virtual society, individual discourse power, influence, and opportunities for appearance are more unevenly distributed than in the real world, with a minority possessing the ability to influence the concepts and standards of the majority. For group interaction, internet technology can fill the physical distance gap, utilizing the immediacy of information technology to gather individuals scattered around the world into the same public sphere, where they adopt rituals such as posting videos and sending danmaku to express their viewpoints and convey emotions during interaction. In “Lemon Head” videos, Bilibili becomes a social public platform where vast youth groups participate in interaction and share emotions. By exchanging and disseminating cultural symbols related to self-mockery culture, such as emojis, people’s emotions collide. This emotion

carries the flavor of “fellow sufferers,” and emotional resonance continuously ferments, ultimately condensing into a “self-mockery” group.

### 4.3 Product of Emotional Catharsis and Self-Entertainment

Initially, “Lemon Head” videos served as a special effect to conceal identity, but their current prevalence on Bilibili has evolved beyond mere identity concealment to gradually become an entertainment carnival for emotional catharsis. From the perspective of the videos themselves, youth groups choose the lemon head because “lemon” already carries self-mockery connotations, derived from the popular self-mockery term “lemon spirit.” The surface meaning is that eating lemons tastes sour; the underlying meaning is feeling envious when seeing others’ excellence, abbreviated as “I’m sour.” Building upon “lemon spirit,” the release of “Lemon Head” allows youth groups to quickly understand its connotations, representing another derivation of self-mockery culture. From a titling perspective, youth groups have transplanted clickbait behaviors from self-media to videos, with titles typically being eye-catching, such as *About How My Mom’s Tutor for Me Is My Boyfriend* or *About My Stepmother Cheating with a T*. All kinds of rare life events bloom in “Lemon Head” videos. With Bilibili’s algorithmic recommendation, users are immediately pushed to the next “Lemon Head” video after watching one. Such videos have become traffic passwords, and under the platform algorithm’s promotion, they further drive the popularity of self-mockery culture.

### 4.4 High Empathy Under Group Carnival

Constrained by social morality, people in real life would not act against social ethics out of jealousy. However, the anonymous nature of the internet amplifies people’s innermost desires. Social media creates an interactive space where users can freely express viewpoints while reasonably venting emotions, perfectly matching audience needs when combined with diversified “lemon spirit” cultural symbols. The magic of Lemon Head lies in its ability to accommodate any story. For instance, accidentally breaking a teacher’s toilet as a child, stretching and accidentally inserting a hand into a male classmate’s mouth, or becoming the bride’s bridesmaid at an ex-boyfriend’s wedding—these socially dead experiences that not even scripts could invent have truly occurred in real life, simultaneously distant and near. When watching these videos, audiences can temporarily forget real-life troubles and enjoy moments of happiness and pleasure through humor. This resembles why we enjoy stand-up comedy or funny videos—actively seeking moments of happiness beyond life pressures. This also explains why humorous videos can become popular across various platforms. In Lemon Head videos, a common danmaku comment is “Thank you, Lemon Head.” After watching this happiness-inducing content, netizens not only refrain from malicious mockery but rather express goodwill and gratitude toward creators. Lemon Head videos provide decompression and relaxation emotionally. When netizens release pressure and huddle together for warmth, they naturally

form a carnival in social networks.

As an emerging youth self-mockery culture, “Lemon Head” videos have become another symbolic carrier for contemporary youth groups’ self-comfort. This reflects youth groups’ purpose of psychological defense through self-deprecation. Behind “self-mockery” lies the anxiety of youth development, which the internet amplifies unrestrainedly, sweeping it into popular subculture. Notably, the emotional appeals and sentiments reflected in collective self-mockery have no absolute good or evil; therefore, this self-mockery culture should be viewed through a rational, objective lens. Media platforms should fulfill their “gatekeeper” role, promoting positive cultural significance. During regulation, they should guide correct online concepts, contribute to a green and healthy internet, and steer online subculture toward positive, healthy development.

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