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## Online Youth Subculture Performance from the Perspective of Emotional Communication -Research on the Phenomenon of ‘Postprint’

**Authors:** Liu Tianxiao

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### Abstract

In this study, the semi-structured in-depth interview method is used to conduct qualitative research on the phenomenon of “nonsense literature”, in an attempt to answer the reasons and mechanism of its prevalence. Through the research, the author finds that “nonsense literature” not only presents a distinct tendency of satire and resistance and subculture attributes, but also has a powerful communicative function and has its applicable context in real life. It is worth noting that this study also found that the sudden surge in popularity of “nonsense literature” makes people blindly follow the trend, and its contents are mixed, which has a certain negative impact on the network environment, which is worthy of vigilance and reflection.

### Full Text

#### Preamble

**Title:** Online Youth Subculture Performance from the Perspective of Emotional Communication: A Study on the Phenomenon of “Nonsense Literature”

**Author:** Liu Tianxiao, College of Chinese Language and Literature, Xinjiang Normal University, China, 1617361508@qq.com

**Abstract:** This study employs semi-structured in-depth interviews to conduct qualitative research on the phenomenon of “nonsense literature,” attempting to explain the reasons and mechanisms behind its prevalence. Through this research, the author finds that “nonsense literature” not only exhibits distinct tendencies of satire and resistance along with subcultural attributes, but also possesses powerful communicative functions and has applicable contexts in real life. Notably, this study also reveals that the sudden surge in popularity of “nonsense literature” leads to blind trend-following, and its mixed content has

certain negative impacts on the online environment, warranting vigilance and reflection.

**Keywords:** Nonsense Literature; Emotional Communication; Meme Theory; Subculture

## 1.1 Background Introduction

In the post-COVID-19 era, the pandemic situation in China continues to evolve rapidly. While people are returning to normal production and life in an orderly manner, the COVID-19 pandemic is not yet over, and epidemic risks still persist [1]. Some overseas scholars believe that the continued occurrence of COVID-19 will reshuffle the world order, and although the threat to human life, health, and security may be temporary, the economic and even political turmoil it affects could last for generations [2]. American writer Thomas Friedman regards the novel coronavirus outbreak as a new starting point in history, referring to the period after this starting point as the post-epidemic era [3]. During this time, due to epidemic control measures and conscious self-protection, ordinary people's free activity space has been reduced, and leisure and entertainment options have become limited. People increasingly place their spiritual needs on social media platforms such as Douyin, Kuaishou, Bilibili, Weibo, WeChat, and QQ, thereby intensifying the "traffic is king" environment. Currently, numerous videos and content lacking substantive information flood the internet in pursuit of traffic. On these social platforms, audiences have created a plethora of meme-rich expressions, including the "nonsense literature" that this article aims to explore. "Nonsense literature" refers to texts that primarily appear in new media contexts, possessing almost no present significance but mainly absent significance. We have observed that many people are dissatisfied with the low-quality content prevalent in current online media, so they employ parody and imitation of nonsense to satirize these works and achieve resistance. In this regard, we are curious: Why do contemporary youth produce "nonsense literature"? What motivations lie behind it? Why has "nonsense literature" become so widespread? What does the prevalence of this "nonsense literature" reflect about the psychology of contemporary youth? What spiritual needs does it satisfy?

## 2.1 Literature Review of the Phenomenon of "Nonsense Literature"

The phenomenon of "nonsense literature" has attracted academic attention from multiple perspectives. Initial research in the academic circle focused on linguistic philology. In 2021, Zhang Qin analyzed and studied it from the perspectives of pragmatics and semantics, pointing out that "nonsense literature" is a special linguistic phenomenon deliberately created by linguistic social groups. It is anti-elite and anti-traditional, featuring a humorous aesthetic style and greeting function [4]. In 2022, Zhu Xinyi analyzed its contextual effects and interpersonal

functions from the perspective of relevance theory, discovering a large number of original materials for the study of “nonsense literature” [5]. Qian Yimin, Sun Hui, and Zhong Yuanyi classified “nonsense literature” and “fuddleology” into the category of “perfunctory science” in 2022, explaining the popular principle of “fuddleology” from the perspective of cognitive processing. They argued that both “fuddleology” and “nonsense literature” implied the public’s frustration and resistance to passive social interaction [6]. In the same year, Luo Min and Hu Mingyuan studied the production process and outcomes from the perspective of cultural consumption, pointing out that “nonsense literature” transformed from the recovery of audience meaning and joyful production to the elimination of subjectivity and the deconstruction of resistance, reflecting the pessimistic situation of internet cultural consumption [7]. In summary, current research on “nonsense literature” mainly focuses on language analysis, remaining at the superficial level of concept definition, category division, and feature induction, with insufficient in-depth and diversified research.

## 2.2 Subculture

The concept of subculture was proposed by American sociologists in the 1940s, though actual research had already begun earlier, and its formation and development have gone through three stages. In the first stage, the Chicago School began studying immigration phenomena, juvenile delinquency, occupation, and gender subcultures in the 1920s, forming the famous Chicago “deviant subculture” study in the 1960s. In the second stage, from the 1970s to early 1980s, the Birmingham School took British working-class youth groups after World War II as research objects, established the academic system of youth subculture research, and opened up the cultural perspective of subculture [8]. In the third stage, post-subculture research was proposed by scholars. In 2003, Weinzierl and other scholars believed that post-subculture differed from previous youth subcultures due to its uniqueness and social practice [9]. Domestic scholars such as Tao Dongfeng have introduced and analyzed foreign subculture theories.

Network subculture is the product of the emergence and development of the Internet, which Andy mentioned in his book *After Subculture: A Critical Study of Contemporary Youth Culture* published in 2012 [10]. There are many types of network subculture in China, such as mourning culture, bullet screen culture, and parody culture. In 2017, Wan Jinxiang, Ye Ting, and Peng Xuanxuan argued that network parody culture is vulgar, kitsch, and crude, representing a “wolf in sheep’s clothing” that covers up its “evil” nature [11]. In the same year, Gu Xueqiang and Liu Pengfei believed that network subculture was imperceptibly influencing teenagers’ values, posing great challenges to ideological education for teenagers [12]. In 2022, Wang Shuixiong and Zhou Jiteng focused on Generation Z youth born between 1995 and 2009, conducting a comprehensive investigation of the youth subculture formed by them. They concluded that Generation Z youth culture has taken on new forms due to internet development, with both advantages and disadvantages in its influence [13]. In the same year,

Li Su and Pan Jingang discussed the causes of modern cynicism such as pan-entertainmentism, exquisite egoism, and consumerism in youth subculture in the age of all-media, and proposed countermeasures [14]. However, these studies did not examine the phenomenon of network subculture from the perspective of emotional communication.

### 2.3 Theory of Emotional Communication

Emotional communication theory has attracted considerable scholarly attention, primarily in the network environment, and has yielded numerous research results both domestically and internationally. Emotional communication is supported by three theories: first, emotional language expression [15]; second, the theory of emotional social sharing [16]; and third, the theory of emotional contagion [17][18]. The definition of emotional transmission has not reached a definitive conclusion. Derks D argued in 2008 that emotional transmission is the identification, generation, and sharing of emotions or emotional levels among more than one individual [19]. Domestic research on emotional communication has gradually developed over the past decade, with increasing activity in network media. In 2021, Chen Jingyang divided early emotional communication studies before 2013, which were mostly based on psychological theories, into the exploration stage [20]. In 2007, Yin Yating first explored the field of network emotion communication through the “Xiaoli” event [21]. In 2008, Zhang Jinglong and Li Duansheng studied the expression of social emotions in network communication from a communication perspective [22]. In 2011, Jin Yunbo and Xu Yuanli, based on the perspective of network communication, explained the influence of network alienation on network emotion communication [23]. From 2013 to 2015, some scholars conducted in-depth research on the framework and mechanism of network alienation [20]. In 2013, Wang Lei studied the propagation mechanism and influencing factors of group emotion based on system dynamics [24]. In the same year, Lai Anting attempted to explore the origin and process of group events from the perspective of group emotions, thereby exploring the psychological mechanism of group events [25]. In 2018, Zhu Tian and Ma Chao pointed out from the perspectives of public opinion, psychology, and computer science that research on emotional communication should develop toward holistic emotion research [26]. In 2021, Zhou Shuhuan and Yang Xiaokun conducted empirical analysis and research on emotional communication and its impact on social media under the new coronavirus epidemic [27]. Foreign scholars tend to use empirical research methods to study emotional transmission. In 2014, Kramer et al. believed that emotions displayed by news media would affect people’s behaviors [28]. In the same year, Coviello et al. showed that online social media could enhance people’s empathy and emotional infectivity [29]. In 2015, scholars Balon and Rime pointed out that compared with expressing emotions through face-to-face communication in real life, written love is more popular among people [30]. Up to now, the academic circle has not studied the phenomenon of “nonsense literature” from the perspective of emotional communication theory.

## 2.4 Problem Raising

Therefore, from the perspective of emotional communication theory, this paper attempts to answer the following questions: Why do contemporary youth produce “nonsense literature” ? How do these motivations affect the spread of “nonsense literature” ? What do the reasons for the prevalence of “nonsense literature” reflect about the psychology of contemporary youth? What spiritual needs does it satisfy?

## 3. Research Methods

This paper uses semi-structured in-depth interviews to attempt to answer a series of questions regarding the reasons and mechanisms behind the popularity of nonsense literature.

### 3.1.1 Interview Outline Development

The interview questions are mainly divided into three parts. The first part primarily involves the basic information of the interviewees, including their gender, age, and occupation. In the second part, the research questions are transformed into interview questions, and structured core questions are determined for the interviewees (including their views on “nonsense literature” on the Internet). In the third part, new questions closely related to reality are proposed according to the objective situation of the interviewees and their answers.

### 3.1.2 Selection of Interviewees

This study conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 12 interviewees for approximately 60 minutes each. The interviews began in December 2022 and ended in February 2023. First, the interviewees included college students and other young people, and second, they recruited up hosts who produced “nonsense literature” videos through social meetings for more research samples. According to the principle of maximum sampling in qualitative research methods, all interview contents were sufficient to answer the research questions when the 10th respondent was collected, and sample collection was then closed. The interviewees varied in age, occupation, location, and other aspects, with low degrees of homogeneity. The interviews were conducted through WeChat text interviews and one-on-one interviews.

The interview results were transcribed into verbatim manuscripts totaling 25,013 words. The processing of interview content was completed by the author. The core questions were as follows: opinions on the “nonsense literature” meme itself on the Internet, opinions on young people playing this meme, ways of getting in touch with “nonsense literature,” the situation of people playing the “nonsense literature” meme around them, their own motivation for playing “nonsense literature,” and ways to make “nonsense literature” memes. It is worth noting that the questions involved in the interview are not limited to these but can

be extended into different subsections depending on the answers given by the interviewees.

#### 4.1 Satirical Resistance Tendency and Subcultural Attributes

“Nonsense literature” is a kind of meme formed through the mutation of language. It attracts attention by subverting traditional speaking habits and discourse logic. “At a time when speech cannot be expressed as freely as expected, nonsense literature has emerged. There are so many rules on the Internet that you can’t always type letters and get through. When you’re done saying things you can’t, people tend to parody this nonsense literature,” respondents noted. “Memes are a safe and hidden way to let off steam.” One distinguishing feature of nonsense literature is that it evokes a sense of identity and empathy, even as it does not. Seventy percent of interviewees talked about their personal experiences. On video platforms such as Bilibili and iQiyi, it is common to encounter situations where people in short videos or TV dramas say some non-nutritious lines, and a large number of “quotations” such as “listen to your words, listen to your words” will float across the bullet screen. Although only 10 percent of interviewees would follow suit, 80 percent admitted that when faced with similar situations in other videos or life contexts, they would subconsciously want to use the “nonsense literature” meme as a joke. “After the outbreak of COVID-19, my lifestyle changed, and home isolation became the norm. Staying at home, I felt an ethereal mood. I often feel that my life is empty and boring. All kinds of information on my mobile phone make me sick and nauseous, and ‘nonsense literature’ just reflects my mood and state,” one respondent admitted. Stuart Hall proposed an adversarial reading of texts in his encoding and decoding theory, which detests and even opposes the spiritual core of texts and holds a negative attitude toward the thoughts, feelings, and ideologies conveyed by texts. Decoding is the active cracking of information transmitted by the receiver to the communicator. Audiences dislike receiving boring and low-quality content, and “nonsense literature” is an emotional expression based on this foundation, representing a resistance to low-quality information.

#### 4.2 Communicative Function and Social Life

“Nonsense literature” has strong applicability and is suitable for a variety of practical contexts. When greeting people, one can say, “Long time no see, I haven’t seen you since last time” ; to encourage others, one can say, “You can do this unless you can’t” ; sarcastically, one can say, “If there’s any truth to what you’re saying, it’s not so unreasonable.” When a leader asks about work progress, one can respond, “Not done yet, but not done at all.” It is an obvious fact that “nonsense literature” permeates real life and influences today’s offline social interactions. It is humorous and easy to imitate, making it a popular meme among young people in social circles. “We used to say ‘nonsense literature’ when we were having fun in the dorm. It was a clever way to follow

up many sentences, and it also practiced our ability to be funny,” one respondent noted. On the other hand, as a meme culture, “nonsense literature” has many limitations in its offline use and is not suitable for serious, formal situations. The interviewee admitted that “I need a lot of courage to speak nonsense literature in front of teachers, which is rarely the case.” Similarly, “nonsense literature” should not be used in meeting summaries, or it will become “empty talk” and “conventional talk” with nothing substantial to say. “Some leaders act arrogant, find things to do, waste everyone’s time, talk over and over again but can’t say anything important, yet pretend badly. Either they have no substance in their stomach, or they have nothing to do. Viewed in this way, ‘nonsense literature’ seems to be a discourse tailored specifically for certain ‘useless’ leaders,” said one interviewee. When memes are played on people who don’t understand “nonsense literature,” barriers can be created, resulting in communication obstacles.

### 4.3 The Heat Surges and the Content is Mixed

As a meme, “nonsense literature” is spread excessively on social platforms such as Douyin, Bilibili, and Weibo. When interviewees discussed their attitudes toward “nonsense literature” and related issues, it was found that people were dissatisfied with the abuse of “nonsense literature.” Low-quality and inappropriate “nonsense literature” is disliked, while high-quality “nonsense literature” that has “something to say” is praised. The former is specifically manifested as the repeated application and mindless circulation of some sayings of “nonsense literature.” David Croteau has explained this “star principle,” which states that popular products are the primary economic goal of most media organizations. “As far as I know, I know nothing” and “A minute on stage, 60 seconds off stage” are equivalent to “stars,” and creating topics related to them provides more opportunities and resources, and is more likely to generate comparable profits and benefits. “I like it if it comes up occasionally and at the right time. It’s funny for the occasion, but it annoys me if it comes up over and over again,” respondents noted. In other words, in an environment where “traffic is king,” “nonsense literature” is being consumed to the point of being “annoying.” When the interviewer continues to ask how “nonsense” can have “substance,” they fall into a logical contradiction. The high-quality “nonsense literature” admitted by 80 percent of the interviewees consists of videos organized by using the language of “nonsense literature” as lines, which obviously shows an ironic and critical attitude toward language formalism, and ghost videos and spoof videos created by combining “nonsense literature” with popular music or network-famous scenes.

## 5. Summarization and Reflection

“Nonsense literature” has experienced a transformation from subculture to mass culture. It uses parody and irony to convey the audience’s dissatisfaction with current phenomena of expressionism and formalism, essentially fighting poison with poison. To resist “nonsense” with “nonsense” has already fallen into a vicious

circle, not to mention the invisible control of the hand of capital and market forces, so it has been covered with a tragic color since its birth. “Nonsense literature” has obvious emotional attributes, a prominent satirical resistance tendency, and powerful communication functions, which lay the foundation for its popularity to date. The more young people need emotional catharsis and wish to attack language formalism, the more they cannot leave “nonsense literature.” The network environment of “traffic is king” and “entertainment to death” penetrates thoughts into real life with the help of “nonsense literature” and changes people’s language habits imperceptibly. But in the final analysis, “nonsense literature” is based on “nonsense” in real life as raw material for the production of satires, which allude to the drawbacks of today’s society: leading cadres procrastinate in meetings without solving practical problems, network media content production prioritizes quantity over quality, young people are unable to face competitive social reality, are confused about the future, and do not know what to do, among other issues. The disadvantages are the “death knell,” while the meme is the bell for beating. The existence of “nonsense literature” has its own value, and its future development follows its own rules.

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