

Exploring the impact of internet ugly on social media users using a multi-case study approach

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Abstract. With the development of social media platforms, a phenomenon called ‘internet ugly’ has emerged on social media platforms. Ugly content is the antithesis of aesthetics, spreading intuitively pompous, strange content that may negatively impact users. Based on the phenomenon of ‘internet ugly’ in several popular social media platforms, the research uses a multiple-case research method to analyze three cases, collecting data on audience sentiment. The study finds that visually ugly online content, whether it is eating or acting ugly, does not have a significant negative impact on users. Even to some extent, it has a considerable positive impact on a large portion of the audience, even though a few users believe that ugly content negatively influences their moods. The importance of this research is that it can help regulators of social media platforms get a better grasp of the developments, even if they adjust their regulatory standards. Additionally, it may also help social media users understand the real purpose of ugly content on the Internet so that they can enjoy a better online environment.

1 Introduction

Social media are Internet-based applications built on Web 2.0, which refers to concepts and platforms that utilize collective intelligence. Social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, provide people with ubiquitous connectivity to the web and have grown rapidly in recent years [1]. According to Alexa's ranking of the top 500 websites on the web, YouTube is ranked second, demonstrating the importance of online services focused on sharing short videos [2]. The contemporary online environment encourages digital natives to engage in various forms of collaborative and productive endeavors through social media and digital services. The phenomenon of short video content being generated by individuals and posted to social networks through commercial services such as YouTube, Twitch, and Facebook Live is prevalent [3]. Based on this setting, one of the long-lasting aesthetic fads is internet ugly, a nameless aesthetic that permeates memetic material above all other forms of online culture [4]. Internet ugly can be deliberately chosen as a dialect by creators, or it might be produced by amateurs with no particular artistic goal. Because of the Internet's distinct bottom-up architecture, the internet ugly spreads there [4]. Since ancient times, it has been widely recognized that good is beautiful and evil is ugly. Evil is associated with destruction, chaos,

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and disorder, and evil is rooted in the irrational aspirations and hopes of human beings [5]. People can visualize evil as the result of the accumulation of repressed and suppressed desires, reflecting the so-called dark side of humanity. Observing the manifestations of vices, negativity, and deviance on the Internet, one sees their dark side [5].

Li. J, An. Y, and Xia. T explored whether 'ugly cute' Internet memes in today's social media can arouse the interest of the audience [6]. This research concluded that ugly cute Internet memes have largely attracted the interest of users, and their utilization rate has increased significantly, which is related to the aesthetic trend of the Internet among the general public. However, only a few researches have been conducted on the phenomenon of 'ugliness' in short videos, and whether ugly videos in short videos have a positive or negative impact on viewers compared to 'ugly cute' emoji. Exploring this question is of great significance for analyzing aesthetic trends on social media platforms and setting standards for network regulation. Based on the background of 'internet ugly' in social media, this study will explore the impact of ugly videos on viewers on social media platforms. The research will take a multi-case study approach to analyze the comments of social media platform creators, namely 'microcelebrities', who have thousands of followers, and determine their impact on viewers based on the emotional polarity of the comments.

2 Case description and method

Based on the close relationship between ugliness and evil, the research intuitively hypothesizes that social media will hurt users' minds. The study uses a multi-case research methodology to argue for its effects. An extensive, methodical examination of some people, groups, communities, or other units in which the researcher looks at detailed data about multiple factors has also been defined as a case study [7].

2.1 Formatting the text

The study begins with an analysis of the 'culture of ugliness' that is so prevalent on social media platforms today - 'mukbang', which means live meal. Firstly, the research selected Nikocado Avocado, an eating podcasting internet celebrity on YouTube. He owns several food channels on YouTube and has a total of more than 5 million followers. Thus, it is persuasive to use Nikocado as a case. The 'ugliness' of his eating videos is characterized by the fact that he attracts viewers' attention by exaggerating the amount of food he eats and his weight, for example, eating 10 buckets of noodles in one meal. At the same time, Nikocado often shows exaggerated movements during the eating process, such as taking off his shirt and slapping his stomach or jumping up and down to proudly show off his fat, and occasionally shares his weight changes with the viewers.

The use of multi-case studies allows for a deeper understanding of the case as a whole by comparing the similarities and differences of the individual cases embedded in the case. Evidence from multiple case studies tends to be stronger and more reliable than evidence from single case studies [7]. Based on this, the study selected Yuka Kinoshita, another Japanese internet celebrity on YouTube, who also has a persuasive total of more than 5 million followers, as a case for analysis. Although Yuka still eats a similar amount of food in a meal as Nikocado, unlike Nikocado, Yuka is well-proportioned, cute, and sweet, and has a more elegant eating process. She often cooks her food from several different countries and is accustomed to sharing variations in the flavor of her food with her viewers in real time. She was on a television show to prove her stomach capacity.

To further study the impact of ugly content on users in social media, the research continued with another more common phenomenon, videos that attract the viewer's attention at the time by making a fool of themselves and insulting themselves. Etymologically, evil is

defined as something beyond the proper scale, something beyond its limits, indicating a violation of norms, related to excessive, transcendent, and unregulated activity [5]. Such videos violate the normal aesthetics of ‘goodness’ and exist in the category of ‘evil’. Due to the Chinese government's strict regulation of social media platforms, almost all the microcelebrities that broke the bottom line and attracted viewers by dressing up scandalously have been gradually blocked. However, it is undeniable that these microcelebrities still have certain values for the academic research on aesthetic ugliness. In this context, the research selected a microcelebrity Teacher Guo, who used to have millions of fans on various social media platforms, as a case to make the study more convincing. In 2021, microcelebrity Teacher Guo was blocked because of her repeated ugly behaviors, such as playing ugly, cursing, indecent gestures, and spreading obscene information in her videos. Therefore, the videos in her account could no longer be viewed. However, Teacher Guo's huge influence still has a certain degree of discussion on social media, and many of Teacher Guo's fans have posted representative ugly videos recorded on the platform for the public to discuss. To make the conclusion of the research more accurate, the study starts from the two most popular social media platforms in China, Douyin, and Little Red Book, to explore whether there is a similarity in the emotions of the users' comments in the two platforms.

2.2 Method

The research analyzed the comment section by using the word frequency analysis tool. Word frequency analysis is a widely used technique in quantitative linguistics to determine the frequency with which a word occurs in a given text or set of texts [8]. In this research, word frequency analysis can help identify comment words with a high number of occurrences, leading to a better understanding of social media users' attitudes. Also, sentiment analysis is an essential part of analyzing user reviews. Sentiment analysis is a branch of natural language processing (NLP) that involves classifying textual opinions as positive, negative, or neutral using computer methods [9]. Sentiment analysis algorithms can sort through enormous volumes of textual data and extract insightful information without violating copyright by using machine learning and natural language processing techniques [9]. The research analyzed the selected comments in further detail by using the natural language processing tool ‘HanNLP’. The study took each of the comments and analyzed them separately for sentiment data, with the interval of polarity values ranging from -1 to 1, representing extremely negative and extremely positive, respectively. The study divided the interval of -1 to 1 into four parts, which were -1 to -0.2, representing more negative sentiment, the second group was -0.2 to 0.2, representing neutral sentiment, which means comments that did not show a clear tendency towards sentiment, the third group was 0.2 to 0.5, which represented more positive sentiment, and the last group, 0.5 to 1, which represented very positive sentiment.

3 Results analysis

To explore the impact that Nikocado’s posted eating videos have on his viewers, the study analyzed the video comment sections. The research randomly selected five of Nikocado's videos and randomly selected a total of 50 comments in the comment sections. Next, the research analyzed the comment section by using the word frequency analysis tool ‘Wordsift’. After eliminating some common verbs, nouns, and conjunctions such as "I, feel, need," the remaining key adjectives and nouns, "disgusting, friendly, delicious, awesome, joker," and "I, feel, need," were analyzed. "Friendly, delicious, awesome, joker, abused" appears frequently, as shown in Fig. 1, these words can reflect the general emotional attitude of users towards watching Nikocado videos, and the word “love” appears more often.

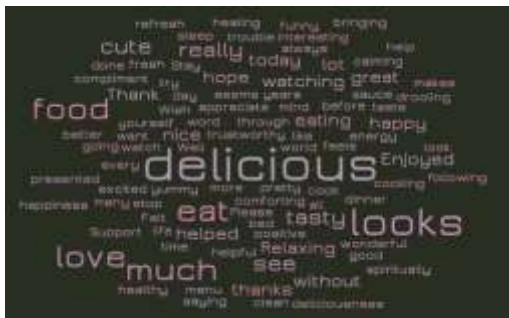


Fig. 3 Word frequency of Yuka's comments (Photo credit: Original)

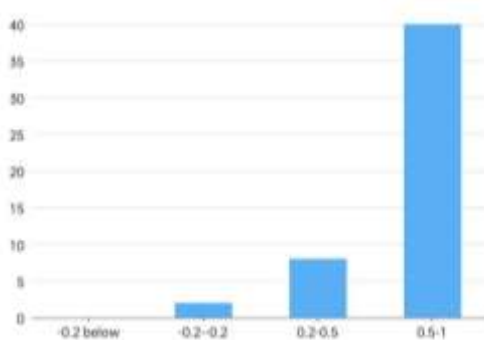


Fig. 4 The sentimental polar analysis of Yuka's comments (Photo credit: Original)

Regarding Teacher Guo, the research first analyzed the selected comments using the ‘WordItOut’, which showed that positive words such as “love, laugh, fun” appeared more often, suggesting that social media users have a generally positive view of Teacher Guo (Fig. 5). Following that, the research analyzed the comments of five fan-posted videos of Teacher Guo on Douyin, all of which contained ugly images, and then randomly selected 50 comments for sentiment analysis. It found that 5 comments with negative sentiment 13 comments with negative sentiment, 9 comments were in the range of 0.2-0.5, and the remaining 23 comments were in the range of 0.5-1, as shown in Fig. 6. Therefore, based on the samples from the comment section on Douyin, Teacher Guo has more positive influence on users. The word "funny" appears in many users' comments, claiming that the video makes them feel relaxed, which shows that users are interested in the fun of the ugly video of Teacher Guo.



Fig. 5 Word frequency of Teacher Guo's comments (Photo credit: Original)

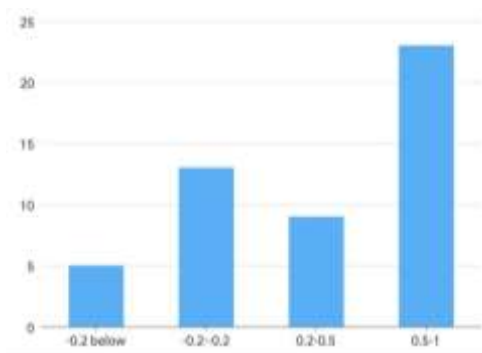


Fig. 6 The sentimental polar analysis of Teacher Guo's comments on Douyin (Photo credit: Original)

The study then proceeded to analyze 50 randomly selected comments on Little Red Book. According to HanNLP's sentiment polarity analysis tool, 13 comments show negative emotions, 8 comments have an undifferentiated emotional tendency, favoring teasing or intentionally imitating the words and actions in the video to present a sense of fun, 10 comments have a slight positive emotion, and 19 comments have a very strong positive emotion, as shown in Fig. 7. Based on the data derived from the samples, the percentage of positive influence on Little Red Book is similar to that presented by the Douyin.

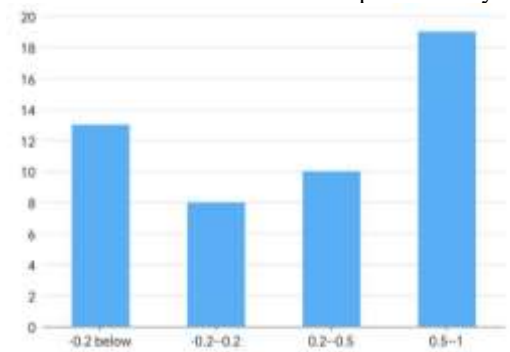


Fig. 7 The sentimental polar analysis of Teacher Guo's comments on Little Red Book (Photo credit: Original)

4 Discussions

By analyzing the data of the three web celebrities in the two ugly areas of social media, it is possible to see the value and significance of this ugly content for users. Contrary to the initial hypothesis, the sample concluded that the positive impact of the internet significantly outweighs the negative impact. The conclusion may be related to two factors. Firstly, social media reflects the reality of emotions. Social media has become a window for people to see themselves, and the image people see on the Internet becomes the ideal "I", the image of people's imagined identities [5]. The second possible reason is related to the widespread use and appreciation of ironic discourse and taste. Taste is an important element in social and aesthetic phenomena and is central to social media practices [10]. Perceived ugliness may also have an impact on aesthetics [11]. According to the testimonies of young users, these elements of ugliness are integral to the packaging of contemporary cultural products, taking them beyond their objective value. Irony, self-deprecation, spoofing, and political incorrectness become powerful levers of cultural dynamics at the societal level, capable of activating various psychosocial mechanisms [12].

However, the research has some limitations. Firstly, the drawback is reflected in the size of the data. In this research, only 50 comments were selected for each case, and analyzing the data based on this may lead to an incomplete and non-generalizable study. At the same time, only three cases were selected for analysis in this study and the number of cases selected was small, a situation that may also lead to errors in the results of the study. It is worth noting that HanNLP is a natural language processing tool of a mechanical nature. This means that there are some errors in analyzing the sentiment of individual comments. The research suggests that this is related to the fact that social media users always use negative sentences to express their positive attitudes. Users like to flirt with specific sentences, something that HanNLP is currently unable to address. Therefore, there will be a small amount of data with errors, but this does not affect the overall judgment of the data obtained.

5 Conclusion

Through the analysis of this sample, this research found that social media content with ugly aesthetics positively affects viewers' psychology to a large extent. The findings disprove the initial research hypothesis, which is a new research finding. However, even if the huge negative impact cannot be proved concerning the sample selected so far, increased regulation of social media platforms is still necessary. This is because, in the contemporary era of rapidly changing online aesthetics and trends, no one can guarantee that social media content with ugly aesthetics will not develop and evolve new trends in the future. At the same time, the article also points out two possible reasons behind the results of this research. The first one is that viewing ugly aesthetic content on social media reflects the state of mind of the majority of the public. Besides, the second reason is related to the widespread use and appreciation of the ironic register. In addition, the research fills to some extent a gap in academic research on this niche culture. Due to the relatively short period since the birth of the internet ugly, there is only a little academic research that has studied this phenomenon. This study may help the regulators of social media platforms to better understand the real impact of superficial negative videos so that they can adjust their regulatory standards promptly to better serve the public entertainment and government regulation.

However, the article also emphasizes that the limitations of the research cannot be ignored. The limitations are mainly reflected in the small scale of the amount of data screened and the small number of cases selected, which may lead to the lack of certain persuasive results. At the same time, future research can further try different research methods, such as offline interviews, and questionnaires. There may be new findings after careful communication with the audience. Additionally, future studies that expand into other areas of internet ugly may also yield more accurate results and provide insights into the motivation of social media users for ugly aesthetic content and predict the development trend of this performance style. It may contribute to the maintenance of long-term stable development of social media platforms and the physical and mental health of users.

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