

Self-Presentation and Meme Culture: How Do Young People Manage Emotions on Social Media?

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Abstract. Against the backdrop of global crises, social media has become a crucial platform for young generations, allowing them to self-express and alleviate anxiety. With the widespread use of social media, a growing number of young people from diverse countries have become active users. Self-expression and memes are two common reasons young people are drawn to social media. Self-presentation refers to the deliberate actions individuals take to manage their impressions on others in social situations. Memes indicate the collective creation and dissemination of modifiable and easily reproducible media units on digital platforms. Young people use self-presentation on social media to maintain social connections and express emotions through various symbols. Therefore, this study aims to explore how self-presentation on social media can help young people alleviate social anxiety and identity confusion, and how memes can mitigate negative emotions caused by crises and help young people build their identities. This article combines dramaturgy, social identity theory, and humour relief theory to analyse the mechanisms of social media's impact on emotion regulation at both the individual and group levels. Moreover, practical implications are revealed in terms of platforms, policies and social media users, highlighting the importance of self-portray and meme use.

1 Introduction

The pandemic of COVID-19, global economic decline, political violence, regional conflicts, and extreme climates have all caused a factual global crisis. Social media has become an important platform in the daily lives of young people, due to it being able to help people express their own individuality and alleviate the anxiety caused by crises. With the wide popularity of social media, an increasing number of young people from various countries have become the main active users on different social media platforms. In Australia, 98% of young people regularly use at least one social media platform [1]. Similar statistics are collected in other countries, such as the United Kingdom, where an estimated 92% of young people are active on social media by the age of 12 years [2]. They collect information online, establish and maintain social connections, and showcase their identities and express their emotions through various visual and textual symbols.

Self-expression and memes, as two frequently mentioned main reasons, explain why people are so committed to using social media. Self-presentation was defined as the conscious

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behaviour of an individual in social situations to manage the impression they make on others [3]. Meme refers to the collective creation and dissemination practices carried out on digital platforms through modifiable and easily replicable media units [4]. On the one hand, young people need more self-presentation [3] on social media platforms to build a sense of identity and manage a sense of anxiety. On the other hand, this might demonstrate the unique mechanism of negative emotion alleviation among online memes in times of crisis. In fact, young people participate in collective negative emotion relief through internet memes. Therefore, this study aims to address how self-presentation on social media helps young people alleviate social anxiety and identity confusion, and how memes diminish the negative emotions brought about by crises and help young people establish a sense of identity. By integrating research methods from psychology and communication studies, this article analyses the mechanism of social media's role in emotion regulation at both individual and group levels.

2 Self-presentation, Meme culture and social anxiety

Previous scholars have extensively studied self-presentation and online exposure. The concept of self-presentation originates from Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, which conceptualises routine social interaction as a performance aimed at managing the impressions from others to oneself [3]. On the Internet, it manifests as how individuals selectively construct and manage their online identities to gain social approval, express a sense of identity, or manage privacy boundaries [5]. Research conducted by Luo and Hancock identified four prominent mechanisms that may account for the effects of self-disclosure on well-being, involving perceived connectedness, social support, the capitalisation process and psychological authenticity [6]. Meanwhile, different psychological states, such as well-being states, can affect the effectiveness of self-disclosure [6]. The findings of their research discussed the motivations and psychological effects of self-disclosure and identified the research theories and methods. This summarises the main variables of self-presentation in social media with the research gaps. Apart from the theoretical review, there are also many practical aspects to this topic. Regarding the privacy protection related to self-disclosure, a study has pointed out that people often sense that their personal privacy is under threat, but often tend to underestimate the risks of their online activities [7]. Fejes-Vékássy's study gave a similar finding regarding the significant role of online self-disclosure through qualitative and quantitative analysis, addressing the delicate balance between self-expression and privacy protection [8]. In fact, although the existing research is relatively comprehensive in both theory and practice, when it faces global crises such as COVID-19, whether there will be some modifications in the way young people express themselves remains to be illustrated.

Social anxiety and sense of identity are also topics that are widely discussed in the academic community. Social anxiety refers to the persistent fear of being negatively evaluated or rejected in social contexts, often accompanied by avoidance behaviours and excessive self-monitoring [9]. The sense of identity formation was defined by Erikson in his Stages of psychosocial development theory. He divided a person's growth into multiple stages and believes adolescence and emerging adulthood are the stages for sense of identity [10]. In the recent study, an article indicates that in the presence of an intermediary variable (loneliness), problematic internet usage is positively correlated with levels of depression and anxiety. However, a high level of social media identity may reduce loneliness, but it will exacerbate the severity of depression and anxiety [11]. This reveals the mediating model between sense of identity and social anxiety. Nevertheless, previous research has established a connection between sense of identity and social anxiety from multiple perspectives. Most of the theories were formed before the Z generation became active on the Internet, which leads to some issues that need to be discussed at the intersection of several fields.

The meme, as an emerging cultural phenomenon on the Internet, has attracted increasing attention from scholars. The word “meme” originates with Richard Dawkins as a cultural “replicator” similar to genes [4]. In the online environment, it was reinterpreted by Shifman as a set of digital items featuring shared content and formats, where users could understand each other and disseminate and imitate them on the internet [4].

Although previous studies have separately explored the self-presentation, social anxiety and sense of identity of young people in social media usage and the cultural function of memes, there is still a lack of systematic research on the individual-level self-presentation and the meme-based emotional regulation at the collective level on social media, especially in the context of a global crisis, which is a highly uncertain situation.

3 Social role, social identity and humour in anxiety relief

To conceptualise how adolescents’ self-presentation and memes on social media function as coping mechanisms under the pressure of global crises, a multi-level theoretical framework is constructed. Self-presentation in social media at the individual level and the humorous and social functions of memes at the group level were discussed within this theoretical framework, as well as explaining the impact of these two on identity and anxiety relief.

At the individual level, self-presentation on social media is actually a strategic behaviour of impression management. According to Goffman’s dramaturgical theory [3], individuals use carefully selected photos, words, or audiovisual materials to express their aesthetics and emotions. While constructing their public identity, they also think and relax in the private realm. This duality enables people to cope with the social expectations and anxieties triggered by crises. At the group level, memes, as a form of public participatory culture, reflect and influence collective emotions and sentiments. The social identity theory posits that a part of an individual’s self-concept stems from the group to which they belong, while memes, as a shareable symbolic form, enable users to indicate their group identity and shared sense of identity [12]. Through forms such as satire and black humour, memes can transform the widespread fears and anxieties in people’s hearts into collective humour in the context of global crises. This process is consistent with the relief theory [13], which states that humour can relieve tension and convert individual negative emotions into collective entertainment. This form of humorous communication maintains the emotional distance between the public and the crisis and becomes increasingly popular in the daily entertainment of the public. Furthermore, the proliferation of internet memes has given rise to numerous subcultural groups. These loosely connected online communities are formed based on shared emotional experiences rather than formal ideologies. This means that these communities operate through emotional empathy, and during the dissemination of memes, they can establish a high degree of identity recognition, thereby making the extreme uncertainty in global crises manageable on a psychological level.

At the level of influence, the interaction between individual self-presentation and collective meme participation has produced two main psychological and social outcomes: identity construction and anxiety relief. Specifically, self-presentation provides a cognitive foundation for the formation of an individual’s identity, while memes provide a social and cultural background for the identification of collective identity. The combination of these two means that young people can form a dual identity of individual and collective on the Internet. Through feedback loops, such as watching, liking, sharing, and interacting with memes, people can constantly re-construct their sense of identity based on others’ situations. Furthermore, these practices collectively played a role in anxiety relief. According to the social identity theory, shared emotional expressions can bring about the same sense of identity [12]. To be specific, when individuals see their personal setbacks reflected in humorous memes, they feel understood and relaxed, thereby reducing feelings of loneliness.

In fact, laughing together with strangers across screens has become a social skill for strengthening emotional connections in online communities.

In summary, self-presentation acts as the starting mechanism, memes function as the mediating cultural process, and sense of identity and anxiety relief represent the influence results. This integrated structure illustrates how young people's Internet practices operate both psychologically and socially to produce emotional resilience in the face of global crises.

4 Discussion

4.1 Self-expression and anxiety relief

On the individual level, it has long been a common practice for young people to express themselves, and the popularity of social media has provided an excellent environment for such behaviour. For the majority of young people around the world, they have been affected by the pandemic, followed by ineffective policies, political instability and the global economic downturn. In today's increasingly globalised world, the scope of these impacts is wider than at any time. Moreover, grey rhino event threats such as geopolitical conflicts and extreme climates have never disappeared, especially for young people who are economically vulnerable and inexperienced. In fact, the self-presentation of young people on social media is not only a psychological relief but also an identity negotiation behaviour under the shadow of the global crisis, that is, a process of continuously shaping and adjusting their self-identity between external demands and internal emotions to achieve a dynamic balance. Under the framework of Goffman's dramaturgical framework, the network environment constitutes a stage, and the public consciously plans their front stage roles through text, images, audio and video, and interaction [3]. This performative process shows a cyclical pattern of presentation, feedback, and adjustment. Individuals post, receive reactions (likes, comments, shares), and subsequently adjust their online identity in accordance with perceived others' expectations. Ultimately, it is reflected as a perfect front-stage role. In conclusion, this process provides an motility, enabling people not only to believe that they can live their lives in the most ideal way in reality to constantly achieving immediate satisfaction, but also aligning with the principles of the social identity theory, enhancing a sense of identify, and thereby being able to relieve psychological discomfort in a short period of time under the various macro crises that bring instability [12].

However, this apparent emotional relief is often temporary. In other words, the controllability of self-presentation comes at the cost of long-term anxiety and fatigue, since individuals must constantly maintain an idealised self-image in public over a long period of time. This alienated behaviour reflects a paradox in the aspect of the true self. Practice has proved that the more carefully one curates a desirable persona, the further one may drift from genuine self-expression [6]. The emotional labour involved in maintaining an idealised image can cause significant psychological stress. To alleviate this situation, people tend to take various actions, which can, in turn, bring about new challenges. Therefore, under the catalytic effect of this global crisis, a vicious cycle of anxiety and depression will emerge. Notably, factors such as gender and personality differences can affect the effectiveness of this cycle. For instance, women tend to face greater pressure to present an idealised version of themselves, and their connection with anxiety outcomes is more pronounced [12]. Hence, while self-presentation offers a coping mechanism for uncertainty, it simultaneously reproduces the very social anxiety it seeks to relieve.

4.2 Meme community and emotion regulation

Same as the individual level, in the group, Internet memes function as effective and cultural tools for managing emotions during crises. Several characteristics of Meme cultures, including highly replicable, participatory, and intertextual, make it possible for media units to compress complex social emotions into easily shareable symbolic forms. In the face of global crises, they transform their fear and anxiety into humour, satire or absurdity, thus becoming a mechanism for collective emotional regulation [13]. Through this shared humour, scattered individuals form an affective public under the theme of crisis meme, that is, a space where young people gather together because they share the same emotions in the face of a crisis [14]. In this space, people not only can share humour, but also can gain a group sense of identity.

This participatory interactive model has rapidly gained popularity due to the functional characteristics of social platforms. Firstly, replicability, which lowers the threshold for public participation by using template-based images, texts, or short videos, facilitates the rapid spread of memes [4]. Secondly, participation, where the public embeds personal narratives into public-facing memes by adapting and piecing them together, enabling the content to be reinterpreted and presented in a personalised manner. Thirdly, the amplifying effect of algorithms, which, through the recommendation mechanism of social platforms and the individual's social circle, prompts certain emotional content to rapidly form an affective public, enhancing micro-group identification [14]. In fact, meme culture related to external crises has been widely created and disseminated among young people, such as social issues that young people are prone to face, like pandemic lockdowns, economic anxiety, or academic pressure. In the process of deconstructing negative emotions like pain and anxiety into socially accepted collective humour, individuals, through self-deprecating memes, establish emotional bonds of freemasonry, reducing their sense of loneliness.

However, the emotional relief brought by memes also comes with risks. Excessive humorization of serious issues may lead to emotional numbness and distortion in the discussion, ignoring the actual damage caused by crises, such as mental illnesses or decline in quality of life, and weakening people's ability to critically explore systemic problems. Moreover, memes rely on cultural symbols that are used and spread by people with similar levels of understanding; their meanings may become exclusive or misunderstood due to cultural, gender, or generational differences. For individuals who have been affected by trauma, certain black humour memes may even cause discomfort or deepen the trauma.

4.3 The interaction between individual and group emotions

The intersection between self-presentation and meme culture reveals a complex and effective feedback system. Three major pathways can be identified, involving Identity sense, Emotional empathy and Visibility cycle pathway. Identity sense pathway, that is, individuals apply popular meme culture on social media, convey a sense of humour and belonging by utilising meme-style frameworks to construct self-expression, and at the same time strengthen the collective identity of micro-culture. The emotional empathy pathway refers to the fact that individuals' expressions of emotions, such as anxiety or fear, in their self-presentations will be integrated into the re-creation based on memes. Through this re-creation of memes, the group amplifies and feeds back similar emotional signals, eventually forming a cycle of emotional empathy and continuous output of meme content. Visibility cycle pathway refers to the feedback mechanisms on the platform (likes, shares, follows, etc.), which amplify the posts that can evoke strong emotional empathy, thereby encouraging people to produce more of such content, making it more visible on the Internet and reinforcing this type of sense of identity within online communities.

These processes explain why, during global crises, individual self-expression often seamlessly integrates with collective discourse dissemination. There is no doubt that a successful communication carrier can simultaneously serve as a tool for identity display and an intermediary variable for collective catharsis. For instance, those self-deprecating memes related to academic burnout or social anxiety enable people to express their dissatisfaction, showcase their psychological vulnerability, and at the same time, make those who have similar experiences burst into laughter, thereby enhancing a sense of group identity.

Nevertheless, these processes generate several contradictions. The performative authenticity dilemma arises when genuine emotions are aestheticised through memes, leading the public to discount them as jokes [6]. Similarly, humour based on memes may shift the group anxiety away from reflection on the current social problems and transform the macroscopic sense of frustration into brief relief. In addition, the act of pursuing a sense of group belonging through humour also forces reluctant individuals to make compromises, which actually inhibits the multifaceted understanding of one culture and various emotional states, and may exacerbate the long-term psychological stress of some individuals.

5 Implications and strategies: platforms, policies and social media users

Self-presentation and memetic engagement are two sides of a single process that mix privately coping with public sentiment. Memes actually become spaces to share experiences, feelings and emotional states during crises, and provide more opportunities to achieve self-expression and a sense of identity. Several implications and strategies can be tried for social media platforms, policymakers and online users.

In terms of various social media platforms, it is vital to encourage creative self-expression in online circumstances. Social platforms could provide relevant tools, such as built-in meme generators and convenient popular templates, to enable young people to create and share original content more easily. Simultaneously, supporting young people in expressing their true selves, such as opening and customising personal profiles and encouraging them to try more positive ways of self-expression. These designs can strengthen a positive sense of identity while avoiding excessive emphasis on an unblemished image. Moreover, prioritising supportive content in recommendations is an effective way to promote social media users' expression. The algorithms and the pushed content should not only focus on the popularity of the content, but also drive the ones that can facilitate community building and bring emotional relief. For instance, showing some positive or humorous memes related to the common challenges faced by the community. Seeing one's personal predicament reflected in the memes will make young people feel understood and comforted, thereby reducing their sense of loneliness. Lastly, platform governance should take the responsibility to facilitate community formation. The platform can support identity-based groups or subculture communities, which is a space for young people to share memes. For instance, memes can be categorised by themes, or regulated forums can be established. At the same time, features such as posting on top or community guidelines that encourage peer support can be added. These measures will strengthen the positive affective public dynamics mentioned in the article.

From the perspective of government departments and social policy makers, some suggestions are given to enhance the role of social and psychological support in social governance and communication. Firstly, it can be considered to combine the official promotional information with memes. Official media can adopt language that resonates with young audiences by integrating memes, emojis or trending topics into promotional activities, such as posting announcements about public health on TikTok or Instagram. This will demonstrate that the government understands youth culture, and this connection makes the

official information more attractive and empathetic, gains the recognition of young people, and helps relieve public anxiety. Secondly, it is important to provide psychosocial support in youth-friendly formats. That means the relevant government agencies should combine psychological support with popular meme content. For instance, mental health promotion can be carried out through media content featuring memes, which can guide young people to seek help. The key lies in achieving a balance between seriousness and the relief function of humour, as pointed out in this research, so that young people will not lose interest in official advice. Thirdly, engaging young people in two-way dialogue. The government can invite young people to provide feedback or submit suggestions, and implement them accordingly. This participatory approach regards young people as co-creators of the rules rather than merely passive recipients. By valuing the creations of young people, the government can influence the subculture communities formed around common memes, enabling the formation of identity and solidarity consciousness within these communities. This will demonstrate that the policies are formulated from the perspective of the audience.

From the perspective of individuals who use social media as a tool to express themselves, complicated recommendations and possible proposals are provided to improve the way they participate in the online community. First, social media users should engage themselves mindfully in meme communities. When using memes to cope with stress, it is important to have a purpose. When in a certain meme community, one can try to participate in the conversation by creating memes or posting supportive comments, which can strengthen the connections with others. However, be careful with tone and avoid targeting or humiliating others in jokes. Additionally, if passively browsing causes anxiety, try to minimise this behaviour; instead, actively seek out those inspiring communities that are known for their positive attitudes. Secondly, cultivating critical media literacy will give valuable insight into online social community participation. It means that young people should actively question and reflect on the content they see and share. Given that the algorithms of social media can affect emotions, before forwarding any memes or news, the public should first verify the facts and background information. Although this study shows that memes can surely help cope with stress, it is also important to note that humour often simplifies complex issues. Young people should be encouraged to develop a more objective view of online information by raising their awareness of reflection and questioning. For example, when people see a meme, they should hold a critical attitude of analyse whether it is subjective or an objective fact. This means people should not blindly believe viral media content and maintain critical thinking. Thirdly, it is crucial to build emotional resilience beyond online spaces. Although memes can help relieve stress, while they enable people to seek emotional support online, they can only alleviate the problem to some extent and cannot completely solve an individual's psychological issues. If the crisis leads to a mental disorder, one should seek help from friends, family, psychological counselling or a professional psychiatrist. At the same time, internet memes can normalise emotions, but communication in real life and self-care are also equally important.

6 Conclusion

This study has advanced the understanding of how young people use online self-presentation and meme-sharing as coping mechanisms during periods of global crisis. It found that carefully managing online persona can help adolescents maintain a sense of identity, while the collective creation and sharing of crisis-related memes provides communal relief and a sense of belonging. In effect, individual impression management and shared digital humour form an integrated emotion-regulation process: self-presentation represents a personal coping strategy, memes relieve the collective negative emotions, and these practices collectively enhanced individuals' sense of identity and were highly favoured by a mass of young people.

By linking Goffman's ideas of performance with contemporary theories of participatory media, this finding illuminates a new socio-psychological pathway for explaining by bridging psychological and cultural theories of social media usage. Integrating these perspectives, the article proposes an individual–group dual mechanism. Young people's self-representation on social media is to meet their personal psychological needs, such as personal sense of identity, methods to cope with negative emotions, while their participation in meme sharing simultaneously provides group emotional relief and collective identity recognition.

In summary, this article contributes a novel framework showing that youth's routine social-media behaviours serve a deeper psychological function. That is, reducing crisis-driven negative emotions and reinforcing cultural group solidarity, thereby extending prior work on digital self-disclosure and collective emotion regulation. More importantly, this research provides diverse practical implications and strategies for social media platforms, policy maker and individuals to cultivate a harmonious online environment and expand the role of online communities in promoting self-presentation and memes to relieve psychological problems.

Ultimately, future studies should build on these insights with more rigorous and diverse methods. Longitudinal empirical studies are needed to examine how meme culture and self-presentation jointly influence young people's sense of identity and emotions over developmental timeframes. Conducting cross-cultural comparative studies would also be very valuable, as it would allow researchers to understand whether similar emotional regulation processes occur in different societies or in different crises. Researchers should explore more variations in meme genres and humour styles (satire, dark humour, and absurdity) and how these affect psychological outcomes. Moreover, it will be important to study the role of social platform algorithms in curating self-presentation and meme exposure, as changes in what content is visible could amplify or dampen their emotional impact. These future investigations will help educators, platform designers or planners, and policymakers understand and support healthy online self-expression and community-building among adolescents.

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