From Ojou-Sama to "Customer Service Saki-Chan": The Dissemination, Evolution, and Meaning-Making of Virtual Character Memes

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Abstract. As a prominent form of social media phenomenon and subcultural transmission, digital memes exhibit strong creative vitality and distinct contemporary characteristics in both their content evolution and discursive expressions. Within this context, ACGN subculture serves as a fertile ground for the generation, remixing, and circulation of memes, facilitating participatory meaning-making among digital youth. This study employs digital ethnography and discourse analysis to examine the case of the animation character Togawa Sakiko from Bang Dream! It's MYGO!!!!!, aiming to explore the processes of symbolic reconstruction, intertextual localization, and dissemination mechanisms of ACGN-based meme content within Chinese digital environments. The findings indicate that the circulation of ACGN-related memes, exemplified by the case of Togawa Sakiko, exhibits characteristics of forming weak-tie connections among marginal subcultural groups. Under the combined influence of the anime's original narrative and broader socio-economic conditions, these memes not only foster collective identity and emotional resonance but also display a dual nature that encompasses both criticality and spectacle.

Keywords: ACGN subculture, digital memes, symbolic reconstruction and intertextual localization, digital ethnography and discourse analysis

1. Introduction

In contemporary Chinese digital culture, memes have evolved into a dynamic form of user-generated content (UGC), particularly amid the rapid algorithmic evolution of platforms and the mainstream adoption of generative AI. This study focuses on the meme phenomenon surrounding the Japanese anime Bang Dream! It's MYGO!!!!!, with particular attention to the cultural reproduction and evolution of the character Togawa Sakiko in online memes. Specifically, the research investigates how Sakiko's image has been localized, remixed, and circulated within digital fan cultures, emphasizing two primary aspects: the localized re-articulation of character identity and fan community interactions.

Employing a digital ethnographic approach, the researcher observed relevant online communities and conducted in-depth case analysis using a discourse-analytical framework. The study aims to trace the circulation and meaning-making processes of digital memes within the ACGN subculture

and to understand their role in youth emotional expression, identity construction, and social critique in networked spaces. Ultimately, the research seeks to integrate meme studies with subcultural perspectives to explore the social significance behind Internet cultural trends.

2. Background

2.1. Overview of Bang Dream! It's MYGO!!!!!

Bang Dream! It's MYGO!!!!! is a TV anime series released by the Japanese company Bushiroad, broadcasted from June to September 2023. Due to its melancholic tone and emotionally nuanced storytelling, which significantly differ from the traditional Bang Dream! franchise anime, the series has attracted substantial attention from enthusiasts and triggered a phenomenal craze within the Chinese ACGN subcultural fan community. As of July 14, 2025, on Chinese video platform Bilibili, this anime has reached 76.291 million views, garnered 2.11 million followers, and received 24,473 comments. With 26,000 users rating it, it achieved a remarkably high score of 9.7/10, demonstrating a popularity in China that even surpasses its reception in Japan.

The phenomenal popularity of MYGO!!!!! is closely related to its extensive derivative fan creations and online memes. Character dialogues, screenshots, songs, and clips from the original anime have become widely circulated memes within the subcultural communities, which subsequently evolved into derivative memes following the proliferation of derivative works. Due to the one-year gap before the release of its sequel, Bang Dream! Ave Mujica, officially aired in January 2025, a large number of derivative videos and images related to the original series were uploaded to video platforms, predominantly Bilibili. Among these fan-made videos, the most viewed reached 8.899 million views and accumulated 61,000 danmaku (real-time comments).

Therefore, this study will focus on a specific character from MyGO!!!!!, Togawa Sakiko, and her related internet memes. Although she serves as the protagonist in the sequel, she also occupies the center of narrative conflict in MyGO!!!!! itself, enjoying immense popularity among fans. Throughout much of MyGO!!!!!, Sakiko is depicted as a stereotypical "Ojou-sama": wealthy, socially elite, and refined in manner. However, toward the anime's conclusion, it is revealed that she lives in a cramped studio apartment, forced into child labor and caring for her alcoholic father. Numerous derivative memes and secondary fan creations emerged from this dramatic shift.

2.2. Meme studies

The term "meme" was initially coined by Dawkins as an analogy to biological genes [1]. He viewed memes as cultural units encompassing a broad range of phenomena, including slogans, trends, abstract concepts, and beliefs, capable of "infecting" human minds and subject to evolutionary selection within cultural contexts. From this original definition, the term "meme" itself has undergone memetic mutation; contemporary usage often refers more specifically to a genre or practice rather than a cultural unit [2,3]. Particularly within Internet culture, memes as a genre constitute a significant element of digital culture [2,4]. Shifman conceptualizes Internet memes as socially constructed public discourses, defining memes as groups of digital items sharing common characteristics in content, form, and/or stance, consciously created, widely circulated, imitated, and adapted across the Internet [4]. Building on this, Wiggins and Bowers propose a transmission pathway for Internet memes: "spreadable media" are remixed or parodied to become emergent memes, which are then iteratively replicated and widely disseminated online, ultimately becoming fully realized memes [2]. Galip further notes that, within the platform-based social media cultural

production environment, memes increasingly embody aesthetic style, authorship, and self-expression [5].

As a form of participatory digital culture, memes fulfill various social functions. They illustrate the dual role of individual agency and social systems and serve as a prism for understanding contemporary digital culture [2,4]. The actual power behind the virality of memes lies in the networks of meanings people construct around them [6]. Within the Chinese context, Mina points out that Chinese memes can bypass censorship mechanisms on Chinese platforms to enable "implicit political expression," thus disrupting the monolithic discourse space dominated by mainstream narratives in microsocial contexts [7]. Consequently, extensive research has explored the potential of Chinese memes in social critique, political participation, nationalist mobilization, and their roles in shaping emotions and identity [8-10]. For instance, Ma analyzes memes related to Baozou Comics and identifies their popularity as representative of a grassroots creative movement [9].

Therefore, the study proposes the following research questions:

RQ1: How are characters reproduced, evolved, and circulated as original texts for memes?

RQ2: What community values and identity expressions are reflected in the reproduction of these character images?

RQ3: How does the reproduction of character images function as a bond maintaining fan communities?

3. Research methodology

This study adopts the method of digital ethnography to examine user culture and social interactions within virtual environments. Although this approach typically yields a smaller volume of data, it enables an in-depth understanding of the social relationships among meme disseminators beyond merely analyzing the meme as a media text [5]. Specifically, researchers employed covert access by concealing their identity, refraining from participation in content production, and instead becoming passive observers within online field sites [11]. The ethnographic study lasted one and a half months, from active Chinese MyGO!!!!! fan communities, including Bilibili and Baidu Tieba, through screenshots and notes.

This research focused primarily on memes created and popularized between September 2023 and January 2025, particularly the "Customer Service Saki-chan" meme series using the character Sakiko as original text. Due to its significant influence and numerous variant creations, this meme demonstrates intertextuality and localization, thus serving as a highly representative case.

For case analysis, the study applied the three-dimensional approach common in discourse analysis [12]: referential or ideational system, contextual or interpersonal system, and ideological or worldview system. Ethical standards were strictly observed, with all data sourced from publicly accessible digital platforms.

4. Case analysis

In this case, Sakiko's image as the original text, or "spreadable media", was localized within Chinese internet culture and widely disseminated as an emergent meme [2].

The meme gained popularity after the airing of episode 13 of MyGO!!!!!, in which Sakiko's part-time job at a customer service call center was humorously remixed with Taobao's default customer service avatar. By juxtaposing the anime character with the familiar Chinese symbol of "Taobao customer service," creators generated humorous dissonance through symbolic and cultural mismatch [4]. Sakiko's original aristocratic speech mannerism "desuwa" was replaced with the pleasing and

affectionate customer service phrase "亲" (qin, "dear"), highlighting the character's downward social mobility and reluctant compromise. The line "truly condescending" from the anime took on new meanings related to class disparity, life pressures, and individual helplessness, evolving into satirical discourse.

The symbols used in the "Customer Service Saki-chan" meme themselves evolved into memes, fostering further mashup memes, such as combining Sakiko with the "Patrick answering the phone" video meme from SpongeBob SquarePants [13]. Sakiko's character thus underwent resemiotization and re-entextualization, shifting from a Japanese girl to a localized "Taobao customer service" worker [13]. Her "poverty" label expanded, symbolizing economically struggling young urban citizens, with memes humorously depicting everyday financial hardships.

This phenomenon reveals the tension and contradiction between social critique and aesthetic consumption inherent in ACGN memes. On one hand, as one of the most prominent post-pandemic anime series, MyGO!!!!! shares its audience with China's ACGN community—predominantly the "pan-Z generation" aged 15 to 25 [14]—who are grappling with mounting employment pressure, life competition, and mental stress accumulated during the pandemic. Sakiko memes resonate deeply with these youths, as many project their own struggles onto her character. Through the creation and circulation of these memes, they not only voice dissatisfaction with social realities but also express admiration and longing for Sakiko's independence and resilience. The hardships she undergoes in the memes humorously foreground everyday struggles often ignored by mainstream narratives, making these memes a form of resistance discourse. This highlights the potential of subcultural character memes as a space for political participation and social critique. Compared to traditional memes, ACGN character memes exhibit stronger remix flexibility and sustained creative vitality due to the integrity of the source text and the fan community's reinforced identity. However, they are also highly dependent on the original narrative: when the sequel Ave Mujica aired a year later and Sakiko's depiction deviated significantly from the "working-class urban youth" image constructed through memes, the fan-created discursive system collapsed.

On the other hand, these memes also display characteristics of performative "media spectacles." Many fans described Sakiko's tears and breakdowns in fan discussions as "delicious," treating her suffering as a consumable emotional product that offers a kind of "distorted" satisfaction. Especially after the sequel aired and the "Customer Service Saki-chan" image mutated, numerous fans began reflecting on and criticizing this portrayal in online communities. Many considered the depiction of Sakiko's hardship in the anime to be a form of "commercial hype"—or even "烂炒"(lanchao, failed hype). In this context, the meme-constructed image of Sakiko as a "struggling urban citizen" inadvertently ended up concealing or reinforcing the very value systems it was originally intended to critique.

5. Community culture: a connective infrastructure for marginal

Subcultural Fans Highly spreadable memes are one of the defining features of MyGO!!!!!. Its original texts—such as character lines and screenshots—were already circulating widely as mature memes. These memes exhibit a high degree of textual convergence, meaning that across different formats—videos, image macros (e.g., subtitled screenshots), and texts (such as quoted dialogues in danmaku and comments)—the conveyed meanings remain largely consistent. Given the original material's spreadability, these memes were themselves remixed, parodied, or reinterpreted into emergent memes, forming clustered networks of meaning akin to "meme spores."

This cyclical process continuously expands the boundary of in-group identification among subcultural "insiders," effectively lowering the entry threshold of MyGO!!!!! as a Bang Dream!

installment and as a "soft yuri" production. In a Baidu Tieba thread titled "Why is MyGO so addictive?", many users highlighted the "traffic-directing" function of memes in cultivating community cohesion. During the peak of MyGO-related fan production from 2023 to 2024, generative AI technologies rapidly advanced and entered mainstream usage, streamlining meme creation, circulation, and remixing. AI was widely applied in music generation, voice synthesis, image generation, and video production, further detaching memes from their original texts. On Bilibili, particularly under high-view meme videos loosely tied to the source material, users often commented, "I watched MyGO just to understand your video."

For this group of marginal subcultural fans, the circulation and mutation of memes function as an emerging form of "indexical order" [13]—a spontaneously developing collective consensus. Although looser and more open than traditional subcultures, these behaviors still constitute a form of digital social cohesion.

"Customer Service Saki-chan" is one such re-encoded meme. While its creators and early adopters originated from the MyGO subcultural community, the meme's visual reference to "Taobao customer service"—widely recognized by the general public—blurred the boundary-marking tendencies typical of subcultural memes [15]. As a result, "outsiders" could understand and participate in the meme discourse without knowing the anime, and many fans cited the meme as their entry point into MyGO!!!!!. On May 9, 2025, the official Bilibili account for Taobao published a promotional post featuring "Customer Service Sakiko," symbolizing the meme's full absorption into mainstream discourse.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, Togawa Sakiko, as an ACGN textual character, has been widely reproduced as a meme within the Chinese internet, showcasing processes of localization and mechanisms of connection among marginal subcultural communities. The study concludes that character representations are recontextualized and re-entextualized through meme remixing, making memes a medium for youth communities to express identity, construct social understanding, and reflect social realities. Memes serve as vehicles for critical discourse, yet their fragile representational nature makes them vulnerable to transformation into consumable spectacles, thereby obscuring the very social issues they may aim to critique.

Moreover, the intertextuality of memes and the popularization of generative AI have enhanced memes' function as connective tissue among fans at the margins of subculture. This study contributes a case reference for online community and digital subculture research, particularly offering insights into how ACGN memes mediate between texts, communities, and sociocultural realities. Future research should further explore comparative studies of character reproduction across cultural contexts and examine emerging trends in meme evolution shaped by AI technologies.

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