

# *Despair and Hope in Nonsense: A Study of the Subcultural Ritual of Youth*

## *—Taking "Crazy Literature" as an Example*

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**Abstract:** In the era of intelligent communication, the phenomenon of folk discourse production in online society is increasingly common. From the initial roaring style to the prevalent "crazy literature" today, various so-called internet "literature" emerges endlessly, becoming a "media spectacle" and also giving various forms of expression to the subculture of despair. Although "crazy literature" belongs to the category of the subcultural ritual of despair, those who are "despairing" are "not despairing". Young people release emotions in despair through hysterical nonsense, and seek hope by establishing emotional connections with others in the same circle. This paper analyzes "crazy literature" from the perspective of interactive ritual chains, explores the formation mechanism of discourse carnival, and reveals the cultural symptoms behind "crazy literature", providing a pathway for understanding "crazy literature" and the culture of despair.

**Keywords:** interactive ritual chains, discourse production, crazy literature, subculture

## 1. Introduction

*"In the early game, Diaochan indeed cannot defeat Zhang Liang. Zhang Liang's first and second skills control and enhance damage, clearing waves quickly. However, I suggest Diaochan should first buy a Bloodsucker because this allows her to replenish her status at any time. By the way, Zhang Liang's spicy hotpot is really delicious, especially with deep-fried dough sticks and instant noodles soaked in soup, topped with sesame sauce. It's truly a delightful earthly pleasure."*

*"Yes, indeed, a sow's resistance significantly decreases after giving birth, and reproductive organs undergo changes. Improper care at this time can affect the sow's postpartum recovery and, consequently, the health of piglets. It could potentially lead to postpartum depression in sows, directly impacting the economic efficiency of the pig farm. Therefore, proper postpartum care for sows is crucial."*

The chaotic sentence structure, undisputed content, and unexpected endings express the speaker's strong emotions while conveying a sense of nonsensical humor. This is the prevalent "crazy literature" today, with various styles such as roaring, repeating, and rainbow-farting. Although termed "literature," "crazy literature" differs significantly from traditional literature and is essentially a product of internet meme culture. It has infiltrated various social scenes, becoming a common mode

of discourse. Whether urging deliveries on e-commerce platforms, arguing with netizens on social media, or expressing fervent love and support for something, "crazy literature" can vividly express intense emotions. The emergence of "crazy literature" not only promotes identity and emotional expression, especially among young people, but also reshapes the digital cultural landscape of the internet.

As Kellner puts it, "With the development of media technology, profound changes have occurred in contemporary culture, turning the whole world into a spectacle composed of various media symbols." [1] With the advancement of media technology and the popularity of social media, numerous "spectacular phenomena" have emerged on the internet, and "crazy literature" is one such "media spectacle."

## 2. Analysis of Ritual Elements

The concept of interactive ritual chains was first proposed by American sociologist Randall Collins. He posited that interactive rituals consist of four elements: the group focus of interactive participants, barriers that exclude outsiders, mutual attention focus, and shared emotional states. These elements interact with each other, resulting in collective excitement and emotional pleasure among participants. Consequently, four ritual outcomes emerge: symbols of social relations, individual emotional energy, group solidarity, and moral standards. [2] In the era of new media, thanks to technological advancements, interactive rituals can take place without temporal or spatial constraints on any social media platform, achieving the desired ritual outcomes.

### 2.1. From Offline to Online: "Co-Presence" in Virtual Settings

Collins argues that rituals fundamentally emerge as activities after physical gatherings, where physical presence serves as the link for interaction and communication. For instance, traditional ritual activities such as weddings, funerals, and religious ceremonies emphasize physical co-presence, which enhances the visual cues received from other participants compared to remote participation via phone or television. Only through sufficient physical co-presence can the strongest sense of being present be felt, allowing for the release of fervent emotional energy and strengthening of group cohesion. Therefore, face-to-face co-presence and mutual attention among individuals are the foundation of interactive rituals. It is through physical co-presence that the exchange and feedback of symbolic capital and emotional energy occur. At this stage, the body serves as a functional medium of communication, capable of perceiving, receiving, internalizing external information, and responding to interaction signals from others through body parts, language, gestures, and more. [3]

However, being physically present is not an absolute necessity for ritual interaction. Collins argues, "If the nervous system can directly generate the same effects remotely, then its effect would be the same as being physically present." [4] The development of mobile internet technology has reshaped the spatiotemporal logic of interactive rituals, turning the "global village" into a reality. Social media platforms such as MicroBlog and Little Red Book have eliminated the spatial limitations of traditional communication, providing a domain for "virtual presence" and making online "co-presence" the norm. At the same time, the immersive and participatory experiences offered by these platforms enable users dispersed across different regions to establish online long-distance connections in their nervous systems, producing ritual interaction effects similar to those of being physically present. Social media platforms, centered around users, allow everyone to meticulously design and decorate their own spaces, especially with various privacy and blocking functions that enable individuals to shed their disguises and fully enjoy the ritual experience.

Once users enter the app interface, various media platforms use algorithms based on their app activity history to recommend content, facilitating interactions among users interested in the same

field or topic, thus enabling them to "meet" online. Therefore, these platforms serve as bridges for users to engage in online ritual interactions. Taking Little Red Book as an example, it constructs a virtual space on the internet where everyone has equal opportunities for self-presentation and expression. If users have shown interest in "crazy literature" through their search behavior, the platform continues to recommend related posts. Users can interact remotely through actions such as likes, saves, and comments, transforming offline "physical presence" into online "co-presence," facilitating focused interactions among enthusiasts of "crazy literature."

As of now, the topic of "crazy literature" on Little Red Book has amassed 1.54 billion views, with the most liked post receiving 757,000 likes.

## **2.2. From Mainstream to Niche: Circle Symbols Promote Group Identity**

French-Jewish sociologist Emile Durkheim believed that religious rituals serve a social integrative function, with totem worship being the origin of religion. Totems symbolize primitive tribes and maintain tribal unity and emotions. However, they merely represent a tribal emblem; people worship not the totem itself but the meaning it represents. Therefore, totems are symbolic expressions of tribal members that promote group identity within the tribe. Collins, in his study of interactive ritual chains, borrowed Durkheim's concept of "totem," suggesting that clear participation by group members and barriers excluding "outsiders" are necessary to strengthen group identity. "Subcultural capital' refers to objects and ideas within a subculture that members consider unique, scarce, and emblematic of their interests, that is, the unique style of the subculture itself." [5]

"Crazy literature" is one of the derivatives of youth subcultures, characterized by niche dissemination primarily among Generation Z, referring to individuals born between 1995 and 2009. This demographic includes students and ordinary workers. Regardless of their roles, they face daily pressures in the post-pandemic era such as high living costs, competitive job or academic environments, and interpersonal challenges, amidst a facade of apparent tranquility and emotional stability. Internally, however, they often feel frustrated and anxious, needing outlets to vent emotions and relieve stress. The content of "crazy literature" ranges from complaints about early morning classes to frustrations about endless overtime, reflecting common experiences among most young people. Therefore, they easily empathize with each other, constrained by their identities in these circumstances.

Another limitation is the group symbols. As mentioned by Professor Guo Qingguang in "Communication Studies Tutorial," effective communication requires both parties to establish a common space of meaning. As a circle symbol, "crazy literature" acts as a barrier that excludes "outsiders," facilitating identity continuity among group members through posting, commenting, and sharing in various forms. When browsing social media platforms, individuals keen on using "crazy literature" will interact with posts and bloggers, possibly replying with "crazy" comments or liking to show support. Through extensive copying and pasting, "crazy literature" generates emotional energy among "crazy enthusiasts," expanding the shared space of meaning between communicators. Generation Z doesn't indiscriminately use "crazy literature" in all scenarios but tends to use it more in private circles, interacting with peers from the same background. Consequently, those who do not understand or use "crazy literature," such as some elders or leaders, inadvertently form communication barriers with young people who frequently use it, becoming "outsiders" to "crazy enthusiasts."

## **2.3. From Spectating to Joining: Meme Transmission Triggers Collective Frenzy**

Richard Dawkins proposed the concept of "meme" in his book "The Selfish Gene," referring to the cultural transmission of an idea, behavior, or style from one person to another. [6] Thanks to its

virtuality, interactivity, and low threshold, the internet has become a crucial arena for the imitation, replication, and dissemination of linguistic memes. The popularity of "crazy literature" originated from Douban. Some netizens shared their conversations with Taobao customer service, where using phrases like "I know I don't deserve early delivery, everyone else has received their orders, unlike me who even hesitates to urge for delivery, has become a ridiculous hot topic joke," effectively urged customer service to ship their orders, sparking widespread imitation among netizens. The content of "crazy literature" is open and easily imitated, possessing inherent meme characteristics, which attracted a large number of users to create derivative works, igniting a creative frenzy on social platforms. Consequently, the content of "crazy literature" continues to proliferate and evolve into different versions, with its application scenarios becoming increasingly diverse. For instance, on TikTok, the platform offers features such as shooting and publishing videos under the "join immediately" topic, making it easy for TikTok users to participate in the "crazy" trend. Currently, the topic of "crazy literature" has accumulated 4.57 billion views on TikTok, with the most liked video under this topic receiving 2.357 million likes.

Next, the breakout of any internet meme cannot be separated from the boost provided by opinion leaders. As Rogers once said, only by connecting strong and weak ties in social networks can the maximum dissemination effect be achieved. Behind the breakout of "crazy literature," there are also numerous celebrity bloggers who have helped fuel its popularity. For example, netizens quoted Zheng Shuang's meme-worthy statement from a variety show, "I'm really angry! If I don't get angry, will others think I'm stupid?", and turned it into an emoji pack widely used on social media platforms. Last August, singer Na Ying's remarks known as "Na's Words" (referring to her previous statements) exploded on TikTok. Phrases like "This is just a scare tactic!" and "Yes, I'm mentally unstable, everyone has issues" flooded major platforms, with netizens even creating DJ remixed versions that became the hottest summer video BGM. Hashtags such as "Formally Diagnosed as Na Ying" and "Na Ying Plays My Mental State" repeatedly trended on MicroBlog, TikTok, and other platforms, with netizens exclaiming "Na Ying's mental state is ahead by ten years." As public figures, both Zheng Shuang and Na Ying naturally attract attention, effortlessly sparking discussions and providing momentum for the spread of "crazy literature."

Lastly, literary and cinematic works serve as the resource pool for "crazy literature," allowing netizens to engage in "textual poaching." "Lin Daiyu's crazy literature" is a derivative of "crazy literature," adopting the speech style of Lin Daiyu from "Dream of the Red Chamber," where netizens adapt classic quotes to express opinions in a more literary manner compared to traditional "crazy literature." The TV series "The Legend of Zhen Huan" has also joined the "crazy" ranks. Lines like "I can't do it!" and "If we freeze to death here, will anyone know?" from the classic dialogue have been appropriated by "Zhen fans" (loyal fans of the series) for use in everyday life scenarios. Additionally, "The Legend of Zhen Huan" has spawned "diagnosis culture." The meme "Formally diagnosed as xxx" originated from a note on Little Red Book titled "I've officially been diagnosed as Huanbi" with the original text stating "On June 30, 2023, at 11:15 PM, I was officially diagnosed as Huanbi because I just can't stand other people," quickly becoming a trending topic upon its release, sparking widespread discussion and active imitation, evolving into a new form of "crazy literature" known as "diagnosis-style literature."

#### **2.4. From "Internal Consumption" to "External Consumption": Emotional Venting by Removing Masks**

Goffman's dramaturgical theory posits that interpersonal interactions are akin to performances. In different settings, individuals adjust and constrain their behaviors according to their interaction partners, operating between the "frontstage" and "backstage." Although interpersonal interactions online occur in virtual spaces, this performative behavior persists. When individuals are on the

"frontstage," they restrain themselves, striving to present their most perfect selves to others, while it is only on the "backstage" that they can disregard others' opinions and fully express themselves.

This form of self-display is akin to donning an exquisite mask, which over time can lead individuals into a vicious cycle of mental exhaustion. "Internal consumption," the depletion of internal resources, has become a prevalent term in the internet lexicon in recent years, now recognized as one of the ailments of the times. The term "internal consumption people" refers to a group prone to anxiety, repression, tension, and other negative emotions, exacerbating their inner turmoil. The Douban group "Internal Consumption People" was founded on August 13, 2021, with over fifty-four thousand members actively posting; hashtags such as "Reject Mental Exhaustion" and "How to Overcome Mental Exhaustion at Work" frequently trend on MicroBlog, prompting netizens and media alike to engage in discussions, attempting to find paths for those experiencing internal consumption.

Turning internal consumption into external consumption is one potential solution. Influenced by Confucian thought, individual personality must harmonize with society, a trait inherent in East Asian cultures. Traditional social norms demand emotional stability in adults, emphasizing endurance and inhibition. However, suppressing emotions without release only intensifies internal repression. "Eliminating mental exhaustion and directly venting when necessary" is a method contemporary youth employ to address mental exhaustion. No longer pursuing perfection and refinement, they arm themselves with outrageous language to honestly express their intense emotions. The emergence of "crazy literature" allows individuals to tear off the mask of "calm waters" and provides a channel for personal emotional release, thereby breaking free from internal consumption.

### **3. Exploring Ritual Outcomes**

Collins pointed out that when the elements of a ritual effectively combine, they generate a specific chain reaction, resulting in social effects known as ritual outcomes. Participants in rituals can derive "emotional energy" and a "sense of group belonging" from these interactive ceremonies.

#### **3.1. Constructing a Sense of Group Belonging**

Within interactive rituals, people use various symbols to express and convey meaning. These symbolic representations embody shared beliefs among group members, becoming "sacred objects" among them. The formation of an interactive ritual chain provides social members with a common focal point of attention and a shared emotional experience. Participants can express and transmit emotions through consistent symbols, language, and behavior, collectively experiencing and sharing similar emotional states. This emotional resonance strengthens connections among social members, establishing a sense of group identity and belonging.

Firstly, for the group that uses "crazy literature," this literary form has become a shared symbol, aiding in the construction of a unique group identity. By employing the same linguistic style and expression in online spaces, they collectively create a specific cultural atmosphere and mode of communication, thereby reinforcing their perception and recognition of each other's identities. Secondly, "crazy literature" expresses users' unique perspectives and emotional experiences regarding social phenomena or personal encounters. These shared experiences and perceptions create a strong emotional resonance among group members. By understanding and sharing their feelings, they receive emotional support from others, thus enhancing connections and a sense of belonging among the group. Additionally, the rebellious, ironic, and critical spirit exhibited in "crazy literature" makes group members feel they possess a unique set of values and belief systems. Pursuing these values collectively further strengthens their group identity and sense of belonging.

Therefore, such subcultural groups, through shared language, emotional experiences, and values, form a strong sense of group identity and belonging, thereby becoming more enthusiastic about using "crazy literature" as a mode of expression.

### 3.2. Attaining Emotional Energy

"Crazy literature," with its unique approach, provides users with abundant emotional energy. This literary form often incorporates elements of exaggeration, satire, and rebellion, capable of touching deep emotions and evoking strong resonance and emotional release among people. Firstly, "crazy literature" uses exaggeration and satire to allow individuals facing life's anxieties and helplessness to alleviate their tension with humor and self-deprecation. It creates a relaxed atmosphere where individuals can release inner anxieties. Secondly, "crazy literature" fosters a shared emotional resonance among group members. It makes people realize that everyone has their own troubles and hardships, which find resonance and expression within "crazy literature." This resonance helps individuals feel they are not alone, that others understand their emotions and circumstances, thereby enhancing emotional support and connection. Additionally, "crazy literature" embodies a spirit of rebellion against traditional norms, encouraging individuals to challenge conventional comfort and express their genuine thoughts more courageously, thereby reinforcing their own values.

In summary, "crazy literature," through exaggeration, satire, resonance, and rebellion, provides people with rich emotional energy, enabling them to face life's disturbances with an optimistic and humorous attitude.

## 4. Cultural Symptoms of "Crazy Literature"

Whether it's the previously popular "Versailles literature" on the internet or the current widely popular "crazy literature," these cultural phenomena appear to be a nonsensical discourse carnival on the surface. However, they are closely linked to social contexts and are essentially a product of the structural dilemmas in contemporary society, constituting a subcultural "resistance" belonging to the youth.

On one hand, the prevalence of "crazy literature" reflects the divergence between internet slang and mainstream discourse at the level of values. "Crazy literature" attracts spontaneous participation from a large number of netizens in a festive manner. Under the agenda-setting function of platforms, it competes for discursive power with mainstream discourse, squeezing the survival space of mainstream discourse and causing it to face an existential crisis. Generation Z, with its adept use of social media platforms, gradually regains the power of self-expression and self-presentation.

On the other hand, behind its superficial entertainment nature, "crazy literature" reflects the deep-seated anxiety of young people. Using convoluted and irrational language, "crazy literature" expresses the speaker's intense emotions, focusing on releasing the suppressed emotional appeals under "spiritual consumption," and indirectly responds to social issues with absurd discourse. Faced with relatives urging on reproductive issues, one can calmly respond with "I'm infertile"; or when someone borrows money and doesn't repay, one can openly shout and make a scene, preemptively undermining their dignity in public.

## 5. Conclusion

Today, "crazy literature" has become the internet's traffic code, vividly demonstrating the youth's fervor for imitation and creation, their pursuit of identity, and their love for interactive and participatory cultures.

As Rollo May once said, "We feel anxiety because we do not know what role to strive for and what behavior to trust." [7] Each generation has its own way of expression—ten years ago, the post-

90s used Martian language to express themselves, and now Generation Z vents their emotions through nonsensical discourse. Although "crazy literature" falls within the category of subcultural nihilism, those who embrace it are far from nihilistic. Through hysterical gibberish, young people release despair and establish emotional connections with others in the same circle to seek hope. However, emotional release does not solve problems. After the carnival ends, attention should be focused on the problems themselves and address "craziness" at its root.

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