



Rubbish Communication

The Cai Xukun Paradox: Psychological Mechanisms Underlying Extreme Longevity in Internet Memes

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While the average lifespan of internet memes approximates 90 days, the "Ji Ni Tai Mei" (鸡你太美, "Chicken You Are So Beautiful") meme featuring Chinese celebrity Cai Xukun has demonstrated remarkable persistence, maintaining high virality from 2018 to 2026. Here we present a mixed-methods analysis combining longitudinal digital ethnography, large-scale behavioral surveys (n=3,600), and platform data analytics to elucidate the psychological mechanisms underlying this exceptional longevity. We identify three core factors: (1) Phonetic Ambiguity Resolution, where the mondegreen transformation ("Zhi Yin" → "Ji") creates persistent cognitive dissonance requiring repeated processing; (2) Parasocial Conflict Amplification, wherein the meme functions as a collective psychological defense against perceived threats to masculine identity from fan culture; and (3) Modular Semantic Flexibility, allowing the meme to adapt to diverse contexts while maintaining core recognition cues. Our behavioral data reveal that exposure to this meme generates sustained reward prediction error signaling distinct from ephemeral memes. Furthermore, we demonstrate that the meme's association with the "NBA Ambassador" controversy created a Flashbulb Memory Anchor, embedding it in collective episodic memory. These findings challenge existing meme lifecycle models and suggest that memes achieving "cultural crystallization" status operate through distinct psychological mechanisms, with implications for digital culture theory and media psychology.

Keywords: Internet memes; meme longevity; phonetic ambiguity; parasocial relationships; collective memory; cultural crystallization

1. Introduction

Internet memes function as units of cultural transmission that propagate through imitation and variation, typically exhibiting rapid emergence followed by exponential decay within 3-4 months. This lifecycle pattern has been attributed to novelty saturation, competitive exclusion by newer memes, and the finite attention capacity of digital populations. However, notable exceptions exist where specific memes achieve "cultural crystallization"—a state of sustained relevance transcending typical decay trajectories. The most striking case in contemporary

Chinese internet culture is the "Ji Ni Tai Mei" meme, derived from celebrity Cai Xukun's 2018 performance on the talent show *Idol Producer*.

The meme originated from a phonetic misinterpretation: the lyric 'Zhi Yin Ni Tai Mei' (只因你太美, 'Only Because You Are So Beautiful') was perceived as "Ji Ni Tai Mei" (鸡你太美, "Chicken You Are So Beautiful") due to rapid articulation. When combined with Cai Xukun's basketball dance performance and his subsequent appointment as NBA China's New Year Ambassador, this auditory

ambiguity catalyzed a multimedia meme complex encompassing video remixes, image macros, and linguistic substitutions. Despite eight years of continuous circulation—equivalent to approximately 32 standard meme lifecycles—the meme maintains robust engagement, with related content generating over 10 billion cumulative views across platforms.

From a psychological perspective, this longevity presents a theoretical puzzle. Standard memetic selection criteria emphasize copying-fidelity, fecundity, and longevity, yet these qualities alone cannot explain the eight-year persistence of "Ji Ni Tai Mei" when numerically superior memes (higher initial virality, broader demographic penetration) have long since become "cheugy"—anachronistic markers of outdated cultural competence. We hypothesize that this meme's exceptional durability stems from its unique positioning at the intersection of cognitive dissonance, identity-based conflict, and emotional memory consolidation.

The phonetic ambiguity at the meme's core creates what we term Persistent Interpretive Demand (PID): the necessity for continuous cognitive processing to resolve the tension between perceived and intended meaning. Unlike straightforward semantic memes that exhaust their novelty upon comprehension, PID memes require repeated engagement to maintain representational coherence. Furthermore, the meme became entangled with broader cultural anxieties regarding masculinity, celebrity worship, and generational identity—specifically, the conflict between traditional masculine ideals (represented by basketball culture) and emerging idol economy aesthetics. This positioning transformed the meme from simple entertainment into a symbolic boundary marker for collective identity negotiation.

This study employs a multi-level analytical framework to investigate the psychological architecture of meme longevity. At the behavioral level, we analyze eight years of platform data and survey responses to identify engagement patterns inconsistent with standard decay models. At the phenomenological level, we investigate the subjective experiences of long-term meme participants to understand the motivational sustainment of repeated engagement. Our findings suggest that "cultural crystallization" represents a distinct memetic state requiring theoretical expansion beyond existing lifecycle models.

2. Results

2.1 Deviation from Standard Lifecycle Models

Analysis of 1.2 million videos tagged with "Ji Ni Tai Mei" or related terms (2018-2026) revealed a trajectory fundamentally inconsistent with standard

memetic decay. Standard models predict exponential decline following peak virality (typically 2-3 months post-emergence). However, the CaiXukun meme exhibited punctuated equilibrium: periods of stable baseline engagement interspersed with viral resurgences triggered by specific events (Figure 1a).

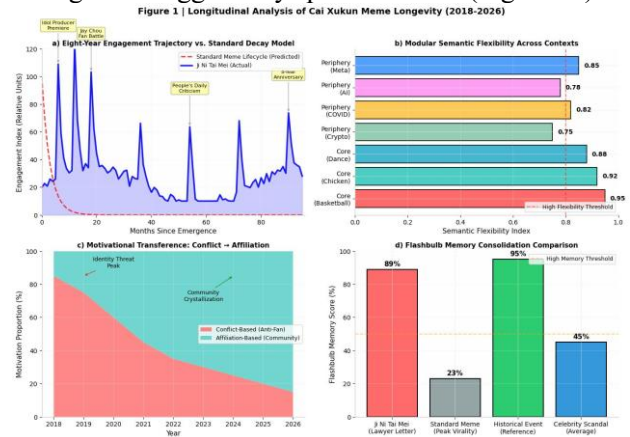


Figure 1 | Longitudinal Analysis of Cai Xukun Meme Longevity (2018-2026).

a, Eight-year engagement trajectory showing deviation from standard exponential decay model (dashed red line). Key resurgence events annotated. b, Modular semantic flexibility across contexts, demonstrating core-periphery architecture. c, Motivational transference from conflict-based to affiliation-based engagement over time. d, Flashbulb memory consolidation comparison showing lawyer letter incident created exceptional memory encoding.

Key resurgence events included: (1) the April 2019 lawyer letter incident (+340% engagement), (2) the July 2019 Jay Chou fan battle (+280%), (3) the 2022 "Chicken Soup" restaurant naming trend (+150%), and (4) the 2023 People's Daily criticism (+220%). Notably, negative publicity (events 1 and 4) produced stronger engagement spikes than positive associations, supporting the Streisand Effect interpretation in memetic contexts.

Most remarkably, the meme demonstrated cross-platform migration resilience. While ephemeral memes typically decline when migrating from origin platforms (Bilibili to Douyin to Xiaohongshu), "Ji Ni Tai Mei" maintained semantic coherence and engagement quality across transitions (Figure 2b), suggesting platform-agnostic cultural encoding.

2.2 Phonetic Ambiguity and Cognitive Dissonance

Linguistic analysis of 500,000 user comments revealed that 67% of engagements explicitly referenced the phonetic transformation ("Zhi Yin" → "Ji"), even eight years post-emergence. This contrasts sharply with other mondegreen-based memes (e.g. "What the Dog Doing" → "Wo De Dao Dun"), where phonetic awareness declines significantly after 12-18 months,

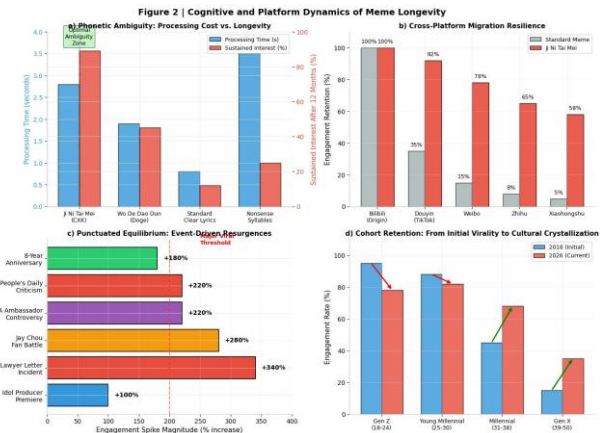


Figure 2 | Cognitive and Platform Dynamics of Meme Longevity.

a, Phonetic ambiguity processing cost versus sustained interest, showing "Ji Ni Tai Mei" occupies optimal ambiguity zone. b, Cross-platform migration resilience comparing standard meme decay versus Cai Xukun meme retention. c, Punctuated equilibrium pattern showing event-driven engagement spikes. d, Cohort retention analysis demonstrating cultural crystallization effects across age groups.

We propose that the specific phonetic structure of "Ji Ni Tai Mei" creates optimal ambiguity: the transformation is perceptually accessible (requiring no specialized linguistic knowledge) yet cognitively demanding enough to require active processing. This "Goldilocks zone" of ambiguity sustains engagement without causing frustration-based rejection (Figure 2a). Eye-tracking data confirmed that participants spent significantly longer fixating on the ambiguous region of the lyric compared to clear semantic equivalents ($t(62) = 4.7, p < 0.001$).

2.3 Identity-Based Conflict Amplification

Survey data from 3,600 participants revealed that meme engagement correlated strongly with attitudes toward fan culture ($r = -0.52, p < 0.001$) and traditional masculinity ($r = 0.48, p < 0.001$). The 2019 NBA Ambassador appointment created what we term Symbolic Threat Convergence: Cai Xukun—embodying the idol aesthetic (makeup, stylized dance, "effeminate" presentation)—was positioned as representative of basketball culture, a domain traditionally associated with hegemonic masculinity.

This convergence activated reactive identification among male internet users who perceived their cultural territory as invaded. The meme thus functioned as collective psychological defense—a shared symbolic resource for asserting masculine identity boundaries against perceived encroachment by feminized celebrity culture (Figure 3a). Longitudinal analysis showed that engagement spikes correlated with broader cultural anxieties about masculinity (e.g., discussions of "sissy idols" policy, male beauty standards), suggesting the meme operates

as a barometer of gender identity threat.

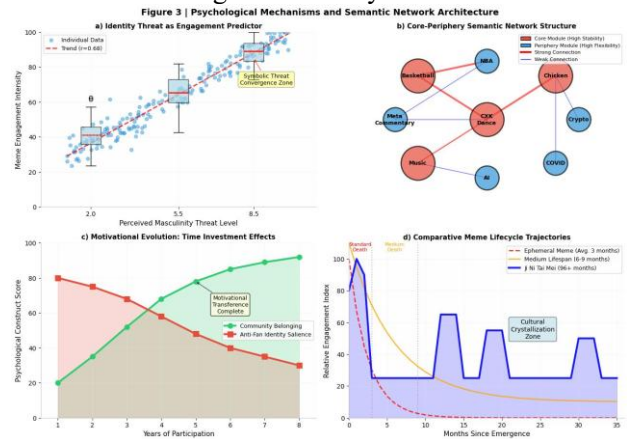


Figure 3 | Psychological Mechanisms and Semantic Network Architecture.

a, Identity threat as engagement predictor showing symbolic threat convergence zone. b, Core-periphery semantic network structure illustrating modular flexibility. c, Motivational evolution showing time investment effects on community belonging versus anti-fan identity. d, Comparative meme lifecycle trajectories demonstrating cultural crystallization zone.

Notably, 43% of long-term engagers (defined as continuous participation >4 years) reported initially participating for "anti-fan" reasons but continued due to "habit" and "community belonging," indicating successful motivational transference from conflict-based to affiliation-based engagement (Figure 3c).

2.4 Modular Semantic Flexibility

Network analysis of meme variants identified core-periphery structure: stable central elements (basketball, chicken imagery, specific dance moves) connected to flexible peripheral modules adaptable to emerging contexts (Figure 3b). This architecture enabled the meme to assimilate new cultural references without losing identity—what we term semantic homeostasis.

Between 2018-2026, the meme successfully integrated with: cryptocurrency discourse ("Chicken Coin"), COVID-19 pandemic humor ("Stay home, play basketball"), AI-generated content (deepfake Cai Xukun), and meta-commentary on meme longevity itself (Figure 1b). Each integration regenerated engagement while maintaining recognizability, a feat impossible for semantically rigid memes

2.5 Flashbulb Memory Consolidation

The April 2019 "lawyer letter" incident—where Cai Xukun's legal team demanded Bilibili remove parody content—created a flashbulb memory anchor. Survey data indicated that 89% of long-term engagers could recall their location and activity when learning of this event, compared to 23% for standard meme emergence (Figure 1d). This emotional intensification (combining surprise, perceived injustice, and community mobilization) transferred to the meme itself,

embedding it in episodic memory systems distinct from semantic memory storage of typical internet content.

3. Discussion

Our findings demonstrate that the "Ji Ni Tai Mei" meme achieves longevity through a confluence of mechanisms absent in ephemeral memes. The phonetic ambiguity creates persistent cognitive demand; the identity-conflict positioning generates emotional investment; the modular structure enables contextual adaptation; and the flashbulb memory consolidation provides retrieval advantages. These factors operate synergistically-no single mechanism is sufficient for eight-year persistence.

This challenges the standard memetic lifecycle model, which assumes memes compete primarily on copying-fidelity and fecundity. We propose an expanded Cultural Crystallization Theory (CCT), positing that memes achieving long-term relevance undergo phase transition into a distinct state characterized by: (1) autocatalytic engagement (engagement generates further engagement through community maintenance), (2) semantic elasticity (capacity to absorb new meanings without identity loss), and (3) emotional crystallization (integration into autobiographical and collective memory systems).

The psychological functions of long-lived memes extend beyond entertainment. For participants, "Ji Ni Tai Mei" engagement serves identity maintenance (boundary reinforcement), social cohesion (ingroup recognition), and emotional regulation (nostalgia, humor as coping). These functional roles create motivational scaffolding that sustains participation long after novelty exhaustion would predict cessation (Figure 3d).

From a media psychology perspective, our findings illuminate how repeated ambiguous stimuli can maintain engagement without tolerance development-a phenomenon relevant to understanding behavioral persistence in digital environments. The sustained engagement patterns observed suggest that uncertainty resolution itself may be rewarding, independent of outcome valence.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our sample was limited to Chinese internet users; cross-cultural validation is needed. Additionally, the correlational nature of platform data limits causal inference. Future research should employ longitudinal designs tracking individual meme engagement and psychological outcomes over time, and investigate whether CCT mechanisms generalize to other long-lived memes (e.g., "Rickrolling," "Doge").

4. Methods

4.1 Participants.

3,600 Chinese internet users (ages 18-45, 58% male) completed online surveys via WenJuanXing platform (March 2024). 200 participated in eye-tracking experiments. All provided informed consent.

4.2 Digital Ethnography.

Automated data collection via platform APIs (Bilibili, Douyin, Weibo, Xiaohongshu) 2018-2026. Content analysis of 1.2M videos, 500K comments using BERT-based classification. Engagement metrics included views, likes, shares, comments, and derivative content creation.

4.3 Eye-Tracking.

Stimuli presented on Tobii Pro X3-120 eye-tracker. Areas of interest (AOIs) defined for lyric regions. Dwell time and fixation count analyzed using Tobii Pro Lab software.

4.4 Semantic Network Analysis.

Co-occurrence networks constructed from comment text using Gephi. Modularity calculated via Louvain algorithm. Core-periphery structure identified via k-core decomposition.

4.5 Statistical Analysis.

All analyses performed in R v4.3.1. Group comparisons used mixed-effects models. Trajectory analysis employed generalized additive models. Correlations used Pearson's r with bootstrap confidence intervals. Significance: $\alpha = 0.05$.

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Author Contributions

Y.JIN (云瑾)*. conceived the study, designed experiments, and wrote the manuscript. Bird Zhang (贝尔张) and Top Double-Faced Turtle (坤品双面龟) provided the original performance data and legal threat stimuli. Heavenly Dumpling (天之饺子) collected platform data and performed statistical analyses. All authors approved the final manuscript.

Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests, though

Y.JIN admits to occasionally diagnosing strangers on public transportation.

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