

Symbolic Appropriation and Cyber Manifesting: Transnational Circulation of the Kris Jenner Memes Among Global Youth

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Abstract: Digital media have rendered online memes a primary medium of cross-cultural engagement among global youth. The Kris Jenner “manifestation” meme, which went viral worldwide, triggered mass participatory cyber manifesting on Chinese social media. This Chinese practice, distinct from its Western psychological counterpart, blends manifestation ideology with local folk rituals for good luck and prosperity. Drawing on meme theory, cross-cultural symbolic negotiation theory, and identity performativity theory, this study analyzes the meme’s symbolic origins, cross-cultural dissemination, and social impacts using platform observation, case study, and textual analysis. Findings demonstrate that global algorithmic circulation, cross-cultural opinion leaders and widespread youth financial precarity jointly drive its cross-cultural resonance. Through semiotic deconstruction and localized meaning reconstruction, these imported cultural signifiers evolved from an individual Western psychological ritual of intentional manifestation into a localized media practice for Chinese youth to release anxiety, perform self-identity, and build subcultural solidarity. This transformation highlights the role of local audiences as interpreters within the process of symbolic reproduction while exposing cultural superficiality and manufactured emotional release enabled by algorithm-driven entertainment. This study offers theoretical insights into transnational meme circulation and practical implications for governing youth digital culture in the contemporary media landscape.

Keywords: online memes; cross-cultural communication; youth culture; symbolic appropriation; cyber manifesting

1. Introduction

Global digital connectivity and iterative new-media technologies have reshaped cross-cultural communication by redefining its participants, circulation channels, operational logics, and expressive modalities. Traditional cross-cultural communication models relied heavily on institutional and elite actors. In contrast, cross-cultural exchanges within digital media ecosystems operate under decentralized, emotion-driven and participatory mass cultural logic, with online memes emerging as the most dynamic contemporary vehicle for cross-cultural exchange. Coined by Richard Dawkins, memes function as replicable units of cultural transmission, circulating via multimodal carriers including static images, short-form videos and templated textual formats (Dawkins, 2012). Notably, the transnational mobility of memes is far more than a simple transfer of cultural signs; it entails an iterative cycle of decontextualization, recontextualization, cross-cultural symbolic negotiation, localized semiotic adaptation and reconstruction of normative values (Ji, 2023). As such, meme circulation provides a valuable analytical lens for understanding contemporary intercultural exchange.

Circa March 2026, prosperity-focused visual memes featuring Kris Jenner gained viral traction on overseas platforms including TikTok and Instagram. As the core managerial matriarch of the Kardashian family enterprise, Kris Jenner’s mediated public persona accumulates rich symbolic capital tied to decisive agency, commercial acumen, resource accumulation and entrepreneurial success. Young netizens repurpose her portrait as customizable profile picture templates, employing it in a playful yet ritualistic manner to invoke prosperity, good luck, academic success, and career advancement (Wang, 2023). Relevant hashtags garnered tens of millions of views within weeks, with Generation Z constituting the primary participant demographic. The content ranged from avatar templates and “manifestation success” narratives to humorous memes, visual adaptations, and mutual experience sharing, collectively forming a highly active participatory cultural scene (Sun, 2022). This makes it a paradigmatic case for critical inquiries into new media cross-cultural communication.

Existing scholarship examines meme dissemination, youth subcultures, symbolic transmission, and social-media self-presentation. Nevertheless, most studies focus on memes within a single cultural context, leaving cross-border meme circulation under-theorized. Taking the Kris Jenner meme as a case, this paper addresses three core questions: What enables this meme to overcome intercultural barriers and achieve rapid transnational popularity? What forms of semantic reconstruction reshape this meme within new media ecosystems? And how do the underlying logics of youth media consumption, collective affective structures and shared psychological anxieties drive its mass uptake? Combining a case study approach with

long-term textual observation, this paper analyzes the meme's origins, cross-border dissemination, semiotic reconfiguration, and social implications. It seeks to deepen theoretical understandings of cross-cultural new media communication and the evolving digital cultural practices of young netizens.

2. Theoretical Frameworks and Analytical Lenses

2.1 Online Memes and Communication Logics of New Media

First proposed by Richard Dawkins, meme theory elaborates the mechanisms through which cultural units replicate, mutate and are selectively retained via imitative transmission (Dawkins, 2012). Within contemporary new media ecosystems, online memes circulate fluidly through platform infrastructure, user-generated content pipelines and algorithmic distribution (Yu & Geng, 2020). Unlike traditional cultural transmission, meme propagation is marked by low participation thresholds, emotion-driven engagement, semantic openness, and rapid semiotic iteration. Virality derives less from isolated textual content than recurring user practices: imitation, remixing, performative display, peer sharing and group discussion. Online memes that gain cultural and commercial traction usually possess three interlinked features: a distinct semiotic anchor, a flexible space for interpretive ambiguity, and modular formal structures amenable to rapid symbolic appropriation enabling transnational cultural mobility (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007).

2.2 Symbolic Negotiation and Localized Semiotic Reconstruction in Cross-Cultural Exchange

A core research problem in cross-cultural communication scholarship lies in the reception, adaptation and secondary circulation of cultural signifiers within unfamiliar semiotic contexts. Digital media have dismantled the long-standing dominance of elite cultural producers, institutional discourse and legacy mass media over intercultural exchanges, shifting cultural flows toward decentralized non-elite user participation, lightweight multimodal content circulation and frequent semiotic transformation. When foreign cultural symbols enter a local cultural field, they inevitably undergo the twin processes of decontextualization and recontextualization: original cultural backgrounds, normative value hierarchies and situational social contexts are largely erased, while core symbolic meanings are abstracted, simplified and reconstructed. Local audiences then reinterpret these signifiers through the lens of lived experience, affective demands and native cultural traditions. Young people often adopt strategies of symbolic deconstruction, ironic parody, semiotic collage and symbolic appropriation to rework imported cultural signifiers (Ji & Li, 2024).

2.3 Digital Media Engagement and Dramaturgical Logics of Youth Identity Performativity

Social media are more than simple information transmission channels; they serve as core dramaturgical arenas where people conduct identity performativity, build subcultural belonging, express affective emotions and negotiate life meanings (Goffman, 1959). Daily digital media behaviors—custom profile images, usernames, personal signatures, content creation and online interaction—function as multi-layered self-presentation activities that strengthen collective identity. Amid widespread structural precarity and aspirational anxieties, young people participating in niche cultural communities leverage digital media to balance playful expressive recreation with the outward projection of material and life aspirations (Yu, 2022). Vernacular digital rituals including cyber manifesting, playful engagement with internet tropes, and ritualized use of customized profile pictures constitute unique participatory media practices for young people.

3. Formation Mechanisms and Transnational Circulation of the Kris Jenner Meme

3.1 The Global Cultural and Media Context of Meme Emergence

The global popularity of the Kris Jenner meme arises from the interplay of global digital infrastructure, mainstream entertainment, youth affective subjectivities and the affective economy. Semiotically framed as a powerful entrepreneurial matriarch in global pop culture, Kris Jenner's mediated image aligns with mass aspirations for wealth, power and success, laying cultural groundwork for her reconstruction as a secular auspicious symbol. As the core operator of the Kardashian business empire, she embodies transnational youth narratives of self-made success built on brand planning and resource integration, endowing her portrait with symbolic connotations of prosperity and achievement.

Meanwhile, cyber manifesting, a psychological visual ritual centered on intentional wish-making, has grown prevalent across Western social media. Western manifestation relies on individual mental visualization, while Chinese cyber manifesting rituals absorb native fortune-worshipping symbols such as the God of Wealth and koi fish. Scholarly work on digital virtual rituals shows online manifestation relieves anxiety, fosters group identification, and articulates personal values (Lin & Xu, 2024). Across societies, young generations worldwide face shared structural precarity marked by fierce labor competition, stalled intergenerational mobility, and rising living costs. These pervasive anxieties contribute to the rapid dissemina-

tion of the meme as global audiences become sensitive to narratives of luck and material success (Peng, 2023). In addition, short-video and image-driven online communication allows the Kris Jenner portrait to fit algorithmic rules of major social platforms and disseminate widely.

3.2 Digital Pathways of Transnational Meme Circulation

Three interrelated pathways account for the transnational spread of the Kris Jenner meme. Global networked platforms and algorithmic recommendation mechanisms constitute the primary driving force behind cross-border dissemination. Social networks such as TikTok and Instagram prioritize concise, visually oriented content via personalized recommendation systems, enabling the meme to achieve global visibility beyond geographic and linguistic boundaries. Beyond platform technology, cross-cultural content creators serve as intercultural mediators.

Overseas Chinese content creators reinterpret the meme to lower cross-cultural comprehension barriers, integrating the meme into local communication ecosystems. A third factor relates to the affective resonance among young people across different societies, marked by financial anxiety, aspirations for self-realization, and a sense of group belonging. These shared dispositions allow the Kris Jenner meme to transcend cultural boundaries, generating extensive participation, imitation, and creative adaptation (Chang & Tian, 2018).

3.3 Localized Meme Practices in China's Digital Ecosystem: An Empirical Analysis

The Kris Jenner meme possesses its own localized features within media practices. The meme circulation mainly takes place on three platforms: Xiaohongshu, Douyin and Weibo. User-generated content includes editable avatar templates, personal success testimonies, memes with ironic subtext, and collaborative check-in posts. By late March 2026, the hashtag #KrisJenner on Xiaohongshu accumulated over 52.9 million views and 99,000 posts, building a dense meme ecosystem revolving around Kris Jenner's portrait. This community is dominated by students and early-career young adults. Their core aspirations revolve around wealth accumulation, job hunting, postgraduate admission and civil service recruitment (commonly known as shang'an, or "making it ashore," a metaphor for attaining hard-won goals), alongside career advancement and harmonious interpersonal relations. These multifaceted wishes reflect young people's material pressures and anxieties about personal growth.

Chinese netizens recreate the imported visual symbol within semiotic fusions. They refer to the portrait as the "digital God of Wealth," the lucky koi totem, or the "Matriarch of Fortune" (a playful Chinese online moniker meaning Fortune Grandma), integrating it into traditional auspicious cultural systems covering the wealth deities, koi and other lucky symbols. Such decontextualization of foreign symbols weakens cross-cultural interpretive obstacles and mitigates the cultural discount effect in cross-cultural communication (Ma, 2021).

Additionally, communicative logic hinges on identity performativity and subcultural cohesion. Using Kris Jenner's avatar is not merely individual cyber manifesting, but a threshold to join youth subcultural communities.

The empirical analysis reveals the extensive semiotic reconstruction of the meme. Participants modify the portrait of Kris Jenner with Chinese auspicious elements including gold ingots, red backgrounds, Fu calligraphy, koi patterns and the ceremonial costume of the God of Wealth to fit domestic aesthetic and fortune-seeking traditions. Linguistically, creators apply local internet dialects such as "swap your profile picture to get rich," "manifest nine-figure wealth," and "get a leg up at work." As a result, the Western logic of manifestation is embedded into the local internet practices of manifestation. Anecdotal accounts of salary raises, graduate admissions, visa approvals, and business deals attributed to adopting this avatar circulate widely as persuasive folk examples.

It also should be noted that there is a synergy of cross-platform circulation of the meme. On Xiaohongshu, there are avatar templates and user testimonies; Douyin hosts performative short videos and satirical interpretations; Weibo fuels trending topics and mainstream exposure; while WeChat spreads the trend through profile pictures, Moments and group chats. Together they form an integrated localized circulation ecosystem. Case studies show that the Kris Jenner meme is not merely an imported signifier, but a flexible cultural artifact continuously revised and semiotically reconstructed by Chinese netizens.

4. Semiotic Deconstruction and Semantic Reconfiguration of Memes in Cross-cultural Dissemination

4.1 Semiotic Deconstruction: Decontextualization and Semantic Reduction

With the spread of the Kris Jenner meme in the global digital space, multi-layered semiotic meanings associated with this visual signifier are systematically decontextualized and semantically simplified. Only a small fraction of Chinese netizens possess full knowledge of the Western cultural background associated with this signifier. This context involves the

storyline of the Kardashian reality series, the operating logic of the family's commercial empire, and the Western celebrity-industry norms. Most common Internet viewers lack this contextual grounding and have little motivation to delve deeper into the meme's original connotations. For most audiences, the meme condenses into a symbol of success and self-improvement. This erasure of original cultural context facilitates the meme's embedding within China's digital media ecology. By lowering cross-cultural interpretive barriers and mitigating the cultural discount effect, it enables rapid semiotic assimilation, symbolic appropriation and large-scale circulation among young people. This streamlined symbolic processing explains the high transmission efficiency that distinguishes online memes from traditional cross-cultural content.

4.2 Semantic Reconfiguration: From Individual Manifestation to Vernacular Meme Recreation

Following its circulation across Chinese social-media platforms, the meme undergoes substantial semantic reconfiguration. First of all, a change of genre. The Western manifestation is a form of individual mental visualization without any religious connotations, while Chinese youth transform this imported practice into a playful grassroots meme recreation built upon irony and self-deprecation. The reaction to Kris Jenner's portrait usually involves half-serious and half-parodic aspects, and these visuals become recyclable semiotic cultural signs, not objects of worship.

Secondly, a change of function. Initially being an individual psychological practice, it turns into a means of subcultural cohesion. The use of the Kris Jenner avatar becomes a particular signifier that indicates a certain youth subcultural identity and creates consensus and a sense of belonging within the subculture. These uniform avatars serve as recognition signs for subcultural insiders, thus encouraging peer communication and relational bonding across niche online communities.

Thirdly, a change of cultural affiliation. This Western visual resource is reframed as a digital auspicious icon that is compatible with local fortune-seeking practices. This signifier is incorporated into traditional Chinese cultural repertoires associated with wealth deities, koi totems, and misfortune-reversing customs.

Such semantic reconfiguration is far from passive reception of foreign cultural content; instead, it embodies agentive semiotic reconstruction driven by young people's unmet affective demands, interpersonal social strains and pervasive structural precarity.

4.3 Functional Reorientation: Multi-layered Sociocultural Effects of Youth Digital Practice

The Kris Jenner meme carries multiple interrelated social functions in young people's daily media consumption.

First, internet memes serve as a vital channel for affective catharsis. This low-cost, low-stakes virtual ritual provides an effective outlet for financial anxiety, academic pressure and occupational stress. Young people adopt Kris Jenner's portrait as their social media avatar as a projection of their inner feelings into virtual semiotics.

Beyond affective regulation, these visual cultural signs allow for online identity performance across social media platforms. They reinforce users' subcultural affiliations and sense of belonging to certain youth communities, while drawing boundaries from mainstream cultural frameworks. Personalized avatars of this kind have become the primary visual medium for online identity expression for many young netizens.

This shared symbolic resource fosters collective sociocultural cohesion. As a unified semiotic anchor, it facilitates the process of online communication and promotes comment exchanges, visual remixes and ritual check-ins, thus establishing strong affective relations in the virtual community. Also, continuous discussions about the Kris Jenner portrait maintain the stability of online subcultural communities.

Finally, from a symbolic perspective, the meme enables localized meaning-making and veiled symbolic push-back. With its ironic yet non-confrontational aesthetic logic, this imagery expresses the response of youth to structural precarity and becomes a particular mode of youth cultural expression.

Empirical evidence drawn from long-term platform observation validates all four functional mechanisms. Comment zones gradually cultivate an exclusive in-group vernacular through repetitive sentence patterns and emoticons. Users adopting the Kris Jenner avatar receive greater recognition and reactions from peer groups. Many young people regard this image as a "temporal ritual" deployed ahead of examinations, job interviews and business negotiations to alleviate anxiety. Others turn it into phone wallpapers or chat backgrounds, which further broadens the practical utility.

Taken as a whole, these grassroots semiotic practices demonstrate that the Kris Jenner meme cannot be reduced to a mere imported signifier. Re-configured through local interpretation, these visuals evolve into new cultural signs embedded within Chinese young netizens' online identity performance and offline daily routines. These digital rituals deliver fleeting emotional relief for youth grappling with structural precarity. Nevertheless, the unchecked proliferation of algorithm-fueled transnational meme culture risks fostering superficial symbolic consumption and cultural alienation among younger generations. To mitigate such intertwined risks, it is necessary to advance systematic media governance alongside robust media literacy training (Hu & Zhang, 2022).

5. Conclusion

This paper explores the transnational circulation of the Kris Jenner meme as a representative of youth digital cultural practice. Findings show that imported visual signifiers do not simply circulate across global social platforms; instead, they experience multi-level semiotic deconstruction during localization.

Four primary features characterize cross-cultural meme communication in the contemporary digital environment: decentralized content creation, mass participation, high semiotic flexibility and the affective experience being the key driving force behind its dissemination. The most insightful finding is that youth are not passive receivers of foreign cultural signifiers but active agents of semiotic reconstruction through symbolic appropriation and localization. This reflects young people's interpretive initiative and cultural creativity. It is important to note that young people worldwide face similar structural vulnerabilities, have common affective dispositions, and hold universal aspirations for personal advancement. These factors explain the cross-cultural success of the meme and provide a reliable empirical basis for youth intercultural communication research in a global digital media environment.

Nevertheless, this pervasive viral cultural trend contains non-negligible latent risks. Driven by algorithmic recommendation mechanisms and entertainment-oriented media logics, transnational meme dissemination may lead to the loss of semiotic depth and cultural superficiality. People may ignore the wide biographical, industrial, and ideological contexts of Kris Jenner's mediated image and turn this multifaceted cultural figure into a superficial visual signifier which provides only temporary affective release. Cyber manifesting (the combination of Western individual visualization with Chinese fortune-worship rituals) brings only fleeting emotional relief and does not solve fundamental material problems of youth. Emotional escapism may diminish the tendency of young people to use effective strategies to overcome real life difficulties. In the long run, continuous exposure to imported cultural signifiers may reshape young people's values, perceptions of success, and cultural identity, bringing about latent risks of cultural homogenization.

Thus, memes represent not only one of the key means of cross-cultural communication in contemporary society but also an important analytical tool for studying youth affective preferences, media practices, and cultural formation processes. The examples of transnational memes such as the Kris Jenner meme possess valuable theoretical and practical potential as they facilitate communication between cultures while providing rich empirical material for media and cultural studies. With regard to the expansion of digital cultural flows in a global media space, cross-cultural communication research should further explore the internal mechanisms of meme communication, attendant social risks, and appropriate countermeasures. Public media education should cultivate youth's media literacy and critical thinking rooted in local cultural traditions. Equipped with critical competencies, young people will be able to take part in the inclusive cross-cultural dialogue and guide transnational cultural exchanges toward a more balanced, inclusive and sustainable developmental trajectory.

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