

A Comparative Study on the Use Situation of Memes in China, Korea, and Japan

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Abstract

Memes are a popular communication medium in the Internet era. The use of memes is closely related to the culture of a particular society. However, it was noticed that the usage of memes differs in East Asia including China, Korea, and Japan. This study applied the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to compare and contrast the prevalence of memes in China, Korea, and Japan. Semi-structured interviews among six graduate students from China, Korea, and Japan (one male and female from each country) were conducted to investigate the current status of memes in East Asia, including people's familiarity, perception, and function of memes, etc. Then three potential cultural reasons were concluded using thematic analysis: collectivist culture, people's consideration of copyright, and interpersonal distance. Through the window of memes, unique Chinese, Korean, and Japanese cultures were discussed, which may contribute to virtual intercultural communication and mutual understanding among people with various cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: internet memes, IPA, online intercultural communication

1. Introduction

Memes are resources interpreted by the internet community to facilitate communication between the meme sender and receivers (Jiang & Vásquez, 2020). Young people generally use memes as speech acts (Grundlingh, 2018) in online communication to express their opinions or emotions.

With easy access to the Internet and the popularization of social media platforms, the creation and dissemination of Internet memes have become a digital participatory culture that is popular on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube and TikTok, etc. Moreover, the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic has compelled the mass use of online communication applications, which accelerates the prolific production of memes as a practice to propagate and circulate communications (Knobel, 2006). Richard Dawkins first puts forward the concept of memes in *The Selfish Gene*, in which the gene-centered view of biological and cultural evolution is expressed (Dawkins, 1976). A meme indicates a unit carrying artistic ideas and behaviors that can be spread among individuals through gene-like mimicking (Shifman, 2013). After decades of intermittent growth, memes have gained the favor of internet users and serve as an indispensable part of digital culture. It is picked as the remix of digital content, such as images, words, and videos, to communicate jokes and deliver one's emotions and opinions to others. Regarding other kinds of memes, iteration and recreation serve as the core values, allowing internet users to easily add funny captions to images to express their ideas and moods. Due to the resonant contents and convenience of editing, memes have developed into a chat pattern, including image macro, stickers, stamps, emoji,

kaomoji, etc. Among these, image macro, which is generally a picture with superimposed text, is the most used type of remixed meme. As a medium of communication, memes reflect the vernacular culture and society.

Despite the increasing popularity, the dissemination of memes showcases distinct patterns in different cultural communities (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2018). For instance, in East Asian countries, the usage of memes in China, Korea, and Japan displays different level of popularity and indicates distinct cultural features, which this study will focus on. To be more specific, it appears that internet memes have become a popular cultural phenomenon in China and Korea, while in Japan, the concept of memes is not widely accepted or understood. This phenomenon is well supported by current studies. In China, Memes are widely created, used, and disseminated by users on major social platforms in China, such as Weibo and WeChat (Jiang & Vásquez, 2020). For instance, a Chinese comic known for its humor and satire - Baozou Comic, has been transformed into memes by users and is used in online chatting due to its unique and exaggerated design (Ma, 2016). Not only as a means of promoting communication, but memes have also become an important medium for Chinese Internet users to manage their self-identities and impressions (Wang et al., 2019) and express emotions and affection (Tan & Cheng, 2020). Specifically, it is common for Chinese fans of Japanese Anime would use Moe memes and manga characters memes in China (Saito, 2017) to show their strong preference for the Anime/2D world (二次元), yet such a phenomenon is rare in Japan. Memes are also widely used and disseminated in Korea, in the forms of images, short videos or references from popular media, acting as simple entertainment or sometimes expanding into promotional phrases or images, commercials, etc. (Oh, 2021). Compared with China and Korea, the usage of memes in Japan indicates a limited dissemination. According to an online survey-based research study conducted by Heather O'Connell and Quenton Montgomery-Fletcher (2017), only 10% of Japanese students are familiar with internet memes, while the ratio among American students is as high as 60%.

While there have been pertinent studies examining the use of memes in various countries, they predominantly concentrate on individual country analyses. Notably, there is a lack of comparative research specifically addressing the cases of China, Korea, and Japan. Moreover, research on memes in Japan is relatively limited. Additionally, existing studies often offer only a surface-level description of the situation, neglecting an exploration of the cultural factors that underpin this phenomenon.

This study is aimed at addressing this research gap to further understand the specific meme usage situation and the cultural reasons in these three East Asian countries. We conducted semi-structured interviews with six participants as part of this research. Additionally, we compared and contrasted the similarities and differences in meme usage between China, Korea, and Japan, exploring potential cultural factors that help explain the different meme use situations and distinct communication styles in these countries.

As a collaborative effort by native researchers: three Chinese individuals who grew up in China, thus possessing native experience in internet meme usage within China, and a researcher from Korea who has a native understanding of internet meme usage in Korea. All of the researchers are currently residing in Japan. After experiencing the Japanese way of online communication, including the use of memes for several years, the authors began to consider the overlap in internet meme usage across China, Korea and Japan. This arrangement acknowledges the blending of emic (indigenous psychology) and etic (cultural psychology) approaches, as described by Severance et al. (2013), emphasizing its potential

applicability in cross-cultural analyses of insiders' lived experiences and outsiders' theoretically based analyses.

This article is structured as follows: following this introductory section, which provides a general background on the usage of memes in China, Korea, and Japan, Section 2 outlines our methodology and research procedures. Section 3 displays the analysis results, presenting insights from both a universal and country-specific perspective. Subsequently, Section 4 explores potential cultural reasons underpinning the observed variations in memes usage. Finally, Section 5 comes up with our conclusion and future prospects.

2. Method

2.1. Interpretative phenomenological analysis

There are two major analysis approaches in the social and humanistic fields: quantitative and qualitative. This study used a qualitative approach because it attempts to describe the authentic experiences and phenomena of human lives, not aiming to confirm a hypothesis or find a general conclusion for human society.

Quantitative methods are often considered the mainstream methodologies used in social science fields. These methods encompass the complete process of constructing pre-existing hypotheses, designing rigorous experiments, and analyzing statistical data in an attempt to generalize universal conclusions about human society. However, In reality, human lives are a complex blend of an ambiguous gray zone filled with intricate phenomena and countless possibilities, making them almost impossible to explain with a single research procedure.

It has been found that in a variety of contexts when research focuses on revealing the behavior and perception of a certain group of people concerning a specific topic rather than involving the explicit testing of hypotheses, a small sample-based qualitative approach is more desirable. The exploratory level of the qualitative approach is not only about "what" people think but also "why" they think so (e.g., Lewis, 1994). There are various types of qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews, case studies, content analysis, case studies, etc. Thematic analysis is appropriate when the research focuses on the participants' subjective experience or understanding (Lewis & Williamson, 1995).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996; Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999; Smith & Osborn, 2003), is the most clearly developed approach to thematic analysis (Smith, 1996). This approach embraces the humanistic position that all human beings are self-interpretative organisms (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). It is constructed based on three important theoretical assumptions: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography. First, IPA emphasizes an individual's phenomenological understanding of their lived world, retaining the subjectivity of specific phenomena based on individual experiences, rather than using pre-existing theories to categorize things. This subjective elaboration necessitates an in-depth exploration of individual cases. Therefore, it is logical that IPA relies on ideography, where the specificity of each single case is given attention. Researchers need to delve deeply into each single case study and then move to another case that shares similar characteristics, comparing and contrasting various cases to find possible patterns among certain groups of people. Finally, IPA is influenced by double hermeneutics, which includes dual perspectives: "the phenomenological worlds of the participants and the conceptual framework of the researcher" (Speller, Lyons, & Twigger-Ross, 2002, p. 47). IPA focuses on participants' subjective narratives; meanwhile, researchers need to access an

individual's inner world to translate and interpret participants' expressions, making sense of the individual participant's message.

This study examines people's personal experiences with the use of internet memes in China, Korea, and Japan, aiming to identify the essential components that make internet meme usage unique in these three countries. Therefore, we collected rich descriptions of internet meme usage from six participants, with two from each of China, Korea, and Japan. We then analyzed participants' narratives to interpret them. Specifically, we allowed participants to describe internet meme usage in their countries based on their personal experiences first, and then we positioned ourselves in their shoes to examine and explain people's real internet meme usage situations in their cultural communities.

2.2. Procedure

The standard workflow of the IPA study is roughly divided into five stages: formulating research questions, sampling, conducting surveys, collecting, processing, and analyzing the data (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). Though this approach allows flexible research design and conduction. The mainstream procedure is to conduct a semi-structured interview with recording, transcribe the data, and conduct a thematic analysis on the transcription. Following the guidelines of IPA studies, we plan to apply the same procedure in our research design: deciding on an appropriate research question, choosing samples, conducting semi-structured interviews with recording, transcribing, and doing thematic analysis.

2.2.1 Formulating the Research Question

In the initial stage, we crafted a research question for this study. As a qualitative methodology, IPA follows an inductive reasoning process, devoid of prior hypotheses before conducting the research. Instead, it allows phenomena to manifest themselves, generating open and explorable conclusions that necessitate in-depth exploration. In contrast to traditional methodologies, IPA leans towards intricate and ambiguous research questions related to people's personal lived experiences that cannot be tested solely from data. For instance, questions like how different groups construct their ethnic or group identity, what meanings they attribute to social roles, and how they perceive various phenomena show significant potential in revealing people's emic perspectives (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

This study delves into the usage of internet memes in China, Korea, and Japan, with a focus on how local individuals make sense of their behavior, perception, and attitudes towards using internet memes in their daily lives. For example, we aim to understand how people translate, comprehend, and respond to various types of memes, including those lacking clear meanings. Translating internet memes can be a complex task, as memes often depend on cultural references, wordplay, and context that may not easily transfer across diverse individuals. Consequently, we can fully utilize IPA to investigate the experiences of individuals from China, Korea, and Japan in their daily use of memes.

2.2.2. Sampling

The primary emphasis of sampling in IPA is on fully appreciating each participant's account, which leads to small sample sizes. This deliberate choice allows for a comprehensive, time-consuming, and case-by-case analysis. The number of participants in IPA studies can vary, ranging from just one to a few individuals, with typical sample sizes of one, four, nine, or fifteen participants. According to Turpin et al. (2009), a sample size of six to eight participants is suitable for an IPA study. This modest sample size

affords the opportunity to explore both commonalities and differences among individuals while keeping the qualitative data manageable. Besides, IPA researchers typically opt for fairly homogeneous samples, as opposed to grounded theorists since the goal of IPA is to conduct an in-depth examination of specific phenomena rather than generating theories for broad generalization. However, it is possible for IPA researchers to uncover universal patterns or mechanisms by comparing various IPA studies on a particular issue. This study contains six participants, who are graduate students (One Chinese male, aged 24; one Chinese female, aged 22; one Korean male, aged 23; one Korean female, aged 23; one Japanese male, aged 23; one Japanese female, aged 22) of Kyoto University. The six participants share a similar educational background and language level, showing similarities in multidimensions (graduate students, multilingual, young generation, etc.).

2.2.3. Semi-structured interview

In the first stage, we recruited the six graduate students through personal contacts at Kyoto University. These participants, aged between 22 and 24, shared similar educational backgrounds and English proficiency levels. We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews at the Kyoto University Library, with each session lasting approximately one hour. The interviews were conducted in a multiple-to-one format, allowing for comprehensive questioning of participants from various perspectives. This approach also fostered a relaxed discussion atmosphere, encouraging in-depth exploration between participants and researchers. While lingua franca - English served as the primary medium of communication (especially for the interviews with Japanese participants), participants were encouraged to use their native languages (i.e., Chinese, Korean, and Japanese) for clarity or better articulation when deemed necessary, given the multilingual capabilities of both the researchers and the participants. Before the interviews, we made sufficient preparations to ensure the smooth conduct of the interviews. Researchers would engage in a comprehensive discussion as a focus group, determining the most appropriate questions for participants of different nationalities based on their culture background and experience. In particular, we identified the interview topic: the use of memes in each country and the outline of the interview questions. During the interviews, we investigated three aspects of the use of memes in each country, including participants' familiarity with memes, their perceived functions of memes, and their attribution of cultural factors related to the current usage situation. We prepared a sophisticated consent form following the research ethics requirements. The participants' signatures were obtained. After the interviews, we rewarded each participant with an Amazon gift card worth 1,500 yen.

2.2.4. Recording and Transcribing

With the participants' approval, the whole interviews were recorded with a smartphone, and the quality of the recordings was guaranteed. Then we transcribed the audio files into text by first feeding the audio into AI speech-to-text services and then manually correcting any inaccuracies or errors to ensure the highest possible accuracy of the transcription. All of the audio files are double-checked by our members to confirm the semantic accuracy involving spoken words such as false starts, significant pauses, and other features in conversation. Parts of the interviews that were conducted in the participant's native language were translated to English in a similar fashion. All of the raw data is attached to the appendix.

2.2.5. Thematic analysis

After completing the transcriptions, we conducted a thematic analysis using the software MAXQDA. This thematic analysis involved identifying themes that emerged in the transcriptions, coding

the themes through free text analysis, connecting the themes into clusters, and defining the superordinate concepts. As previously mentioned, our study involved a total of six samples, comprising two samples each from China, Korea and Japan. We dedicated a considerable amount of time to examining individual cases in these three countries—specifically, we analyzed Japanese participants for the first 6 months, followed by two Chinese participants for the subsequent 6 months, and finally, two Korean participants for the last 6 months.

We identified and summarized salient themes in each country, resulting in a unique and representative pattern of internet meme usage for each nation. Subsequently, we compared and contrasted the similarities and differences between these patterns of internet meme usage in the three countries. Our goal was to uncover exploratory findings that could shed light on how people use memes in these three countries, ultimately facilitating mutual intercultural understanding during online communication.

Finally, we compiled a table of the identified themes, including superordinate themes that most strongly captured the participants' concerns. This table can serve as a resource for researchers exploring cultural aspects. To enhance the organization of our analysis and make it easier to locate the source, we added identifiers to each instance.

3. Result

3.1. General meme usage situation in China, Korea, and Japan

Using memes has become a popular phenomenon in China, Korea, and Japan. This aligns with the findings from our interviews, as all participants demonstrated a basic understanding of memes, such as stickers and stamps. We conducted an in-depth exploration of meme usage situations including dimensions of familiarity, perception, and function in these three countries, and the results show a tendency: memes are more popular in China than in Korea. Additionally, it seems that Japan exhibits the least popularity of meme culture among these three countries.

3.1.1. Familiarity

People in China, Korea, and Japan all enjoy multiple sources of memes. One typical and common source in all these three countries is social media, especially chat platforms. Though the widely used platforms vary from country to country, like WeChat and QQ in China, KakaoTalk in Korea, and Line in Japan, they all release official stickers for users to purchase and use. This also contributes to the popularity of memes by providing a convenient way for people to access memes. However, Chinese people seem to enjoy more convenience by creating memes themselves in addition to the limited official options. The results show that the general familiarity of memes in China is higher than in Korea, and the Japanese people tend to show the lowest familiarity with categories of memes especially for the usage of image macro.

*It's normal for people to use memes, but it may not be normal if they don't use them. (C, f, 22)*¹

It's impossible to communicate without using stamps. (K, m, 23)

¹ We use “(C/K/J, m/f, N)” to indicate each participant. The first capital letter represents their nationality (“C” for China, “K” for Korea, and “J” for Japan); the second lowercase letter represents their gender (“m” for male, “f” for female); the last number *N* represents their age.

The frequency of using memes in conversation is like breathing. (K, f, 23)

Oh this is "kaomoji"? You call these "kaomoji", and these are "emoji"? (J, f, 22)

So this kind of...types of memes is not used in Japan. (J, m, 23)

So, I haven't seen them. (J, f, 22)

3.1.2. Perception

When asked about participants' feelings about memes, multiple feelings were reported, some of which are universal among three countries. For example, though most participants felt in a positive way, like cute and funny, some of them also felt ambiguous sometimes. Additionally, compared to Chinese and Korean participants, Japanese participants showed a stronger sense of resistance to ambiguous memes.

The specifically used types of memes in online chatting are investigated during the interview. Besides the common preference for emojis, stickers, and stamps in China, Korea, and Japan, participants in different countries also have their own favors. For example, the use of image macro is much more popular in China than the other two countries, while Korean participants prefer using kaomoji as the most commonly utilized type of meme in their conversations. And Japanese participants preferred using emoji during communication.

According to our interviews, an obvious gender difference between meme preferences can be observed in all three countries, especially in terms of the types of memes. However it is noticeable that the specific differences, which are internally consistent with the three cultures, can be slightly distinct. To be more specific, both Chinese male and female participants agree that in China, most men prefer using anime characters (usually cute girls) or funny panda characters, while women prefer realistic content such as cute animals or little children. A general gender difference also exists among Korean and Japanese people, namely that in Korea and Japan, men prefer funny stamps while women favor cute stamps. However, it is also worth noting that men may also use cute stamps to convey humor, while some women may not have a certain preference for cute stamps.

Yes, when I think boys prefer texts. But some of them use funny stamps, too. For girls, they prefer using stamps from the line to be friendly and cute. (J, f, 22)

I usually find that girls send realistic memes, while boys send more anime girls and panda heads. (C, m, 24)

This is my friend group, like my high school friends. And we use cute stamps where we're all guys...Not necessarily, but most of the time. You(We)'re trying to be funny.(K, m, 23)

Regarding the condition where people use memes, our participants from all three countries appeared to have a consistent preference for a close relationship, such as friends, family, etc. Moreover, people tend to avoid using memes when talking with superiors like professors and bosses. However, in addition to acquaintances, compared to Japan and Korea, only Chinese participants showed willingness to use memes to engage in conversations with strangers.

It depends on the time and what type of conversation I'm having. But I sometimes use memes with the...not professors but kyouinn. (J, f, 22)

That doesn't work. I didn't send that kind of thing. (And) I don't think I can send memes to a professor...The content of the conversation itself is not the type to use emojis.(K, f, 24)

3.1.3. Function

Generally speaking, There are some basic functions of using memes in all these three countries. First, the main role of memes is to make Internet chats precisely. Unlike face-to-face communication, the participants of online chatting are not directly visible to each other, which makes it difficult for people to feel each other and understand the precise contexts of the conversation because the expressions, gestures, or tone of participants cannot be conveyed well. Therefore, memes, with their vividness, can serve as a desirable supplement to better facilitate people's online chatting.

To be more specific, memes can help people to better express their emotions and intentions. It is clear from participants from all three countries that memes can be used to express emotions since they contain not only text but also pictures and animations. As the Japanese male participant stated it is useful to send memes when people's tension increases or try to express some strong feelings in online chatting. The other five participants all mentioned that using memes can help people express more precise and intuitive emotions than text messages. In this way, memes can facilitate the user's current emotional state to be better understood and perceived.

The main thing is that I want to express emotions, moods, or expressions that can't be expressed in words beyond the pure content. (C, m, 24)

Since (...) there's only text, I use them to convey my facial expression! More vividly. Because if I just use text, there might be misunderstandings. I express if I'm really sad, or if I'm sarcastic, by using memes. (K, f, 24)

Besides, the responses revealed that participants from all three countries agree that using memes in online chatting can show positive feelings and promote the atmosphere of the conversation. In particular, the Japanese female participant thought that the use of memes demonstrates people's eagerness to be more open in the conversation to make the conversation smoother. Chinese participants reported that memes are effective in promoting a relaxing and pleasant atmosphere of conversation, making communicators more comfortable and connected. Participants from Korea stated that they tend to use cute emojis with their loved ones or friends they are not very close with in order to soften the mood.

Because I think it shows that the person who sent stamps and emojis I find are becoming more open to the conversation (J, f, 22).

Promote the atmosphere of chatting, and then be more friendly. Relaxed and pleasant atmosphere. (C, f, 22)

Last, people from all these three countries also use memes for practical purposes. These memes are mostly instrumental memes attached with the text of frequently used phrases in everyday life, like "good morning" and "thank you". With their practical role to show politeness in communication, these memes are usually used in different situations including formal places (i.e., workplace chatting with colleagues) and informal places (i.e., casual chat with friends).

While the familiarity, perceptions, and functions of memes exhibit universal patterns in China, Korea, and Japan, the authentic situations of meme usage appear distinctive in these three countries. The unique results for each country are listed in the following paragraphs.

3.2. China

Memes are very popular in China which might be attributed to a higher frequency of online chatting and a more active network environment. As mentioned, China's major chatting platforms, such as QQ and WeChat, not only release officially produced stickers but also allow users to create, collect, and send their own memes. In this way, Chinese Internet users can create and spread memes with easy and efficient access, resulting in a rich source of memes, especially image macro, in China. Also, compared with Korean and Japanese, Chinese people enjoy spending time on the Internet and have a stronger online interpersonal touch to share their lives or express their moods. Therefore, due to the more active network environment and higher frequency of online chatting, the Chinese rely more on online communication, which might contribute to the high popularity of memes in China.

when QQ was first launched, then you made a lot of stickers like Line, and it gave a function, which means that everyone can make their pictures. (C, m, 23)

Self-made memes (in Japan) are still relatively minor, and as for the quality, the variety, quantity, and quality are not as high as those in China and the United States. There are not as many good ones as I saw on QQ.(C, m, 23)

Regarding the perception of memes, Chinese participants tended to show a positive perception of memes. Both Chinese participants indicated that memes are a helpful tool for conversation, so using memes is a regular acceptable action in people's daily life. Conversely, people who do not use memes may be thought to be weird.

It's normal for people to use memes, but it may not be normal if they don't use them. (C, f, 22)

While Korean and Japanese people only use memes with peers and families, Chinese participants showed a preference for using memes to engage in conversations with both acquaintances and strangers. Particularly in large chat groups where most participants are unfamiliar with each other, individuals enjoy incorporating memes into their chats as a means of expressing their personal tastes. It is not uncommon for two people in such a group chat to bond and form friendships upon discovering shared preferences for certain memes.

In addition to the common functions of communication and emotional expression, memes have shown a more profound role in China. In particular, the Chinese male participant reported an opinion that meme is a way of establishing self-identity like clothing styles, which can help other people to view and understand the user. People build up their image by choosing and sending memes that match their self-image. For example, people who use pet and child emojis will be considered cute, while those who use exaggerated emojis will be considered humorous.

People use their preferred memes to show their own personality, like the way they dress up, and the self-image they want others to recognize. (C, m, 24)

Moreover, memes serve as the cultural bond of a community. It functions mostly in the form of an online group chat, with users actively generating memes that align with the community's theme. In the context of fan groups, enthusiasts craft image macros featuring their idols and accompanying text to express their emotions and opinions. These memes serve as symbolic identifiers, embodying a shared sense of belonging and cohesion within the group. The widespread use of these customized symbols reinforces the community's identity and strengthens the connection among its members.

It's the bond, a kind of meme that is a symbol for one community and helps to link members within a certain group. (C, m, 24).

Also, memes function as a powerful conduit for cross-cultural communication, acting as bridges that connect diverse communities. For example, when Chinese people find some memes that originated from the U.S. that are pretty interesting, they will use and spread them, through which a culture flow from the U.S. to China is built. Also, a participant reported that once he made a meme by himself and only shared it in a small group. However, he found that a complete stranger on Twitter was using it, which indicates the powerful role of memes in culture flow. This instance underscores the influential role of memes in transcending boundaries and facilitating the dissemination of cultural content. The interconnected nature of online spaces allows for the spontaneous adoption and reshaping of memes, turning them into agents of cultural exchange that extend far beyond their initial creation.

I also want to say that this kind of thing will flow from one place to another, such as the kind of memes that originated in the United States, such as the kind of frog heads that shake their heads and shine with colorful light, and then slowly move to Bilibili. (C, m, 24)

3.3. Korea

Memes are reasonably popular in Korea, often exchanged on KakaoTalk, a popular messaging app, or other social media platforms. KakaoTalk offers a wide range of stickers, some of which are free while others require purchase. Despite the cost, many users buy these stamps for their appealing designs and their functions in text-based conversations. The cost of these emoticons varies, and while the selection on KakaoTalk is limited to official stickers, there are websites for meme creation. However, not many people engage in making their own memes, as expressed by a participant who finds himself *not creative enough* to make memes by himself.

This is one set of emoticons, like 30 stamps, and usually cost like 200 yen to 2000 yen (Korean currency). I think it's pretty similar(to Japan). They're really like, they're cute memes. I mean, stamps. They're cute ones. They're funny ones. (K, m, 23)

They are like websites like memes maker, I know, they're really easy to use. To find meme templates, ready to use, you just need to. I know they're there. And I know I can just use a custom image as well. But I just don't feel creative. Not a lot of people do it(making memes). (K, m, 23)

In contrast to China and Japan, Korean participants revealed that they use a special type of face-shaped Hangul sequence in their conversations as the most common type of meme (see Table 1). This is because certain characters in the Korean language can be combined to create facial expressions, allowing them to vividly depict their mood in a more expressive manner.

With kaomoji, I mean, like, with these, these are like at this point, like part of the language. So basically, we cannot communicate without integrating it into, like, the writing culture. (K, m, 23)

Table 1. Examples of face-shaped Hangul memes

○ 入 ○	Expressionless face
ㄸ ㄸ	Crying
一一	Annoyance (representing two squinted eyes)

One of the participants also noted the trend of younger generations mimicking gestures and movements from meme videos, demonstrating how memes in Korea are not only limited to text-based media.

Are you a T? (Makes a T shape with her hands) Do you know this?... Celebrities would do a lot of it and if they post on TikTok, kids would follow, so it became... meme-ified. (K, f, 24)

Korean participants view memes positively, considering them indispensable for casual online chatting. According to one participant, using memes is likened to breathing, highlighting their integral role in communication.

The frequency of using memes in conversation is like breathing. (K, f, 23)

Regarding the preferred relationship, Korean participants appeared to have a consistent preference for a closed relationship, such as friends, family, etc. They tend not to use memes when talking with superiors like professors and bosses. On the other hand, the female participant mentioned that they tend to use stamps more to people they are not close to, in order to smoothen the mood of the conversation.

That doesn't work. I didn't send that kind of thing. (And) I don't think I can send memes to a professor...The content of the conversation itself is not the type to use emojis. (K, f, 24)

But ironically, with friends that I don't have much to talk to ... It seems like I use memes a lot with friends I'm not that close with ... Something like (shows cute "excited" or "heart" emoticons). (K, f, 24)

The Korean female participant reported that memes tend to be used to end the conversation. It was stated that it was because she felt rude if the conversation abruptly ended; rather, she would send a cute sticker to end it. It was also reported that memes, cute memes in particular, are used as a conversation starter as well. This is related to the function of adjusting atmosphere; (cute) memes help make the mood of the conversation softer and more friendly, especially with people the user does not feel very close to.

You send a cute emoticon then. (...) when starting a conversation. "Hello" emoticon. (K, f, 24)

3.4. Japan

Memes are not extensively used in Japan, as seen in the convenience of meme applications and the general public's knowledge, perception, and evaluation of memes. Line, renowned as one of the most widely used international chatting platforms globally, stands out as the predominant chatting application in Japan. Line periodically releases official stickers accessible to all its users, with a majority of memes, including stamps and stickers, requiring payment for access. These can be conveniently downloaded or purchased from the Line store. In contrast, emojis and kaomoji (顔文字) can be effortlessly input using any smartphone. Consequently, memes, comprising emojis, kaomoji (顔文字), and stamps, take the forefront in Japanese online chatting. Among these, Japanese participants described their preferred types of memes. It was revealed that the most favored types of memes in Japan are emojis. Participants mentioned that they tend to add emojis at the end of sentences to supplement the text content, enhancing the conveyance of their meaning and emotions. The convenience and variety of emojis also facilitate their use, as almost all input method editors provide this module. Moreover, serial stickers/stamps provided in line are also commonly used memes. Generally, they are designed and sold by designers and companies and cost approximately 200 JPY on average. There are not a few free stamps, but in most cases, they are not cute and funny enough. Sometimes people passionate about using stickers are willing to pay for it, even though they think it is a little expensive. The highlight is that compared with stamps

without texts, Japanese people prefer stamps with texts because “the meaning is clear,” and sometimes it’s “hard to reply” with an image-only stamp.

Online chatting I think like Line. (J, m, 23)

Yes, I buy them and there are some free stamps, you have to become friends with companies on official Line. (J, f, 22)

The system of Line is...In Line, you have to buy or download the stamps, so you don't have the page for the collection. (J, f, 22)

I...I've seen that with conversation in the competition with friends, but for other moments, mostly Instagram and social media. So my friends specially the international student, they tend to share, second use of them. (J, m, 23)

Yes, I buy them and there are some free stamps, you have to become friends with companies on the official Line. (J, f, 22)

I see, but I have used only a few times I think, by myself. (J, m, 23)

Oh, yes. Several times. Not very often. It's not a common word, I think. (J, m, 23)

Rarely. (J, f, 22)

I mostly use emoji after sentence. I rarely use even don't use the stamp future. (J, m, 23)

So I use stickers when I communicate on social media, like in Line, Instagram, twitter. (J, f, 22)

I think there's more than 10 series of stamps. (J, f, 22)

However, when the topic moves to the image macro, it seems that the Japanese seldom know, use, and create this kind of meme. The participants reported that they often see this kind of meme in social media instead of online chatting, and the users are usually non-Japanese. With little acquaintance with memes, the frequency of their use of image macro was extremely low. The lack of usage of image macro may result from the inconvenience of sharing this type of meme in Japanese chatting applications (Line, Ins, etc.). Most of the image macros originated in social media and spread in the form of posts. Then the readers may take a screenshot and share it with friends through posts or online chatting, like sharing a joke or emotions. However, popular chatting application such as Line or Instagram in Japan does not have the function for the users to create their stamp gallery where they can store and send picture memes they collected from social media. This barrier in collecting and sharing picture memes to express real-time emotions or feelings may hinder the propagation of image macros in online chatting.

It's just..... I thought sometimes I just see some posts on Instagram or something. So it's not something like stamp or that kind of easy to share. I can take screenshot and post it on your story or something that. (J, m, 23)

Because I don't know how they...how people who are using them were doing it but you'd have to collect many images and collect many images and store them somewhere and send them...send them when you have the specific emotion you want to express and something you feel or like with a person. (J, f, 22)

No, I don't even collect. Maybe this is memes. And that I think that kind of expression is more typical to western people, not in Japan. Now we use a lot of stamps, but the other kinds of memes, I think it's not very common. (J, m, 23)

In Japanese application, they don't have the system to, they don't have a convenient system for sharing memes. (J, m, 23)

When asked about Japanese users' perceptions of memes, both positive and negative answers were reported, of which both participants classify memes as funny and cute stuff, which brings positive feelings such as friendliness and open for both senders and receivers during communication. However, the male participant also reported superficial and ambiguous feelings about using memes.

Friendly, I think. (J, m, 23)

Because I think it shows that the person who sent stamps and emojis I find are becoming more open to the conversation. (J, f, 22)

Sometimes it is funny. But sometimes it's very superficial. (J, m, 23)

Yeah, ambiguous. (J, m, 23)

One notable function for Japanese memes is to end a conversation which is similar to Korean. However, the mechanism for this behavior might be different. Koreans use memes at the end of the conversation to avoid being perceived as rude, however, the Japanese use memes to stop conversation. For example, a Japanese male participant explained that some individuals, like himself, prefer ending a conversation with a meme because it can be difficult for others to respond effectively to these visual elements. He further elaborated that, in his perception, memes generally convey less information compared to text, rendering them an external and inefficient means of communication. Users may find memes ambiguous, making it difficult to grasp a specific meaning and respond appropriately. (In contrast, when asked about ending a conversation with a meme, both Chinese participants expressed different opinions. They tend to use memes to fit contexts with the ongoing conversation: the Chinese female participant also noted that individuals who infrequently use memes or only do so at the end of a conversation are considered rare and serious in China. Basically, Chinese users tend to use memes all the time during online chatting, including at the end of a conversation.)

Will it make you feel very difficult to reply?

Yeah I think I had those experience. (J, m, 23)

I will not deliberately end the conversation through memes. (C, f, 22)

Regarding the applicable contexts for using memes, both Japanese participants reported a tendency to send memes in close relationships, such as with friends and family. They avoid using memes when communicating with individuals in higher social positions, such as their superiors and bosses. However, it's noteworthy that Japanese individuals also incorporate memes into their workplace communications. In such instances, a specific category of memes, known as instrumental memes, comes into play. These memes consist of commonly used daily responses like “お疲れ様です” (Thanks for your hard work), “了解です” (Got it) and “ありがとう”, etc. in Japanese society. Japanese people utilize these instrumental memes to adhere to some practical purposes such as following social norms and being polite to their co-workers in online chatting. The use of instrumental memes is a common phenomenon in Japanese internet communities.

It depends on the time and what type of conversation I'm having. But I sometimes use memes with the...not professors but kyouinn. (J, f, 22)

I've never. Yeah..... I don't have connection I just communicate through email with professor my professor or a very official relationship. I don't use the SMS, so..... (J, m, 23)

Table 2. Similarities and Differences of Memes Usage in China, Korea, and Japan

	China	Korea	Japan
Familiarity			
Popularity	√ +	√	√
Source	WeChat/Weibo	Kakao/Reality	Line/Ins
Convenience	√ +	√	√
Perception			
Feeling	√ +	√	√
Preference types	Macro Image	Kaomoji	Sticker/Stamp
Gender difference	√	√	√
Applicable objects	Everyone	Peers/Families	Peers/Families
Function			
Express emotion	√ +	√ +	√ +
Adjust atmosphere	√ +	√ +	√ +
End conversation	×	√	√
Show self/group-identity	√	×	×
Greeting	√	√	×
Practical purpose	√	×	√ +
Cultural reasons			
Copyright issue	×	×	√
Collectivism	Social Cohesion	Standardization	Peer Pressure
Interpersonal Distance	Close	Close	Large
Uncertainty avoidance	×	×	√

Key:

√ denotes that the theme is evident.

×

√+ denotes that the theme is particularly evident.

4. Discussion of Cultural reasons

4.1. Copyright issues

The differences between operation models of social media in China, Korea, and Japan not only influence people's usage behavior but also shape their perspectives on copyright. The ways in which users access memes on chat platforms such as WeChat, Line, and KakaoTalk is one example of these disparities. For Line and KakaoTalk, users are typically required to pay for memes (mostly in the form of stickers) for use. This includes official stickers created by Line or KakaoTalk as well as creator's stickers. In other words, the stickers created by individuals or companies also need to be purchased and downloaded through the official channel of chat platforms. The operation model of Line and KakaoTalk gradually shapes people's recognition of paying for copyright and ensures that whoever uses or sees the sticker will know its creator. However, the operation model of WeChat doesn't influence users in this way. Official stickers are uncommon in WeChat. Although users are also fond of the creator's stickers and need to download them from the official channel, most of these stickers are free of charge. In addition

to stickers, WeChat provides convenient functions for users to search for, send, and save memes, which are typically in the form of gifs. These memes are usually created by ordinary users and are spread quickly and widely, which, together with their gif format, makes it difficult to trace the origin, eventually leading to Chinese people's habitual ignorance of copyright. Creating memes for amusement is generally acceptable, but when utilized for commercial or promotional purposes, it's crucial to obtain proper consent and licenses from copyright owners to prevent legal repercussions.

4.1.1 Copyright issues in China

Compared to Korea and Japan, China's development in copyright has been relatively delayed and facing a weak situation. China's internet witnessed rapid growth, and many platforms initially adopted free strategies to attract traffic and maintain user engagement. Consequently, this led to a relatively weak copyright awareness among most internet users, particularly regarding digital content like videos and music, and resulted in a lower willingness to pay for such content. Additionally, during the early stages of China's digital culture, an imperfect legal framework for copyright existed, allowing platforms like Baidu Wangpan and Xunlei to facilitate the dissemination and storage of pirated resources. As a result, Chinese internet users became accustomed to consuming TV dramas, music, and software without payment. In recent years, the Chinese government has implemented a series of measures to strengthen copyright and contributed to a changing landscape where more individuals recognize the significance of supporting creators and respecting copyright protection through payment. Despite the changing attitudes, Chinese people keep a relatively low sensitivity to copyright issues. As a result, Chinese internet users have shown a high acceptance of the creation and dissemination of memes.

I don't think copyright awareness has much to do with it, because I don't think there are any special laws on this aspect, and maybe everyone doesn't think about it. (C, f, 22)

4.1.2 Copyright issues in Korea

In Korea, people tend to have low awareness regarding copyrights, though the awareness among teenagers is improving these days due to copyright education, according to Kim (2022). This contrasts with the Japanese approach, as Korean copyright education is less ingrained in the cultural and educational systems. Historically, Korea has faced challenges in fully integrating copyright awareness into its society. The lack of stringent enforcement and the prevalence of piracy have been notable issues. However, recent efforts, particularly in educational settings, have begun to address these challenges. The introduction of copyright education in schools aims to foster a deeper understanding and respect for intellectual property among the younger generation. This shift is gradually leading to a broader recognition of the importance of copyright, especially among digital natives who are increasingly engaged in online content creation and consumption. As a result, the understanding and respect for copyright in Korea is evolving, moving towards a more conscientious approach in line with global standards.

I've never, like, people don't really associate memes with copyright issues. It's never been an issue in Korean society. (K, m, 23)

4.1.3 Copyright issues in Japan

Compared to the Chinese and Korean, the Japanese obviously pay more attention to copyright issues. Japan has a well-established copyright framework that aligns with international standards. The Japanese copyright law protects the rights of authors and creators in various fields, including literature, art, music,

and software. The law grants exclusive rights to the creators, allowing them to control the reproduction, distribution, and public performance of their works. In the digital age, the prevalence of technology and online platforms has facilitated a broader understanding of copyright issues. Notably, within a cultural context that prioritizes respect for intellectual property, copyright concerns regarding internet meme usage behavior are pronounced. This cultural awareness leads to cautious meme creation and sharing practices, with individuals preferring original content or materials with clear licensing. Fears of copyright violations may prompt self-censorship, limiting the use of copyrighted images or materials in memes. Legal awareness also plays a role, as users may avoid certain content to prevent legal consequences, such as receiving takedown notices. Unlike in China and Korea which allow fair use without permission under certain circumstances, secondary sharing of copyrighted material is prohibited without the rights holder's consent (Anna Nishino, 2022). When making memes, Chinese and Korean people take pictures from various videos and use them as the basis for their creations, without worrying about copyright issues. But Japanese people rarely do so.

Maybe Japanese people think more copyrights compared to other countries. Because there are there are websites or online sites that have, for example, where people post TV programs or movies, but I think it's in our common, not common image that it's not a good thing to use these...Education. We've been taught that it's not a good thing to use something for free without having...(J, f, 22).

Ah.....Because that person may not prefer to spread his expressions. I just don't know. And so when you don't know, you just avoid the possibility of causing trouble. (J, m, 23)

4.2. Collectivism culture

In this study, we discovered notable distinctions in the utilization of memes among China, Korea, and Japan. These disparities can be attributed to the unique emphasis placed on collectivist cultural values within each society. In Japan, collectivism is predominantly characterized by "peer pressure," where individuals are influenced by their peers' opinions and behaviors. In China, collectivism is manifested through "social cohesion," emphasizing the strong sense of unity and connection within the community. On the other hand, in Korea, collectivism is exemplified by "standardization," highlighting the importance of conforming to established norms and standards. These cultural influences significantly shape the diverse situation in meme usage across these three countries.

4.2.1 Social cohesion in China

In contrast to Japanese peer pressure, Chinese culture places a significant emphasis on social cohesion within groups. Chinese individuals actively seek ways to strengthen the bonds and connections among group members. As expressed by a Chinese male participant, memes serve as a means to showcase his group identity. By utilizing theme-based memes that revolve around idols, anime, games, and more, he experiences a strong sense of belonging and loyalty to his community. These memes become a form of expression that fosters a deeper connection and camaraderie within the group.

I can only send a certain topic-related memes in one kind of cultural community. If you send it elsewhere, no one can understand it, or others don't think it's fun at all. It's like a cultural identity. It's the bond, a kind of meme that is a symbol for one community, and helps to link members within the certain group. (C, m, 24).

In Chinese society, social cohesion plays a pivotal role, emphasizing the significance of unity and harmony among its members (Larsen, 2014). Collectivism is deeply rooted in Chinese culture, fostering

a strong sense of collective identity and belonging. As a result of this social cohesion, various shared cultural products have emerged, serving to maintain harmony within the group. Memes, in particular, have become a prevalent medium for expressing the shared values and beliefs of communities in China. They serve as a powerful tool for showcasing the collective identity and fostering a sense of belonging among individuals. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that memes have gained widespread popularity in China, as they effectively embody and convey the shared cultural sentiments and beliefs of Chinese people.

4.2.2 Standardization in Korea

Standardization holds significant importance in Korean society, reflecting the emphasis placed on conformity and adherence to established norms and practices (JUNG et al., 1998). In Korea, there is a strong cultural value placed on uniformity and consistency, both in personal conduct and societal expectations. Standardization influences various aspects of life, from education and work to social interaction. According to the insights shared by Korean female participants, standardization permeates various aspects of Korean culture, including the category and utilization of memes. Specifically, within the popular messaging platform KakaoTalk, there is a standardized approach to categorizing and using memes.

It seems like Korea has a lot of things that are standardized. Individual diversity isn't emphasized as much as in Japan or China...Even memes are standardized, KakaoTalk emojis. (K, f, 24)

In Korea, the standardization of memes extends to the specific themes and styles that are commonly employed. Users tend to follow established patterns and utilize memes within the predefined categories provided by the platform. This standardization ensures a consistent and familiar experience for users, fostering a sense of uniformity and shared understanding within the community. This emphasis on standardization not only reflects the cultural values of conformity and collective identity in Korea but also contributes to the ease of communication and the maintenance of a cohesive online environment. By adhering to the standardized use of memes within a specific platform, users can effectively convey their thoughts, emotions, and shared experiences in a recognizable and relatable manner.

4.2.3 Peer Pressure in Japan

Currently, image macros are not widely used in Japan, as indicated by the lack of knowledge and interest shown by the male participant in our study. However, when asked about the possibility of using image macros if they were to become commonplace in Japanese society in the future, the participant expressed a positive response. Furthermore, during the discussion about collecting and editing image macros from social media, the Japanese participants conveyed a desire to use them if they were already widespread. However, they expressed reluctance to be the initial source of spreading them, citing a sense of responsibility as the reason behind their hesitation.

When it gets more popular. Yeah. I think I'll have to adjust to that. (J, m,23)

Because you know that it's already widespread. So I don't consider, I don't consider it if it causes problems or not. But if you are at the beginning of the spreading, you will consider more because that makes you feel more responsible for that situation. So.....(J, m,23)

Peer pressure is defined as the tendency of individuals to follow their peers by changing their attitudes, values, or behaviors to conform to those of the influencing group or individual (Kandel &

Lazear, 1992). The strong inclination towards following others greatly influences Japanese behavior and thinking patterns (Pozzoli & Gini, 2012). This helps explain why image macros, which have gained immense popularity in many countries around the globe, are not as prevalent in Japan. The primary reason behind this is the relatively low number of individuals using such content in their communications, and the majority of people in Japanese society will take the same action as others rather than initiating new trends. Therefore, peer pressure hampers the potential for widespread adoption and popularity.

4.3 Interpersonal distance

Interpersonal distance, often referred to in the context of "personal space," relates to the physical space individuals prefer to maintain between themselves and others during various forms of social interaction (Hall, 1968). This concept is a crucial part of non-verbal communication and can vary greatly depending on cultural norms, social situations, personal preferences, and the nature of the relationship between the people involved. According to Hall (1966), interpersonal distances into four distinct zones: 1) Intimate Distance, 2) Personal Distance, 3) Social Distance, 4) Public Distance. Understanding and respecting interpersonal distances can be crucial in social interaction, as invading someone's personal space can lead to discomfort or a negative reaction. However, these distances are not fixed and can vary depending on individual comfort levels, the specific context of the interaction, and cultural differences. For example, what is considered an appropriate interpersonal distance in one culture might be viewed as too close or too distant in another.

According to our interview, Interpersonal space can have a significant impact on how people in different cultures engage with and use internet memes. Memes are a form of digital communication that often relies on shared cultural contexts and unspoken social rules. The way these norms affect meme usage in China, Korea, and Japan can be analyzed as follows:

4.3.1 Interpersonal distance in China

Interpersonal relationships in China exhibit a trend towards greater closeness, with individuals often forming tighter connections with friends, family, and romantic partners. This closeness transcends offline interactions, extending into frequent online engagement, including private chats and group conversations. The flexibility in personal space norms might correlate with a more open and receptive attitude towards the playful and often bold nature of memes. They employ a diverse range of richly expressive memes not only to enhance communication but also for the sheer enjoyment of lighthearted exchanges. As one participant noted, in some group chats, individuals often engage in repetitive sharing of the same memes related to their communities, sometimes repeating them hundreds of times for amusement. Additionally, when interacting with strangers, Chinese internet users leverage memes as an icebreaker and a tool to understand one another rather than texts, displaying a high tolerance for ambiguous memes usage, without concerns about being considered as weird. The act of exchanging memes is embraced as an enjoyable way to engage with others, and those who abstain from this practice might be seen as more solemn or less amicable. Moreover, they extend the use of memes to formal scenarios, including interactions with superiors such as leaders or teachers—a behavior that is deemed inappropriate in the cultural contexts of Japan and Korea.

I added some vtuber fan groups, everyone thought this vtuber was cute, so they cut off some of his memes, very cute, and kept posting them. I will repeat what you post, and then dozens or hundreds of the same meaningless things come down a day. (C, m, 24)

I think there may be, because I obviously feel a lot of pressure in group chats in Japan. If I want to talk in group chats in the United States or China, I just click randomly, and then click and send emoticons randomly, and it is easy to blend in. I'm very serious about Japan's discord. If you suddenly post random things there, people may think you're weird. (C, m, 24)

4.3.2 Interpersonal distance in Korea

Korean culture, which balances respect for hierarchy (as described by Hofstede's Power Distance dimension) with direct interpersonal relationships, may influence meme usage to be more varied. Memes might be used differently across different social strata or age groups, reflecting the balance between respecting social norms and engaging in more direct forms of communication. The concept of *nunchi* – understanding the mood and context – could play a role in determining what types of memes are appropriate in different social settings. Notably, both of the two Korean interviewees mentioned they would avoid using memes, including emojis, with authority figures like professors.

Korean people tend to have relatively close interpersonal distance compared to Japan, especially between friends (Cho, M., 2010), and this cultural norm results in people sharing humorous or annoying memes with their friends more frequently. However, a noteworthy observation from our interviews reveals that individuals don't necessarily use memes less frequently with less-close friends. Instead of sharing funny or annoying memes, they often employ cute memes to lighten the mood of the conversation, doing so with a greater frequency than with close friends. This highlights distinct roles for memes in relationships of different closeness levels.

Yeah, type something really bad. But there are three options. Like saying something really bad or like to make the interaction even funnier. Like, then another meaning, but that's actually funny. Or like, just ignore. (K, m, 23)

Ironically, ..., It seems like I use memes a lot with friends I'm not that close with. ... Something like (shows cute "excited" and "heart" emoticons). (K, f, 24)

4.3.3 Interpersonal distance in Japan

Japanese culture typically values a certain level of formality and reserve in physical interactions, manifesting in a preference for larger personal spaces compared to Chinese and Korean cultures. The considerable interpersonal distances and appreciation for non-intrusive communication in Japanese culture might lead to a more restrained and context-specific use of memes (Moody, 2014). In response, the female Japanese participant mentioned that she would only use internet memes, especially stamps and stickers, during online chats with people who have close relationships. She never uses stamps during severe conversations with people of a higher social status than her.

Maybe inefficient. I don't use stamps when conversing seriously, and you have to focus on the context. (J, f, 22)

Additionally, based on the more considerable interpersonal distance, Japanese internet users may favor memes with precise text meanings, expressing shared social norms, and respecting social boundaries to avoid crossing the line in relationships further causing potential troubles. This aligns with Hofstede's cultural dimension of uncertainty avoidance. It can be defined as the extent to which the culture member feels threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations (Hofstede, 2001). People from high uncertainty avoidance cultures are accustomed to pursuing stability and safety and are concerned about

uncertainty. Conversely, people from low uncertainty avoidance cultures remain open to new things and moderately resist change (Hofstede, 2001). According to a survey, the degree of uncertainty avoidance in Japanese society is extremely high (Dunphy & Shi, 1988). It is reasonable that the increased tendency to be uncertain leads to people's resistance to using ambiguous memes in online chatting to some extent.

In this study, the Japanese participants showed feelings of uncertainty when reacting to some without-text memes. We offered the participants some popular Chinese memes (image macros without text) during the interviews. Both of them reflected that it is hard to recognize the meaning shown in those memes, so it gave them the feeling of uncertainty, and they were not willing to use such types of memes because they wanted to avoid causing misunderstandings and trouble to interlocutors, which might further lower others' opinion of themselves. When asked how they generally respond to this situation, the male participant stated that he tries to avoid this uncertainty by using text to communicate with others. In response to this situation, the female participant offered similar answers: she usually further conversed with interlocutors to determine their meanings.

I'll have a bit more conversation with that. (J, f, 22)

Avoid, avoid uncertainty or when it's uncertain to just avoid uncertainty..... When it's not certain, they just avoid this way. (J, m, 23)

5. Conclusion and future work

With the burgeoning prevalence of memes in East Asia, this study conducted a comparative study of memes usage across China, Korea, and Japan. Applying the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) technique, interviews were conducted with six participants, one male and one female from each country. The findings show that memes have become a widespread phenomenon and play an important role in improving online communication in all three nations but to different extents. Memes are most prevalent in China, which stands out for active user engagement in creating memes. While not as pervasive as in China, Korea demonstrates a considerable use of memes, primarily in the form of stickers and special face-shaped Hangul sequences. In contrast, Japan's familiarity and perception of memes are comparatively limited, particularly in the usage of image macros. Participants in all three countries express positive perceptions of memes, finding them cute and funny, but with occasional ambiguity. Memes primarily serve to enhance online communication, expressing emotions, and fostering a positive conversational atmosphere. Notably, Chinese participants uniquely use memes to establish self-identity and as cultural bonds within communities. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, three related cultural factors have been concluded to explain the differences between these three countries, including copyright issues, the collectivist culture (i.e. social cohesion in China, peer pressure in Japan, and standardization in Korea), and the interpersonal distance.

This qualitative study provides an extensive exploration of the current memes usage phenomenon and a detailed discussion about the potential cultural reasons embedded in East Asia. Nonetheless, the study is subject to several constraints. For one thing, the sample size is rather small and restricted, thereby making it challenging to generalize the findings to broader contexts. For another, the unavailability of an established theoretical framework leads to challenges in contextualizing and interpreting the research outcomes within a more comprehensive theoretical perspective. Future work is needed to address these limitations. To be more explicit, based on the findings of the current exploratory study, the hypothesis

and basis of the questionnaire for the large-sample-based survey in the following stage can be generated, which will also in turn validate and promote the current conclusions, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics underpinning meme culture in East Asia.

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Appendix

A guide for meme usage-based interviews

1) Familiarity

Do you know what a meme is?

Are you familiar with the concept of memes? (㇀ —△)

What kinds of memes do you often use? (stickers, stamps, emoji, kaomoji, etc.)

How many of these memes do you recognize?

Frequency:

Do you often use memes?

Have you ever shared memes?

Where do you get or share memes? (source)

How many times have you shared internet memes?

When will you share memes? (in what situation/ with who / at what time?/ in what part in conversation: in beginning, middle or in the end?)

2) Perception

What's your opinion of the use of memes in Japan?

For what reasons do Japanese people use memes in online chatting?

What's your perception of memes?

What kind of feelings you have when using memes (positive/ negative)

What types of people(teenagers / adults: middle age, elder people) do you think will use memes? What do you think about people who often use memes → (stereotypes)?

3) Function

What is the role of memes? (in online chatting/ in social media: twitter, ins, etc.)

What's you feeling when you share memes?

Are you willing to share memes in online chatting or social media? (why/ why not?)

In what situation/with whom do you think it is appropriate to share memes?

Can you recognize the meaning of some ambiguous memes?

If someone shares these memes to you, how do you feel about it (certain / uncertain)?

Will you reply or not, how will you reply?

4) Cultural reasons

What cultural reasons do you think will affect people's behaviors of using memes in your culture?

What kinds of online conversation can make you feel relaxed?

What differences of using memes you felt when you communicate with people from other culture?