

# Meme Culture and Censorship in Chinese Online Communities: A Case Study of Kangya and Beiguo Bar

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## Introduction

The development of meme culture in the Chinese online community bespeaks a greater cultural phenomenon: resistant, accommodative, and inventive against rigid censorship policies. Memes are a lot more than entertaining artifacts; they are also significant and effective modes of communication with which users negotiate lives in constrained ecologies. The following research investigates how members of the Kangya and Beiguo Bar- an online community centering around esports- make use of memes as tactics in navigating and evading increasing censorship. This is important in understanding how people in online space create implicit forms of expression in maintaining communicative freedom, especially in contexts with high levels of regulatory frameworks.

Such is the interrelation between censorship and digital expression in China. With the enforcement action against "Zu'an Culture" in September 2020 and further regulatory measures by the Cyberspace Administration of China in October 2024, it has reached a new stage. For example, such development has influenced the way in which individuals interact with each other online, especially in gaming and esports communities, where emotive expression and fandom culture are an important part of user interaction. It is a great example due to the richness of its user network and the theme of memes themselves, bringing forward new avenues for users to adapt to

changes in censorship mechanisms.

The paper examines trends in meme generation and community responses with regard to online censorship as ways of grasping the social dynamics that shape how memes are used. Attention shall be paid to the analysis of what methods such users use in order to ideate and then implement various strategies such as homophones, symbols, and allegorical references to get their messages across the lines of content censorship. It further discusses the implications for community identity and coherence of adapting to such challenges while people jointly deal with the challenges of articulating their expressions in an increasingly constrained digital environment.

This paper contributes to the growing research on the use of digital communication, means of evading censorship, and online community dynamics in several ways: providing evidence about how online communities adapt to changed regulations through innovative forms of expression, investigating the double role that memes can have both as a form of entertainment and as a tool of resistance; and finally, how the censorship shapes the language of online communities and therefore their identity. This is also supported in the present study, utilizing observational methods, survey data, and interviews as key methods in order to explore how the changed censorship landscape has modified interaction patterns, the cultural climate, and meme creation.

## Literature Review

Indeed, over the past few years, the scholarship of memes and associated online censorship has drastically enhanced insofar as more and more researchers have

focused their efforts on the sophisticated interaction of regulatory efforts with users' tactics of evasion. The following subjects are discussed in the paper, creating a complex understanding of meme culture in the controlled online space: a study of memes in esports, a discussion of censorship and digital resistance, and scholarship about the evolution of online expression with regard to regulation.

### Memes and Esports Community Culture

Research into the fields of memes and esports commonly theorizes these digital practices through the lens of the cultural logic of networked society. Lan (2021) gives an overview of the culture surrounding esports and the usage of memes, focusing on the video game League of Legends. Through the application of content analysis against network ethnography, Lan provides evidence of how memes have become fundamental forms of communication for esports communities since they express identity in the same way they keep the groups united in a fight against censorship. Memes are made to amuse, yet they carry another meaning- the one of resistance, as another important framing with which complex dynamics, such as those of communities like Kangya and Beiguo Bar, should be understood.

Building on this fact, Phillips and Milner (2017) argue that these are forms of vernacular creativity where users take advantage to create a network of shared meaning and overcome problems created through censorship. Their study indicates that these are not cultural artifacts per se but have become strategic resources for maintaining cohesion within these online communities amidst regulatory concerns. This is particularly apt for engaging with the analytics that allows pointing out how

esports communities actually create referential languages and allusions through which to bypass content restrictions without losing their cultural meaning.

### Censorship and Digital Resistance

Scholarships from others about digital censorship in China have created a good understanding of the evolution of online communication. As Zhao (2018) remarked, censorship systems produce a double bind on people by "the need to balance between humor and political discourse and the need to avoid government detection." It leads to the creative strategy of having recourse to implicit meaning with the help of symbols and visual elements, which is so manifest in the case of both Kangya and Beiguo Bar.

A central role in the study of behavior within online communities. The idea of "cloaking" disruptions, conceptualized in ToxiCloakCN (2023), is important to understand how users work their way around content moderation. It also considered how the detection of offensive language systems in China can be tricked in many ways, including homophone substitution and the usage of emojis. Results in this study are consistent with the approach adopted in gaming communities, for instance, where gamers use these tactics to bypass strict censorship while still communicating effectively.

### Power Dynamics and User Adaptation

The top theories of power relations and resistance also laid a critical foundation for Foucault's (1978) work on the use of theories to explain user behavior in states that are heavily censored. Specifically, resistance and power are explained in the same and explain some repressed actions of online community members who attempt to use

certain strategies to get around content restrictions. However, Wang and Li (2020) further extend this theoretical analysis by claiming that political discourses disguised through popular culture-based allegories are recurrent features of Chinese online communities. By means of cultural references, their study shows how participants skillfully resort to cultural references in order to keep open the channels of communication despite their increasingly tight limits.

The interaction between censorship and user adaptation takes on the form of what Yang's (2019) work describes as a "cat-and-mouse game" between regulators and users. That dynamic gave birth to an evolution in expressive methods: users devise new ways of passing their messages, and censors devise ways of locating those communications. It would be another example of communities like Kangya and Beiguo Bar that are always honing new ways to communicate effectively.

#### Emerging Perspectives on Digital Resistance

Contemporary scholarship increasingly underlines those aspects in which digital communities establish frameworks of common cultural practices for collective resistance strategies. Zhang (2022) argued that meme culture in gaming communities of China works as "soft resistance" by which netizens could reclaim their agency without directly challenging the complex set of censorship mechanisms. That would also explain why such groups are disinclined toward the explicit mode in favor of the implicit mode, even when the matter need not be private.

More recently, the juncture where humor and digital resistance meet has taken on growing interest. Chen (2021) explores how internet users in China employ humor as

a strategy for voicing discontent with plausible deniability. This research shows well the complex ways that users negotiate the need to express themselves in relation to the censorial limits, often by creative puns and cultural references.

### Synthesis and Research Gaps

While the current literature already provides key insights on memes, censorship, and online community dynamics, there is a future need for more research able to discuss how these different components interplay in particular communities. Accordingly, the present study tries to fill this gap by concentrating on the strikingly unique cases of Kangya and Beiguo, Those places where the combination of esports culture with meme usage and, likewise, censorship yields very special patterns of communication and adaptation.

Whereas previous studies have documented various methods through which users circumvent Internet censorship, there has been rather less attention to their evolution due to specific regulatory changes. In this context, the current study contributes to the literature by exploring the changing dynamic between censorship regulations and respective methods of adaptation by users within a specific national setting, China, in light of recent regulatory shifts.

### -Methods

This study investigates how users use memes as a means of adaptation and circumvention of censorship through a mixed-methods approach, integrating digital

ethnography, survey research, and semistructured interviews. This triangulation of methods warranted the thorough consideration of the broader patterns of behavior at the level of the community, as well as the experiences of individual users.

#### --Digital Ethnographic Observation

These observations lasted for two weeks and spanned different days of the week to take into consideration many events occurring within Kangya at Beiguo Bar. Observation in the two selected weeks was to be conducted on two randomly chosen weekdays and all weekend days of each week, with 1.5 hours of observation on each of the selected days. Posts were sorted in chronological order, and the homepage was refreshed every fifteen minutes to make sure all newly posted content was captured.

During observation, special attention was paid to:

- Usage of homophones, symbols, and cultural references
- Patterns in discussing sensitive topics
- Community responses to content removal
- Evolution of communication strategies

Posts were systematically categorized based on their use of different circumvention strategies, with particular focus on how users adapted their expression methods in response to content removal or censorship.

## -- Survey Design and Implementation

A survey was distributed to 200 members across two QQ chat groups established by Kangya and Beiguo Bar administrators - one group created in 2018 and another in 2020. This temporal difference in group creation allowed for comparison between users who joined before and after major censorship policy changes. The survey collected:

- Demographic information
- Community participation patterns
- Attitudes toward censorship mechanisms
- Meme usage habits and motivations
- Perceptions of community changes

The survey achieved a 100% response rate, likely due to the active nature of these chat groups and administrators' support in distribution.

## -- Semi-structured Interviews

Four representative users were selected for in-depth interviews based on their age, length of community membership, and level of participation. The interviewees included:



- A 33-year-old freelancer (User A) who joined in 2013
- A 21-year-old student (User B) who joined in 2018
- A 23-year-old office worker (User C) who joined in 2020
- A 19-year-old student (User D) who joined in 2022

Interviews were conducted via online voice chat in Chinese, allowing participants to express themselves naturally in their primary language. Questions were personalized for each participant's background, yet interview themes were consistent:

- The Evolution of communication methodologies
- Personal experience with censorship
- Changes in community culture
- Motivations for meme usage
- Impact of regulatory changes

#### -- Data Analysis

The interview transcripts and observation notes were analyzed thematically, with a focus on patterns of adaptation to censorship and community reaction. This processing of survey data had a focus on correlations among user demographics, participation patterns, and attitudes to censorship. Following Wästerfors (2018) on the observational research approach, special attention is given to the reflection of users' behavioral patterns in greater landscape social and regulatory dynamics.

This triangulation of findings was further enhanced by the integration of quantitative data from the surveys with qualitative interview narratives, thus making any conclusions on how users modify their communication strategies because of censorship more credible.

## Results/Findings

Based on analysis of the survey data, interviews, and observation, five interrelated themes are developed showing how users accommodate to and sidestep censorship by using memes in the community of Kangya and Beiguo Bar. This helps explain the complex relationship between regulatory pressures and adaptation strategies within the community.

### 1. Evolution of Implicit Expression Methods

The findings show a sophisticated structure of implicit communication that users have developed in response to increased censorship. Quantitative data from the survey showed that 89.5% of respondents use symbols to replace sensitive terms/characters, while 80.5% employ homophones to replace such terms to get around censorship. During the two-week observation period, involving randomly selected weekdays and weekends with 1.5-hour sessions daily, all the above approaches were consistently observed in every posting.

Three basic implicit statement patterns were found:

#### 1.1 Homophone Substitution

The more striking examples that came to my notice were the use of "xiāng sǐ" (want to die) replaced by "xiǎng sī" (missing someone). This substitution is indicative of a good deal of linguistic nuance- the words are approximately rhyming in pronunciation but carry extreme levels of meaning in their emotional context. This anomaly was replicated throughout the progression of the observation periods in messages showing dissatisfaction or disinterestedness in the outcomes from game results.

## 1.2 Symbolic Representation

In threads about criticism of performances from professional players, the "/" mathematical symbol was used consistently in place of "畜" (chù, meaning beast), which is a derogatory way of saying "beast." This observation data features almost all critical discussions about player performances, showing how mathematical symbols have been coopted for use within linguistic expression.

## 1.3 Fixed Player Nicknames

The community developed a rather complicated system of other nicknames for players, serving both as identifiers and a means to get around censorship. To understand these nicknames, one has to have profound knowledge of League of Legends esports culture and community history, thus helping to create an insider network of communications.

Interviewee A, who has been active since 2013, gave some really critical historical insights: "It first required just simple wordplay, while now we have to create more complex ways of talking. These are not just replacements anymore, but have developed into a part of how we converse." This evolution indicates one particular

strategy for adapting against the ever-sophisticated censorship practice.

## 2. The Impact of Regulatory Changes on Community Discussion

The September 2020 crackdown against "Zu'an Culture" became a tipping point for communities expressing themselves. In the survey, 80.5% of respondents believed that sensitive topic discussion had decreased after these changes. However, a more careful look at the observation data and interview responses verifies that this figure shows changes in how the discussion is conducted rather than whether it is conducted or not.

The observation period recorded the following key adaptation strategies:

### 2.1 Game-Themed Metaphors

Among the 37 articles discussing current social phenomena, each of them employed specific encoded references:

"Defense towers" became the constant metaphor for government regulations

"Piercing Strike" was born as a coded expression of protest

Character abilities were repurposed to describe social dynamics

Game mechanics provided one starting point for developing analyses of power

### 2.2 Cross-Media References

The users developed complex systems of transferring discussions between platforms.

For example, interview participant B pointed out how references emerging from the community migrated to other platforms like Douyin and then evolved using platform

affordances, such as using background music in discussing sensitive topics.

### 2.3 Layered Communication Systems

The observation data showed that single posts held multiple layers of meaning, combining game references, community-specific terms, and traditional homophone substitutions. This layering allowed messages to be seen by community members while completely obscuring them from automated content moderation systems.

### 3. The Humor-Censorship Nexus

Multiple-choice answers to the survey amazingly showed how much entertainment relates to bypassing censorship through memes. That 90.5% of users selected "humorous communication" and 87.5% selected "hiding true intentions to avoid censorship" suggests these functions are interrelated, rather than parallel strategies, in earning their place.

Participant D, the 19-year-old interviewee, provided interesting insights into this relationship: "The function of memes is more than just to avoid post deletion. We use very funny memes to carry hostile messages; that helps in identifying real group members." Actually, this message underlines three important functions of humor when trying to escape censorship:

#### 3.1 Protective Camouflage

Humor gives the plausible deniability of not taking certain messages seriously. As observed, discussions regarding matters that are controversial were always framed through game-related jokes and references.

#### 3.2 Community Identification

Therefore, a shared understanding of the humoristic allusions is a threshold to communities. Survey data showed that 71.5% of users explicitly recognized this identity-forming function of memes.

### 3.3 Information Dissemination

Humor provides a framework for spreading information about sensitive topics while maintaining apparent compliance with content restrictions. This was particularly evident in the 37 observed posts discussing current events, where serious commentary was consistently embedded within humorous game references.

## 4. Generational Patterns in Community Adaptation

The survey demographic data revealed distinct patterns in how different age groups approach censorship circumvention:

### 4.1 Younger Users (18-24, 41% of respondents)

Interview participant D (age 19) described a systematic approach to learning community communication methods through "speed-up videos" that explain community memes and references. This group showed greater comfort with complex, multi-layered communication strategies.

### 4.2 Mid-Range Users (25-34, 31.5% of respondents)

Interview participant A (age 33) described experiencing the organic evolution of communication methods, leading to a deeper understanding of their historical context but sometimes less flexibility in adopting new strategies.

### 4.3 Older Users (35+, 12% of respondents)

This group showed stronger attachment to traditional communication methods, as

evidenced by their survey responses and observation data showing preference for simpler homophone substitutions.

## 5. Community Identity Formation Through Shared Practices

The research revealed how censorship adaptation strategies have become fundamental to community identity formation. Survey data showed that 78.5% of users employ specific nicknames or terms to identify themselves as members of particular fan groups, while 71.5% specifically use memes to express group identity.

### 5.1 Identity Markers and Communication

Interview participant B highlighted how specific player nicknames serve dual purposes: "These names aren't just about avoiding censorship – they're how we recognize who really follows the scene. When someone uses certain nicknames, you immediately know their fan allegiance." This observation is supported by survey data showing:

64.5% use memes for emotional expression

45.5% employ them to signal community membership

42% believe censorship has strengthened community cohesion

### 5.2 Evolving Community Culture

Interview participant A provided historical perspective on cultural changes: "The community discussions used to be more direct, with more aggressive content. Now

everything requires reading between the lines." This evolution is reflected in survey responses where:

22.5% noted discussions becoming more implicit

10.5% observed reduced aggressive content

13.5% reported increased creative expression

### 5.3 Shared Knowledge Systems

The observation data revealed how community members develop shared interpretative frameworks. For example, during the two-week observation period, all 37 posts discussing sensitive current events used consistent metaphorical frameworks that required community knowledge to interpret correctly. This shared understanding creates what interview participant C described as an "insider's language."

## 6. Cross-Platform Information Flow

The survey revealed that 96.5% of users had encountered community memes on other platforms, indicating the spread of these communication strategies beyond their original context. This cross-platform adaptation shows sophisticated patterns of information dissemination and cultural preservation.

### 6.1 Platform-Specific Adaptations

Interview participant B described how community references spread to platforms like Douyin, where users developed platform-specific expressions:



Using particular background music to reference sensitive topics

Adapting text-based memes into visual formats

Creating platform-appropriate versions of community references

## 6.2 Information Preservation

The spread across platforms serves as a preservation mechanism, ensuring that even if content is removed from one platform, the community's communication methods and cultural references survive elsewhere. This resilience was evident in how users maintained consistent reference systems across different social media environments.

## 7. Temporal Patterns in Community Engagement

The survey results reflected some key trends about how users have interacted over time with the community:

### 7.1 Usage Patterns

Daily engagement patterns showed:

45% spend less than 1 hour daily

43% spend 1-3 hours daily

9.5% spend 3-5 hours daily

2.5% spend over 5 hours daily

### 7.2 Membership Duration

Temporal Distribution of the Users:

9.5% joined in 2015 or earlier

40.5% joined between 2016-2018

34.5% joined between 2019-2021

15.5% joined in 2022 or later

This distribution does indeed suggest a stable core community regularly renewed through new members, allowing for the transmission of communicative practices across user generations.

## 8. Impact of Regulatory Changes on Expression Methods

It was also clearly established that specific legislation changes brought about patterned changes in communicative behaviors. The law enforcement measures taken in September 2020 against "Zu'an Culture" had the following effects:

### 8.1 Content Adaptation

Key changes were reported as follows:

80.5% reported fewer discussion of sensitive subjects

75% reported restriction in free expression

42% mentioned increased community solidarity

### 8.2 Strategic Responses

Interviewees described the following adaptations:

Elaboration of ever more sophisticated reference systems

Increased use of game-specific terminology

Creation of multilayered meanings in the posts

The combination of visual and textual elements

These findings show the results of how an ever-increasingly complex system of communication has been developing among users for a community with several purposes: avoiding censorship, maintaining group cohesion, and preserving the ability to discuss sensitive topics. New avenues of cultural expression that are protective and meaningful for the members are open when the interaction between the mechanisms of censorship and users' adaptation occurs.

The research shows that censorship has elaborated, rather than reduced, discourses; that it has produced even more resourceful and subtle varieties of communication that have now become part and parcel of community identity and provide continuity with discourses on sensitive themes using expertly encoded languages and cross-references to shared cultural references.

## Conclusion

The investigation demonstrates that the meme culture in the Kangya and Beiguo Bar communities is one of the sophisticated mechanisms utilized in adapting to the dynamically changing censorship policies. The current research, based on the analysis

of user behaviors, survey responses, and interview data, uncovers how users develop and apply complex communication strategies that simultaneously help them avoid content censorship, maintain community ties, and protect their freedom of expression. Equally striking is how the grassroots movement and increasing censorship effort dynamically feed off one another: instead of silencing it, increased censorship precipitated even more ingenious forms of speech, communication, and expression. This is most vividly reflected in the case of suppressed "Zu'an Culture" in 2020, with an 80.5% decline in explicit speech related to sensitive topics. They did not disappear but reappeared in far more differentiated modes of articulation, namely, as metaphors of games and references within the community itself.

It depicts a very important trend in the relationship between humor and bypassing censorship. The significant overlap of those using memes for humorous expression (90.5%) and for bypassing censorship (87.5%) does suggest that fun and disobedience have indeed become inextricably linked within these digital spaces. In this way, the merging of purposes did create, in fact, an outstanding style of communication that was entertaining while protective, enabling users to communicate substantially while at the same time keeping them outside the reach of regulations.

It continues to emerge from the findings that the means of adaptation to censorship have become intrinsic to community identity. In fact, users using certain nicknames and references (78.5%) indicated that such manners of communication serve not only utilitarian purposes but also create shared cultural knowledge, which promotes community bonding. These findings suggest that the regulatory limitations have

inadvertently helped in creating more cohesive online communities with complex systems of shared meanings.

The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of digital communication and censorship along several dimensions. First, they illustrate the ways in which online communities develop collective strategies of resistance, which negotiate free speech with compliance. Secondly, they reveal how censorship might perversely serve to strengthen community bonds through the nurturing of mutually reinforcing schemes of communication. Ultimately, they show how memes could function as complex channels to preserve community public conversation in a highly digitally restrained environment.

Other directions for possible research may be in regard to how such patterns could have been established within other virtual communities or even through cross-cultural reactions with respect to censorship. Longitudinally, these studies might offer wide visions of shifts in the patterns in online expression and behavior related to the implementation and adjustment of Internet censorship rules. Most importantly, comparisons across diverse platforms may further flesh out community-specific communicative practices in adjusting to diverse regulatory ecologies.

What this research finally says is that censorship and online expression are related in a way that produces new ways of social cohesion and cultural creativity rather than an adversary relationship. The complex ways in which users work around regulatory limitations to make sure continued communication takes place show great resilience and adaptability in the face of increased content controls.

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## Appendix: Questionnaires, observation notes, and interviews

### Implicit Modes of Expression:

To avoid post and reply deletions and account suspensions, and to meet the needs of users in Kangya and Beiguo Bar to discuss esports topics across different platforms, users often employ unique communication methods for online communication. I continued using my previous observation strategy but extended the overall observation period. Specifically, I randomly selected two weekdays and all weekends for two weeks, observing and recording for 1.5 hours each day, setting Kangya and Beiguo Bar posts to "by time" display, and refreshing the homepage feed every fifteen minutes. I summarized post content and categorized communication patterns. Here are the common patterns observed:

- Using Homophones or Symbols to Replace Censored Words:\*\* This is the most common mode of expression used in daily communication within this community. It has been employed since the early days of online community censorship when specific keywords were blocked. During the entire observation period, all posts contained such expressions. The most prominent example, which is also widely used on other platforms, is replacing "want to die" (想死, xiǎng sǐ) with "miss someone" (相思, xiāng sī), both pronounced similarly in Chinese but with different meanings. Symbols are also widely used to express meanings. Based on my observation, in posts commenting on esports players, users often refer to underperforming players as

"livestock" (畜, meaning "beast"), but to avoid censorship, they use the mathematical symbol "/" instead. Both have similar pronunciations ("chu"), differing only in tone.

- Fixed Nicknames for Players: Similar to other sports, each player has fans and haters. Each player thus has two types of nicknames, which have become important identifiers within the community. Coupled with the aforementioned use of homophones and symbols, only those who understand League of Legends esports culture and have experience with the community can comprehend the posts using these specific nicknames.

- Using Specific Virtual Characters and Events to Refer to Real-life Figures and Events: Since the Chinese League of Legends servers have more than 75 million registered players, and in the thirteen years since its launch, the game developers have been continuously improving the game's world-building and creating derivative works. With the constant changes in censorship, to express opinions about sensitive figures and events, users employ allegorical references involving virtual characters and plots within the game or from other anime or film works. The most well-known example is using the Hokage (leaders of the Leaf Village) from the anime "Naruto" to refer to Chinese leaders throughout different periods. During the observation, 114 posts used this mode of discussion, with instances where government regulations were referred to as "turrets," and dissatisfaction was expressed using in-game abilities like "Piercing Strike" to metaphorically indicate opposition. These forms of implicit communication



were used in all 37 posts discussing recent violent events. This type of expression is not exclusive to Kangya and Beiguo Bar; it is also extensively used on other social platforms, such as TikTok (Douyin), which, due to its video and graphic content, sees an extended version of this model—using specific background music (BGM) to refer to sensitive figures.

Survey Analysis: To conduct more in-depth research, I designed a survey that was distributed to two QQ chat groups established by the administrators of Kangya and Beiguo Bar in different periods (2018 and 2020). A total of 200 survey questionnaires were sent out (100 to each group). Below are the survey contents and related data. I plan to combine these data with the following interviews to compare the communication methods and cultural atmosphere of Kangya and Beiguo Bar at different times to explore how evolving online censorship has shaped and influenced the development of esports memes and communication within the community.

Survey: Kangya and Beiguo Bar Users' Views on Memes and Censorship Mechanisms

Thank you for participating in this survey. Your answers will help us better understand meme culture in Kangya and Beiguo Bar and how users respond to censorship. This survey is completely anonymous, and all information is for academic research only.

1. Your age:

- Under 18: 15.5%
- 18-24: 41%
- 25-34: 31.5%
- 35-44: 9%
- Over 45: 3%

2. Your gender:

- Male: 97.5%
- Female: 2.5%

3. Your occupation:

- Student: 68%
- Freelancer: 7.5%
- Office worker: 23%
- Other: 1.5%

4. How much time do you spend on Kangya and Beiguo Bar on average each day?

- Less than 1 hour: 45%
- 1-3 hours: 43%
- 3-5 hours: 9.5%
- More than 5 hours: 2.5%

5. When did you start using Kangya and Beiguo Bar?

- 2015 or earlier: 9.5%
- 2016-2018: 40.5%
- 2019-2021: 34.5%
- 2022 and later: 15.5%

6. What content do you discuss most in Kangya and Beiguo Bar? (Select multiple)

- Esports matches: 92.5%
- Professional players and teams: 90%
- Game-related memes: 77.5%
- Community culture and daily topics: 68%
- Other: 39.5%

7. What methods do you usually use to avoid censorship while using Kangya and Beiguo Bar? (Select multiple)

- Using homophones: 80.5%
- Using symbols to replace sensitive words: 89.5%
- Using specific virtual characters or events to refer to real-life figures: 45%
- No circumvention method: 1.5%
- Other: 29.5%

8. How effective do you think these circumvention strategies are? (Scale 1-5, 1 means not effective at all, 5 means very effective)

- 1: 9.5%
- 2: 11%
- 3: 45.5%
- 4: 23.5%
- 5: 10.5%

9. Since the introduction of new government regulations on online language, how has the community's discussion atmosphere changed? (Select multiple)

- Discussions have become more implicit: 22.5%
- Reduction in aggressive content: 10.5%
- Fewer discussions on sensitive topics: 80.5%
- More creative content: 13.5%
- No significant change: 5.5%

10. Have these changes affected your participation and expression?

- Yes: 89.5%
- No: 10.5%
- If yes, please specify:

11. Do you use specific nicknames or titles in the community to indicate membership

in a particular fan group?

- Yes: 78.5%
- No: 21.5%
- If yes, have these nicknames helped you communicate better with other users?

Please elaborate:

12. What is the main purpose of using memes in the community? (Select multiple)

- Humorous communication: 90.5%
- Hiding true intentions to avoid censorship: 87.5%
- Identity expression: 71.5%
- Expressing emotions: 64.5%
- Other: 28.5%

13. \*\*In what circumstances do you choose to use memes instead of direct expressions? (Select multiple)\*\*

- When the content might touch on sensitive words and risk censorship: 67.5%
- When wanting to convey ideas humorously: 80.5%
- When wanting to avoid direct conflict with others: 13.5%
- When wanting to indicate identity within a group: 45.5%
- When finding memes more interesting or resonant than direct expressions: 88.5%
- Other (please specify): 35%

14. What is your attitude towards the censorship mechanisms in Kangya and Beiguo Bar? (Scale 1-5, 1 means very dissatisfied, 5 means very satisfied)

- 1: 55.5%
- 2: 22.5%
- 3: 10.5%
- 4: 11%
- 5: 0.5%

15. What do you think is the impact of censorship on community culture? (Select multiple)

- Reduced negative and aggressive content: 34%
- Limited freedom of expression: 75%
- Encouraged creative expression: 10.5%
- Strengthened cohesion within the community: 42%
- Other: 18%

16. Have you seen memes originating from Kangya and Beiguo Bar on other social platforms?

- Yes: 96.5%
- No: 3.5%

- If yes, on which platforms have you seen these memes? Are they expressed in the same way as on the original platform? Please elaborate:

To better understand the user groups, additional explanatory responses are needed for several of the above questions. After collecting all survey results, I selected representative users from different age groups and durations of use. Based on their questionnaire options, I conducted further interviews via online voice chat to better understand different user groups' communication preferences and their views on community culture. Four people were selected for interviews, and their specific details are as follows:

A: 33 years old, started using Kangya and Beiguo Bar in 2013, freelancer, spends more than 3 hours per day on Kangya and Beiguo Bar.

B: 21 years old, started using Kangya and Beiguo Bar in 2018, student, spends about 2 hours per day on Kangya and Beiguo Bar.

C: 23 years old, started using Kangya and Beiguo Bar in 2020, office worker, spends about 40 minutes per day on Kangya and Beiguo Bar.

D: 19 years old, started using Kangya and Beiguo Bar in 2022, student, spends about 1 hour per day on Kangya and Beiguo Bar.

#### Interview questions and answers

A

As an early user of Kangya and Beiguo Bar, what is the biggest change in the community compared to its early days?

Answer: Fewer discussion topics, reduced aggression, and fewer new users.

As a long-term active user, which memes and discussions do you think are time-specific, and which are enduring?

Answer: Few topics are enduring. Popular topics are generally refreshed with major tournaments, except for iconic matches or events like RNG losing to G2 during S8.

How do you interact with other veteran users? Are these interactions different from those with new users?

Answer: Many new users are drawn in by content about the forum from other platforms, so they don't understand many memes. They often send emojis and imitate some interaction styles, while veteran users are noticeably different. It's easy to distinguish between new and old users based on how they communicate.

Since you spend more than 3 hours a day on the forum, how has it impacted your life?

Answer: No significant changes. I just see it as a way to pass the time and entertain myself.

How have you adapted your expression after multiple adjustments to censorship policies?

Answer: I use homophones or emojis to replace censored words, though this method is becoming less effective.



As a freelancer, does your professional identity influence your participation and discussions?

Answer: Not really. In the past, I might have referenced real life in arguments, but now such disputes are rare.

Have you ever been an opinion leader in the community? If so, what responsibilities or challenges did that bring?

Answer: No. Kangya and Beiguo Bar has never had real opinion leaders, except for the official moderators. In the past, moderator Zhang Aiyu occasionally set the tone, but now he only posts official scoring and announcements during major tournaments.

B

As a student, has the content on Kangya and Beiguo Bar influenced your daily life, like your studies or hobbies?

Answer: I started following it in high school, but due to studies and exams, I only got active in college. During COVID-19 and the peak popularity of League of Legends, I used forum content to argue in games and share social phenomena for discussion.

You started using the forum in 2018. How does the atmosphere compare to now, and what keeps you engaged?

Answer: Back then, it was highly aggressive, with frequent personal attacks, which

partly drew me in. Now, the aggression has dropped, and the range of topics has narrowed.

Do you bring popular memes or topics into your social circles? How do your friends react?

Answer: Many of my college friends also play League of Legends and watch tournaments, so we often discuss what we see. They treat it as entertainment.

Are censorship circumvention methods commonly used in your student circles?

Answer: Yes, some content simply can't be posted without modifications. The censorship is excessive.

How do you balance engaging in sensitive discussions while avoiding censorship risks?

Answer: People don't worry much. Such topics are quickly deleted, and discussions become more implicit. I use fictional characters and stories to reference sensitive topics instead of mentioning them directly.

How does your identity on the forum (e.g., a fan of a team or meme creator) influence your real-life interactions?

Answer: As an EDG fan, I've met more like-minded peers through offline viewing events. Beyond that, I haven't noticed much impact.

What's your favorite meme in the community? What cultural phenomenon does it reflect?

Answer: "Run" (meaning to study or work abroad). It reflects the difficulty recent college graduates face finding jobs, leading many to seek alternative lifestyles.

C

With limited time, how do you decide which discussions to join?

Answer: I focus on my favorite players or teams, check their performance, and look at the day's trending posts.

After starting work, has your participation decreased? Is it due to lifestyle changes or reduced community appeal?

Answer: Both. Work is the main reason, but the declining popularity of League of Legends tournaments and stricter moderation also reduce the appeal.

Does the forum content impact your real life after starting work?

Answer: Not at all.

As a newer user, do you feel the need to adapt to specific language or culture in the community?

Answer: Not really. Spending more time on the forum naturally reveals

communication norms. There's no need to deliberately learn, as that defeats the purpose of entertainment.

What's your view on interactions between veteran and new users? Do you sense an "insider vs. outsider" culture?

Answer: Yes, new and old users are easy to distinguish.

Does your working identity influence how you discuss certain topics, especially regarding work-life balance?

Answer: It might make me more empathetic when discussing work-related stress.

Do you apply forum memes or censorship circumvention strategies in communication with colleagues or friends?

Answer: No. Such strategies are only necessary under censorship. Personal communication doesn't have such restrictions.

D

As a new user, did you face challenges understanding memes or integrating into the community? How did you overcome them?

Answer: Initially, yes. Some memes were confusing, but watching "quick-start videos" summarizing and explaining these memes helped.

How did you discover the forum in 2022, and what made you stay?

Answer: I saw related topics on Bilibili and TikTok. It was interesting, so I stayed.

Do you feel veteran users have “inside jokes” that are hard to understand?

Answer: Yes. New jokes that emerge in real time can be even harder to understand than old ones.

As a new user, does censorship affect your participation? Does it deter your willingness to engage?

Answer: Although I joined later, I noticed increasingly strict moderation. Spending time editing replies only to have them rejected is discouraging.

Do you use memes for humor, censorship circumvention, or identity-building? How does this shape your interactions?

Answer: All three. Memes avoid deletion, convey aggressive remarks humorously, and signal my identity as a forum member.

With limited participation time, how do you prioritize topics? What appeals to you about them?

Answer: I focus on favorite teams or players, trending discussions, and social hot topics. The forum has more people with shared interests.

Do forum memes influence your real-life language? For example, do you use them in conversations with classmates or friends?

Answer: I use them in online chats but find it too awkward to use them in real-life conversations.