

Identity Seeking Behind Internet Humor: A Study on the Social Psychological Motivations of Jiangsu Netizens Participating in the “Scattered Jiangsu” Meme Discourse

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How to cite this paper: Lv, W. (2025). Identity Seeking Behind Internet Humor: A Study on the Social Psychological Motivations of Jiangsu Netizens Participating in the “Scattered Jiangsu” Meme Discourse. *Social Sciences and Humanities*, 2(1), 44-51. ISSN Print: 3104-4328; ISSN Online: 3104-4336.

<https://doi.org/10.63313/SSH.9034>

Published: 2025-10-17

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Abstract

This study takes the popular online expression “Scattered Jiangsu” as its research object, examining it through an interdisciplinary lens that integrates social psychology and internet culture studies. By employing Social Identity Theory, Social Comparison Theory, Individualization Theory, Meme Transmission Theory, and Social Representation Theory, this paper explores the psychological motivations underlying Jiangsu netizens’ engagement in the dissemination and recreation of this meme. The analysis reveals that while the meme appears to highlight internal regional fragmentation and disparities within Jiangsu Province, it essentially reflects a deeper reconstruction of identity, group distinctiveness, and cultural belonging among Jiangsu internet users in the digital environment.

Keywords

Scattered Jiangsu; Identity; Internet meme; Social psychology; Online culture

1. Introduction

In the internet era, the reproduction of regional identities within online culture has emerged as a significant social phenomenon. With the rapid development of social media platforms such as Weibo and TikTok, “Scattered Jiangsu” has become one of the most representative regional memes in recent years. The term humorously exposes the economic, cultural, and linguistic differences within Jiangsu Province, resonating strongly among local netizens and sparking nationwide discussion.

This study argues that “Scattered Jiangsu” functions not merely as an entertaining regional label but as a complex social-psychological phenomenon. It embodies individuals’ awareness of multiple identities, self-ironic engagement with internal differences, and renewed expressions of “Who am I?” within the networked public

sphere. Adopting a psychological perspective, this paper seeks to uncover the underlying identity-seeking impulses and emotional dynamics that drive participation in this meme discourse.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Internet Memes and Identity Construction

The concept of the meme was first proposed by Dawkins to explain the replication mechanism in cultural transmission analogous to genetic inheritance. He argued that memes, as the smallest units of cultural information, are replicated and evolve in human society through imitation and recreation. Entering the digital media era, Shifman further developed meme theory, defining internet memes as digital units of cultural expression characterized by variability, replicability, and participatory potential. Through user-driven remixing, parody, and recontextualization, internet memes construct shared cultural contexts and facilitate collective identity formation.

Scholars such as Milner and Gal, from the perspectives of media culture and identity politics, regard memes not merely as entertaining texts but as a form of identity practice. Individuals, by participating in the creation, circulation, and reinterpretation of memes, make their social identities visible and negotiable. Consequently, internet memes serve as significant cultural mechanisms for collective self-narration and differentiated expression. In the case of region-based memes such as “Scattered Jiangsu”, meme dissemination simultaneously carries the functions of regional symbolism, social comparison, and the reproduction of group emotions.

2.2. Social Identity and Regional Belonging

Social Identity Theory, proposed by Tajfel and Turner, emphasizes that individuals define themselves through group membership, thereby obtaining a sense of belonging and value within the social structure. Individuals not only pursue a positive self-concept but also tend to highlight distinctions between “us” and “them” through social comparison, maintaining a favorable group self-evaluation. Self-Categorization Theory further argues that individuals dynamically switch between different levels of social identity in response to contextual cues—an especially prominent phenomenon in online environments.

Regional identity, as a key component of social identity, embodies both emotional attachment to a geographical space and the social construction of cultural symbolism. In the networked context, expressions of regional identity are often highly symbolic and performative. Individuals engage in acts of identification, critique, and reconstruction of regional belonging through digital language and meme culture. Thus, the “Scattered Jiangsu” meme functions as an important medium through which Jiangsu netizens negotiate self-positioning and collective expression amid the tension between diversity and unity.

2.3. Online Humor and Psychological Regulation

Humor serves as an emotional regulation mechanism in social interaction. Freud's relief theory of humor posits that humor provides a channel for releasing psychological tension, helping individuals resolve latent conflicts and anxiety. Contemporary psychological research further reveals humor's role as a social lubricant that enhances interpersonal closeness, mitigates identity conflicts, and strengthens collective emotional cohesion.

Within online cultural contexts, humor functions not only as a mode of expression but also as a social strategy. Through irony and self-deprecation, internet users subtly achieve self-defense and reinforce group belonging. In the "Scattered Jiangsu" meme, self-mockery alleviates tension arising from intraprovincial differences while simultaneously generating a sense of shared identity—"we are different, yet still belong to Jiangsu." This self-deprecating humor represents a dual mechanism of emotional release and identity negotiation within network culture.

2.4. Current State of Domestic Research

Chinese scholars' research on "Scattered Jiangsu" and similar regional memes has primarily adopted communication and cultural studies perspectives. As an internet catchphrase, "Scattered Jiangsu" embodies regional culture's self-representation and symbolic dissemination, reflecting netizens' active participation in the reconstruction of discursive power. Some scholars, drawing from sociocultural analysis, have explored the meme's popularity mechanisms, suggesting that its spread is rooted in the humorous portrayal of regional economic disparities and dialectal diversity.

However, most existing studies focus on dissemination patterns, discursive imagery, and cultural identity, with limited exploration of the underlying social psychological motivations. In particular, research combining social identity theory and the psychology of online humor remains scarce. Few studies have investigated how netizens achieve identity recognition, emotional affiliation, and reconciliation of internal differences through participation in "Scattered Jiangsu." Moreover, empirical analyses treating internet memes as collective psychological phenomena are still lacking. Building upon previous scholarship, this study introduces a social psychological framework to explore the generative logic and affective mechanisms of the "Scattered Jiangsu" meme from the dual dimensions of identity construction and psychological motivation.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study employs five major theoretical perspectives—Social Identity Theory, Social Comparison Theory, Individualization Theory, Meme Transmission Theory, and Social Representation Theory—to analyze the "Scattered Jiangsu" meme from an interdisciplinary perspective that bridges social psychology and digital culture. These frameworks collectively illuminate the underlying logic of identity construction and

the psychological mechanisms embedded within this internet phenomenon.

3.1. Social Identity Theory: The Psychological Basis of Regional Belonging and Hierarchical Identification

Social Identity Theory posits that an individual's self-concept derives not only from personal attributes but also from membership in social groups. People define themselves through the questions "Who am I?" and "Who are we?", gaining self-esteem and meaning from group affiliation. Within multilayered social structures, individuals activate different levels of identity depending on situational cues.

In the "Scattered Jiangsu" phenomenon, netizens in Jiangsu often emphasize their city-level or prefecture-level identity rather than a unified "Jiangsu" identity. This de-holistic pattern of identification reflects the situational activation of social identities: when internal provincial differences are accentuated, individuals tend to identify more strongly with smaller, experience-proximal groups to gain a sense of tangible belonging and differentiated self-esteem.

3.2. Social Comparison Theory: The Psychological Dynamics of Internal Difference and Superiority

Social Comparison Theory suggests that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing with others, especially in contexts lacking objective standards. In regional discourse, disparities in economic development, educational resources, and cultural prestige among cities often become salient dimensions of comparison.

In online discussions surrounding "Scattered Jiangsu", cities such as Nanjing, Suzhou, Wuxi, and Xuzhou are frequently positioned within frameworks of north-south contrast and strength disparity. Netizens use humor and irony to express intercity competitiveness and relative superiority. For instance, residents of southern Jiangsu may humorously highlight their economic advantages while those from northern Jiangsu employ self-deprecation or irony to achieve emotional balance and psychological catharsis. The intertwining of upward comparison and reverse humor thus reflects the complex interplay of emotion and identity negotiation within the process of social comparison.

3.3. Individualization Theory: Self-Expression and De-Homogenization in Networked Contexts

Individualization Theory contends that in modern societies, individuals increasingly detach from traditional social structures, pursuing distinctive self-narratives and life trajectories. The digital environment amplifies this trend, allowing individuals to express differentiated identities in lighthearted, ironic, and fragmented ways.

The term "scattered" in "Scattered Jiangsu" epitomizes an identity strategy within this individualized context. Through humor, netizens both acknowledge internal disunity and transform it into a marker of individuality and regional distinctiveness. "Scattered" ceases to be a negative label and instead becomes a symbol of expressive

freedom and resistance to uniformity. Through online remixing, secondary creation, and performative reinterpretation, Jiangsu netizens engage in the collective cultural narrative with individualized agency, thereby redefining themselves within the digital community.

3.4. Meme Transmission Theory: Cultural Replication and Participatory Mechanisms

Meme Transmission Theory conceptualizes cultural dissemination as a process of information replication and variation. As units of digital culture, internet memes spread virally through users' acts of remixing, recontextualization, and creative reproduction. Shifman identifies three core mechanisms underlying meme diffusion: spreadability, remixability, and participatory potential.

As a prototypical regional meme, "Scattered Jiangsu" exemplifies these mechanisms. Netizens continuously recreate the meme in multimodal forms—images, jokes, short videos, and dialectal references—thereby generating new meanings across different platforms and discursive contexts. Each act of recreation constitutes a form of social participation and an assertion of identity, transforming meme transmission into a process of collective engagement and symbolic self-definition.

3.5. Social Representation Theory: The Dynamic Formation of Public Cognition and Symbolic Construction

Social Representation Theory emphasizes that individuals, through processes of communication, dissemination, and symbolization, collectively construct shared cognitive frameworks for understanding abstract social phenomena. Social representations function not merely as systems of knowledge but as mechanisms of social meaning production, shaping how groups perceive and reconstruct both themselves and others.

Throughout the dissemination of "Scattered Jiangsu", netizens repeatedly employ, parody, and reinterpret the term, thereby co-constructing a collective cognitive schema of what "Jiangsu" signifies. Complex and diverse economic and cultural disparities are condensed into the symbolic representation of "scattered", which conveys humor while projecting public awareness of internal imbalance. As circulation deepens, this representation undergoes continual reinterpretation, evolving into a shared social understanding characterized by "fragmented yet cohesive" identity and self-deprecating solidarity. Social Representation Theory thus reveals the transformation of "Scattered Jiangsu" from online discourse to social cognition—demonstrating how individual expressions, through collective transmission, crystallize into shared public representations.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Multiple Identities and Hierarchical Nesting

Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory posit that individuals possess multiple, hierarchically nested social identities—such as being Chinese, Jiangsu residents, Nanjing residents, Suzhou residents, or Xuzhou residents. The essence of the “Scattered Jiangsu” phenomenon lies in the fact that, for residents within Jiangsu Province, sub-provincial identities (e.g., at the prefectural or municipal level) are psychologically more salient and emotionally stronger than provincial-level identity. This dynamic manifests in two ways. First, city-level identities are more concrete and experiential. Cities such as Suzhou, Nanjing, Wuxi, and Xuzhou possess distinctive dialects, deep historical roots, unique cultural practices, and relative economic independence. These localized traits are directly perceived and lived, thus forming a core component of personal self-definition.

Second, the provincial identity tends to be abstract and ambiguous. Jiangsu, as an administrative concept, contains sharp internal disparities among the southern, central, and northern regions in terms of economy, dialect, and culture. The label “Jiangsu person” does not convey as much specificity or emotional resonance as “Suzhou person” or “Nanjing person.” Thus, the provincial identity functions psychologically more as a container encompassing several smaller, more meaningful sub-identities.

4.2. Intra-Group Differentiation and the Need for Superiority

Jiangsu’s cities are economically strong and relatively balanced, giving rise to multiple powerful regional centers. Residents of these cities identify deeply with their own city’s economic achievements, cultural heritage, and lifestyle, fostering strong local pride. This pride encourages the emphasis on local distinctiveness over a unified “Jiangsu” identity.

Because the cities’ development levels are comparable, implicit comparisons and differentiations naturally emerge. Emphasizing “I am from Suzhou” rather than “I am from Jiangsu” reinforces the unique value and perceived superiority of the smaller in-group, satisfying individuals’ needs for distinctiveness and positive social identity.

Furthermore, the term “scattered” implies that each city’s residents consider their locality sufficiently capable and independent to represent itself, without requiring validation under the unified provincial label of “Jiangsu.”

4.3. Resistance to “Grand Unity” Labels and Individualized Expression

In a highly homogenized social environment, individuals often resist being “represented” or “averaged out.” The “Scattered Jiangsu” phenomenon can thus be interpreted as a mild form of psychological resistance against an imposed, unified provincial label—an act of individualized expression.

By highlighting their city-specific identities, Jiangsu residents implicitly declare: “Do not reduce us to a single term ‘Jiangsu’; we are diverse and distinct, and these dif-

ferences matter.” This reflects a psychological desire for individuality and recognition of local uniqueness.

Hence, “Scattered Jiangsu” operates as a gentle resistance to macro-level labeling. Its humor conveys a refusal to be homogenized, mirroring broader social trends of individualization and de-homogenized cultural consciousness in contemporary digital life.

4.4. Meme Circulation and Emotional Resonance

The popularity of “Scattered Jiangsu” as an online meme encapsulates several intertwined psychological dynamics:

- **Self-deprecating Humor:** Jiangsu netizens’ voluntary acceptance and dissemination of the meme represent a form of high-context self-deprecation. By humorously exaggerating internal disunity, they generate comedic tension. This self-irony does not signify genuine fragmentation; rather, it provides a safe and humorous way to express pride in local identity while acknowledging internal differences.
- **Intra-group Resonance and Belonging:** When netizens across Jiangsu engage with the meme collectively, they share an “inside joke.” Although the meme highlights “scatteredness,” the collective act of participating in it paradoxically strengthens a sense of belonging to a broader identity—“those who get the joke are Jiangsu people.” This creates a paradoxical effect of unity through disunity.
- **External Display of Distinctiveness:** The meme also serves as an external performance of Jiangsu’s cultural diversity, allowing residents to showcase their region’s richness and uniqueness. This fulfills a psychological need to present their collective distinctiveness to a wider audience.
- **Deconstructing Authority and Flattening Hierarchies:** Internet memes often carry the function of deconstructing seriousness and authority. “Scattered Jiangsu” humorously dismantles the hierarchical gravitas of the provincial administrative structure, flattening it into thirteen or more lively, personified localities. This process of symbolic deconstruction offers both entertainment and psychological release.

4.5. Cognitive Schemata and the Formation of Social Representations

The circulation of “Scattered Jiangsu” has constructed and reinforced a distinct cognitive schema and social representation of Jiangsu: rather than being a cohesive whole, it is perceived as a loose alliance of economically robust, culturally distinctive, and mutually independent cities.

Once formed, such a representation influences public perception and behavioral expectations. For instance, when different cities within Jiangsu act swiftly and independently in response to emergencies or natural disasters, observers instinctively

associate this behavior with the notion of “Yes, Jiangsu truly is scattered.”

This shared schema exemplifies how repeated meme circulation transforms complex socio-economic realities into simplified symbolic cognition—where humor becomes both a vehicle of social meaning and a mechanism of collective psychological projection.

5. Conclusion

The phenomenon of “Scattered Jiangsu” is far more than a mere expression of online humor; it profoundly reflects the resilience of local identity, the growing need for individualized expression, and the pluralistic manifestation of collective pride in the context of China’s rapid urbanization and social transformation. Moreover, it illustrates how network culture provides a humorous and accessible medium through which complex social-psychological dynamics can be articulated and disseminated. Fundamentally, this phenomenon reveals a distinctive psychological mechanism whereby individuals maintain a sense of higher-level collective belonging through self-deprecating humor grounded in strong sub-regional identification.

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