

A Study on the Communication Mechanism of Brand Homophonic Marketing from the Perspective of Meme Theory — Taking the Yili “Year of the Horse Seeks Ma Yili” Event as an Example

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Abstract

In digital marketing, homophonic advertising keeps going viral because it is easy to copy, easy to remember, and easy to share. During the 2026 Spring Festival, Yili's “Year of the Horse Seeks Ma Yili” campaign showed us a complete story: a netizen's casual idea turned into a brand campaign, which then exploded across the internet. This makes it a compelling case for understanding homophonic marketing. Using meme theory, this paper looks closely at how this particular meme was born and how it spread. The analysis shows that this is a phenotype meme, one that plays with the sound similarity between “Ma Yili” and the Chinese word for “missing you” to create layers of meaning. Its power comes partly from a clever pun, but also from the emotions it stirred at three different points in the story. The meme traveled along a clear path: a user created it, the brand caught it and amplified it bigger, it went viral on social media, and all that attention eventually flowed back to the brand. Most interestingly, the brand was not the one telling the story first. Instead, Yili listened, joined in, and helped spread a story that its customers started. This shows a real shift from old-school marketing to genuine co-creation.

Keywords

meme theory, homophonic marketing, brand communication, Yili, Ma Yili

1. Introduction

In contemporary digital marketing, it is common to observe that when a brand incorporates an ingenious pun into its advertising, the ad tends to achieve widespread online dissemination rapidly. From the “Moutai Latte” craze to witty wordplay in everyday posts, puns just seem to work. They stick in our heads and make us want to share them. The Yili “Year of the Horse Seeks Ma Yili” campaign from the 2026 Spring Festival is a great example of this, but with a twist. It all started with a netizen's offhand comment: “Hey, it's the Year of the Horse, why doesn't Yili get Ma Yili to be their spokesperson?” It was a apt pun, and people loved it. The subsequent response from Yili is worthy of in-depth analysis. Yili didn't just ignore it or post a formal statement. Instead, they played along. Within just three days, they released a short suspense film titled Looking

for Ma Yili. Not long after, Ma Yili officially became their spokesperson, and the slogan “Year of the Horse Missing You Pure Milk” was everywhere. It was a clear illustration of an idea traveling from a random user, to a brand, and then to millions of people.

For years, scholars have used meme theory to explain how ideas spread through culture. Richard Dawkins first gave us this idea in 1976 [1]. A meme is like a cultural gene; it survives by being imitated and shared, and language is one of its best vehicles. Zhang Junyi has argued that homophonic ads work so well precisely because they act like successful memes, moving through all the classic stages of being noticed, remembered, expressed, and passed on [2]. However, most of the existing research looks at ads where the brand comes up with the idea. There is less work on cases like Yili's, where the meme starts with the public. This new dynamic raises interesting questions about how the meme changes as it goes from a fan's comment to a national campaign, and about how the brand's role itself is being redefined.

With this in mind, this paper sets out to answer three main questions. First, how exactly was the “Ma Yili” meme created? What is going on with the language, and why did it strike such an emotional chord? Second, what path did this idea take to go from a single comment to a viral sensation? And third, how is the brand's role different in a scenario like this, where the conversation was started by the consumer, not the company?

To answer these questions, this paper will use a case study approach, with meme theory as the guiding framework. The goal is to both add a new layer to how we apply meme theory in the digital world and to offer some practical insights for brands hoping to tap into the creativity of their own customers.

2. Theoretical Foundation

2.1 Overview of Meme Theory

The term “meme” comes from Richard Dawkins's classic book, *The Selfish Gene*. He was looking for a way to explain how cultural information—tunes, ideas, catchphrases—spreads and evolves, and he saw a parallel with biological genes [1]. Just as genes replicate and compete, so do memes. Zhang Junyi briefly defined memes as cultural units that can be replicated, and pointed out that language is one of the main carriers for their dissemination [2]. It can be a single word, a phrase, or even a whole story structure.

For a meme to succeed, it has to go through a life cycle. Heylighen broke this down into four stages: assimilation, retention, expression, and transmission, and also proposed four corresponding selection criteria—salience, memorability, expressibility, and transmissibility—that determine whether a meme can pass through each stage [3]. First, assimilation: a potential new host has to notice the meme, understand it, and accept it. Then comes retention: it has to stick in that person's memory. After that is expression: the host needs to share it with others, whether by saying it, writing it, or acting it out. Finally, there is transmission: the expressed idea needs a stable way to reach even more people, completing the loop [3].

He Ziran and Chen Xinren later made a helpful distinction between two kinds of linguistic memes [4]. There are genotype memes, where the core message stays the same but it might be dressed up in different words. And there are phenotype memes, where the structure or sound pattern stays the same, but the meaning is changed. Ingenious puns are typical examples of phenotype memes.

2.2 The FIT Between Homophonic Advertising and Memes

The reason why puns can serve as effective memes lies in the following aspects: Zhang Junyi offers a clear reason: they grab our attention by playing with language we already know [2]. They tweak a familiar phrase just enough to make it new and surprising. Puns are highly imitable, as their replication only requires simple word substitution; they are memorable due to their rhythmic and catchy characteristics; and they are prone to variation, as the public can create derivative versions based on the original pun structure. All of these traits make the pun a natural phenotype meme. All of these traits make the pun a natural phenotype meme.

3. Case Review: The Story of Yili's "Year of the Horse Seeks Ma Yili"

3.1 A Fan's Creative Input

In the lead-up to the 2026 Spring Festival, Yili, like many brands, was in the thick of its Chinese New Year marketing. Someone on social media made a simple but brilliant suggestion in the comments: "It's the Year of the Horse, you should get Ma Yili to be your spokesperson!" The connection was instant. Her name sounded like the brand, and it fit the zodiac year. Crucially, the spark for this campaign came from an everyday person rather than a marketing department. This origin reflects the user-driven nature of digital meme culture, where content is no longer solely produced by brands but often emerges from the creative participation of consumers [5].

3.2 Yili Listens and Joins the Conversation

Rather than ignoring the comment, Yili adopted a humanized communication strategy: its social media team responded in a playful tone, such as "We hear you! We are looking for her...", thereby creating a sense of suspense among the public. Then, they released a short film called *Looking for Ma Yili* in under 72 hours, designed to get people talking. This rapid response aligned with Heylighen's criterion of salience—by reacting quickly and creatively, Yili ensured the meme captured and held the public's attention, successfully navigating the assimilation stage [3]. From a brand strategy perspective, this demonstrates the importance of "catching the meme"—joining a conversation that is already happening rather than attempting to start one from scratch [6].

3.3 The Official Announcement

The short film did its job, and soon after, Ma Yili was officially announced as the new face of the brand. The slogan, which translates roughly to "Year of the Horse Missing You Pure Milk," made the pun official. The online reaction was significant. It wasn't just excitement about the ad; people felt a sense of pride and joy. Comments reflected a feeling of "they actually listened to us!" and "this is so clever." This turning point illustrated how the meme passed through the expression stage—the brand transformed the netizen's original idea into a polished, official narrative, which in turn prompted widespread user expression and sharing [3].

3.4 Sustained Participation

The official announcement wasn't the end; it was just the beginning of a new wave of content. People started making their own memes, videos, and jokes using the new slogan. The idea kept evolving in the hands of the public. At the same time, Yili rolled out the new "Missing You" milk packaging in stores, connecting the online fun with the actual product on the shelf. This closed the loop between digital buzz and real-world sales. The transmission stage was thus completed as the meme found a stable pathway from online communities to physical stores, while its strong association with the brand ensured that the fun did not wander off but instead reinforced brand identity [7].

4. The Formation Mechanism of Homophonic Memes in Brand Marketing

4.1 The Sound That Started It All

The engine of this entire campaign was a simple soundalike. The Chinese characters for Ma Yili's name and for "Yili" are, of course, the same for "Yili." The clever twist was linking her name to "sinian," which means "missing you" or "thinking of you." So, "Ma Yili" sounded like "Ma Year Yili," but the ad made it "Ma Year Missing You." This pun adopts a two-level expression mechanism: the audience first perceives the sound of "Ma Yili", then associates it with the Yili brand, and finally realizes the emotional implication of "missing you" contained in the pun. That little moment of mental click, that "aha!" when you get the joke, feels good. And that good feeling is exactly what makes you want to share it. As Zhang Junyi explains, this works because the ad (the figure) plays off the familiar words and sounds we already know (the ground) [2].

4.2 A Textbook Phenotype Meme

Following the categories laid out by Chen Linxia, this is a textbook example of a phenotype meme [8]. The structure stays the same: it is always some variation of “Year of the Horse [something that sounds like Yili] Pure Milk.” But the actual word in that slot changes. The fan version was “Ma Yili.” The brand's version was “sinian” (missing you). The form is constant, but the content shifts. This structural stability and content variability endow the meme with strong flexibility and appeal. He Ziran has noted that these phenotype memes tend to be more inventive, which naturally grabs more attention and encourages more people to join in and make their own versions [4].

4.3 More than Just a Pun: The Emotional Layers

The reason why this campaign transcends the scope of a simple linguistic pun lies in its ability to evoke emotional resonance among the public. The campaign unfolded like a story, and each chapter brought a new emotion. First, there was the fun of the idea itself—the “what if” moment that gave the original commenter a little bit of fame. Then came the surprise of being heard—when Yili actually responded, everyone who liked the idea felt a sense of validation. Finally, when Ma Yili signed on, there was a sense of closure and collective achievement. This made the public feel that they were participants in the formation and dissemination of the campaign, sharing a sense of collective achievement. These layered feelings turned a linguistic joke into a shared social moment. Hu Bing and Zhang Jingwen have written about how online memes are really just a way for groups of people to share and amplify an emotion, and this case is a perfect example of that [5].

5. How the MEME Spread: The Path to Virality

5.1 The Instant Comprehensibility: The Premise of Meme Dissemination

The widespread dissemination of a meme is premised on its instant comprehensibility to the public. The “Year of the Horse” pun required almost zero explanation because it was built on things everyone already shared. The Chinese zodiac and the Spring Festival are deeply embedded in the culture. Yili is a brand everyone knows. And the idea of a pun in an advertisement is a familiar one. All the groundwork was already there. Zhang Junyi points out that for a meme to even be noticed, it has to stand out [2]. This pun stood out not because it was bizarre, but because it was a clever twist on something incredibly familiar.

5.2 The Retention Advantage: The Sticky Trait of the Homophonic Meme

A meme also has to be sticky. It has to lodge itself in your memory so you can bring it up later. “Year of the Horse Missing You Pure Milk” is only seven words long. It has a nice, balanced rhythm. And more than that, it's easy to picture. The slogan can easily evoke a mental image of Ma Yili holding a milk carton with a warm smile, and this visual association serves as an effective memory aid. Dawkins himself listed “longevity” as a key trait of a strong meme [1], and being both simple and catchy is the best way to ensure an idea stays in people's heads long enough to be passed on.

5.3 The Dissemination Path: The Spread of the Meme via Social Media

The journey of this meme can be mapped out in four clear steps. First, a user posted the idea, and it got some attention. Second, influencers and media accounts picked it up, moving it from smaller, private chats into the wider public conversation. Third, Yili stepped in and made it official, which was the turning point. Their involvement gave the meme legitimacy and the resources of a major brand behind it. And fourth, the public took it and ran with it, creating a wave of secondary creations—new images, videos, and jokes. The meme was now in a constant state of remix. Liu Hao has discussed how the internet, and social media in particular, is the perfect environment for linguistic memes to achieve this kind of rapid, layered spread [9].

5.4 A DIFFERENT Kind of Brand Role

Traditional advertising usually adopts a one-way communication model: enterprises design slogans and actively deliver them to consumers, with the brand acting as the initiator of the narrative and consumers as

passive recipients. This case flipped that script entirely. Here, the consumer was the author of the core idea. Yili's role was that of an attentive reader, a savvy editor, and ultimately, a powerful amplifier. Their skill wasn't in dreaming up the original pun; it was in recognizing a great idea from their community and having the speed and humility to run with it. This is a shift from talking at people to creating with them. Liu Yu, writing about how media organizations handle online trends, calls this “catching the meme [6].” It is about joining a conversation that is already happening, rather than trying to start a new one from scratch.

6. Conclusion

This study used meme theory to dissect the Yili “Ma Yili” campaign, and a few key findings emerged. First, the meme itself was a phenotype meme that worked through a clever two-part pun, moving from the sound of a name to a brand and finally to an emotion. Its power wasn't just linguistic; it came from the three layers of emotion it created: the fun of the idea, the joy of being heard, and the satisfaction of a shared success. Second, the meme's journey followed a clear path from user to brand and back to the public. Its success depended on a foundation of shared culture, a memorable and catchy phrase, and the amplifying power of social media networks. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the brand's role was fundamentally different. Yili acted less like a broadcaster and more like a skilled participant and amplifier in a conversation their customers had started. This shows a genuine move toward co-creation [7].

For a homophonic marketing meme to succeed, it seems to need three things: it must be easy to understand by leaning on common knowledge, it must resonate emotionally to get people involved, and it must have a clear link back to the brand, so the fun doesn't wander off and forget where it came from.

Accordingly, the present case provides valuable practical implications for brand homophonic marketing practices. First, pay attention. Have systems in place to notice when your customers are having fun with your brand online. Second, be human and be quick. When a valuable public-created idea is identified, brands should avoid rigid official announcements; instead, they should participate in the interaction with an authentic communication tone and respond promptly, as the opportunity window for leveraging such online trends is relatively limited. Third, remember it's a partnership. The goal is to help a community idea grow, not to seize control of it. And finally, keep the connection clear. The best memes are the ones where the joke is inseparable from the brand itself.

Of course, this is just one case. It would be interesting to see if the same rules apply to other brands, industries, or even to campaigns where the brand's response didn't go so well. Future studies could compare multiple cases or try to measure the actual business impact of this kind of co-created campaign with hard numbers. But for now, the Yili story offers a powerful glimpse into what marketing can look like when a brand is brave enough to listen and smart enough to follow its customers' lead.

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Funding

This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

This paper is an output of the science project.

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