
Breaking the Taboo: The Role of Visual Metaphors in Reshaping Profanity in Online Communication

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Abstract

This study explores the transformation of Chinese profanities into visual symbols within internet culture, specifically examining the metaphorical processes through which offensive language is reinterpreted as socially acceptable symbols. The research addresses the gap in existing literature by applying Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Multimodal Metaphor Theory to understand how profanities, such as the term “操” (cào), are metaphorically mapped onto non-offensive symbols, like “草” (cǎo) and plant emojis. The study investigates two key questions: (1) How do profanities transform into visual symbols through metaphorical mappings? and (2) How do multimodal metaphors, combining text and images, reinforce or diminish the original meaning of these profanities? Using a qualitative approach, the paper identifies three core metaphorical mechanisms: phonetic metaphors, imagery metaphors, and metonymic substitution. The findings reveal that visual metaphors play a crucial role in bypassing censorship, retaining emotional intensity, and facilitating social communication in digital spaces. The study’s theoretical contribution includes extending Conceptual Metaphor Theory to visual and multimodal symbols and proposing a “three-stage transformation” model (language symbol → multimodal mapping → cultural appropriation). This research provides insights into the cognitive, cultural, and social processes behind the evolution of language in the digital age and suggests that visual metaphors offer a powerful tool for reshaping online communication within cultural and censorship constraints.

Keywords: *Conceptual metaphor; Multimodal metaphor; Visual metaphor; Digital communication.*

A. Introduction

In recent years, Chinese internet culture has undergone a remarkable transformation in how profanities are used and reimagined as visual symbols. The substitution of vulgar language with seemingly harmless symbols—such as replacing the offensive term “操” (cào) with a plant emoji—illustrates how the internet enables creative expression while circumventing censorship. Profanities, like “操,” originally referring to crude sexual terminology, have been reinterpreted as innocuous symbols that maintain their emotional impact but are socially acceptable. This phenomenon, termed “profanity image-ization,” exemplifies the dynamic evolution of language in the digital age.

A common example of this shift is the use of “草” (cǎo) as a substitute for “操” (cào). Despite differing meanings, these two characters share phonetic similarity, allowing “草” to act as a visual and phonetic replacement for the taboo term. While “草” (cǎo) refers to grass or plants—terms that are neutral and non-offensive—the re-contextualization of this symbol in internet slang transforms the word into a less aggressive alternative to “操” (cào). Furthermore, the plant emoji further neutralizes the word’s original meaning, emphasizing humor or

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lightheartedness rather than aggression. This substitution is part of the broader trend where offensive language is transformed into playful and harmless symbols, enabling users to retain emotional expression without violating social norms or triggering censorship.

This transition from verbal profanity to visual symbols is more than a linguistic change; it represents broader social and cultural negotiations within the digital space. Scholars like Jay (2009) have explored the psychological and social impact of profanity, noting that language serves as a tool for expressing strong emotions. However, there is a gap in research regarding the metaphorical processes involved in the visual transformation of profanities. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have extensively examined conceptual metaphors in verbal language, but their theory has yet to be fully applied to visual or multimodal realms, particularly in the context of internet slang.

This study addresses this gap by examining the metaphorical mechanisms involved in the transformation of Chinese profanities into harmless symbols. Drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and Multimodal Metaphor Theory (Forceville, 1996), the research investigates how profanities are metaphorically mapped onto visual symbols and how combinations of text and images shape these new meanings. Conceptual Metaphor Theory suggests that abstract concepts are understood through metaphorical mappings to more concrete domains (e.g., “anger is fire” or “debate is war”) (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). This framework is useful for exploring how profanities like “操” (cào) and others are reinterpreted through visual metaphors into socially acceptable symbols. Furthermore, Multimodal Metaphor Theory emphasizes how multiple modes of communication, such as images, text, and color, interact to construct meaning (Forceville, 1996). This research will explore how these modes interact to transform offensive language into harmless expressions.

This study addresses two main research questions. First, how do profanities, through metaphorical mappings, transform into visual symbols? Second, how do multimodal metaphors—combining text and imagery—either reinforce or diminish the original meaning of profanities? The theoretical contribution of this study is twofold. First, it extends Conceptual Metaphor Theory to the study of visual and multimodal symbols, an area that has received limited attention in prior research. As Forceville (1996) notes, visual metaphors often function differently from verbal metaphors, and examining them together will enhance our understanding of how meaning is constructed in digital communication. Second, this study contributes to our understanding of how language evolves in the digital age, particularly in response to cultural and censorship constraints. As internet platforms become increasingly regulated, visual metaphors offer a way to bypass language restrictions while still conveying emotional content, challenging traditional boundaries of language.

By examining how Chinese profanities are reinterpreted through visual metaphors, this research will provide insights into the cognitive, cultural, and social processes underlying digital language use. Understanding how language, imagery, and culture intersect in the digital space will offer new perspectives on how metaphor shapes both communication and cultural expression.

B. Theoretical Framework

1. Conceptual Metaphor Theory

In this study, we adopt Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and Multimodal Metaphor Theory (Forceville, 1996) as the theoretical framework to explore the multimodal metaphor mechanisms in the transformation of Chinese profanities into visual symbols. These two theories help analyze how profanities undergo a conceptual and visual shift,

transforming from offensive language into more benign and culturally acceptable symbols in the digital space.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) posits that metaphors are not just linguistic tools but fundamental to human cognition and understanding. This theory suggests that abstract concepts are structured through metaphorical mappings to more concrete domains, helping individuals comprehend complex and abstract ideas through more tangible experience (Jankowiak, 2020; Jankowiaks et al., 2021). For example, in the structural metaphor “anger is fire,” anger, an abstract emotion, is understood and described using the more concrete and familiar concept of fire, which can burn, spread, and be extinguished. Similarly, ontological metaphors treat emotions as tangible objects, such as the metaphor “emotion is an object,” where emotions like anger or happiness are conceptualized as things that can be contained, broken, or manipulated. In the context of internet language, this theory is particularly useful due to the “immediate generation” and “rapid mutation” of metaphors. Online communication, especially through memes and digital symbols, allows for the instantaneous creation and adaptation of metaphors. For instance, the word “操” (cào), a vulgar term for sexual intercourse, may be substituted with “草” (cǎo), a word that refers to grass or plants. These words share similar pronunciation, making “草” a suitable replacement for “操” in internet communication. This mapping of one concept to another—substituting a crude term with a neutral one—illustrates how conceptual metaphors function in online discourse, allowing the original offensive word to be recontextualized into something socially acceptable while retaining its emotional power. As digital language continues to evolve, this metaphorical “re-mapping” of offensive words is continuously accelerated and transformed in response to shifting cultural and social contexts.

2. Multimodal Metaphor Theory

Multimodal Metaphor Theory, proposed by Forceville (1996), builds on the idea that meaning is constructed through the interaction of multiple modes of communication, such as text, images, color, and sound. Forceville’s framework expands the traditional notion of metaphor beyond verbal language, asserting that metaphors can emerge through the combination of different modes. In the case of internet memes, profanities like “操” (cào) or “草” (cǎo) are often paired with specific visual elements—such as emojis or color coding—to create complex metaphorical meanings that cannot be fully understood through text alone. For example, the substitution of “草” (cǎo) with an emoji of a plant (representing grass) and the color green can be understood as a metaphorical transformation. The word “草,” typically neutral, when paired with the green color and the image of a plant, recontextualizes the offensive word “操” into something that evokes natural, non-threatening associations. This multimodal combination of text, image, and color works together to shift the metaphorical meaning of the term from something vulgar to something harmless or even humorous. Forceville (1996) highlights that multimodal metaphors cannot be interpreted properly unless all modes are considered, showing that the interplay of visual and textual elements is essential for decoding the full metaphor in digital communication.

Furthermore, multimodal metaphors create a more complex layer of meaning compared to monomodal metaphors. In the case of memes or internet slang, the combination of imagery and text allows for a more fluid and dynamic interpretation of metaphors. Such multimodal combinations significantly enhance the communicative power of digital language by allowing it to express nuanced or layered meanings that could not be captured through one mode alone.

This study proposes the integration of Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Multimodal Metaphor Theory by applying a three-stage framework: “language symbol → multimodal mapping → cultural appropriation.” This model allows for a detailed analysis of how profanities

are transformed into visual metaphors and integrated into internet culture. The first stage examines the linguistic symbol, such as “操” (cào), and its inherent offensive meaning in the cultural context. The second stage explores how these linguistic symbols are remapped onto visual elements like emojis, images, or colors, to create new, non-offensive meanings. For example, using an emoji of a plant and the color green helps to neutralize the original aggressive connotation of the word. In the final stage, the transformed symbol becomes embedded in internet culture, gaining new meanings that are widely recognized and used within specific online communities. By combining Conceptual Metaphor Theory with Multimodal Metaphor Theory, this framework provides a comprehensive tool for analyzing the mechanisms through which vulgar language is reinterpreted and repurposed in the digital age. This approach accounts for both the cognitive processes behind the creation of metaphors and the cultural processes that lead to the appropriation of these transformed symbols in online discourse.

3. Metaphor Mechanism Analysis

Extraction of General Rules for Visual Metaphors

Through analyzing the phenomenon of profanity visualization in Chinese internet culture, three core rules for constructing visual metaphors have been identified. The first rule is Phonetic Metaphors and Cross-Modal Mapping. The transformation of Chinese profanities into visual metaphors heavily relies on the principle of cross-modal mapping. This rule dictates that profanity’s original meaning (the target domain) must be expressed indirectly through symbols from another modality (the source domain). For example, the vulgar term “操” (cào), which refers to crude sexual language, is often replaced by “草” (cǎo), a neutral word meaning “grass” or “plants.” These two terms share phonetic similarities, which enables “草” to function as a playful stand-in for “操” in digital spaces, transforming an offensive word into something non-threatening. Further, the use of the plant emoji softens the vulgarity and introduces a neutral, often humorous meaning. This phonetic substitution serves as a strategy to navigate online language censorship while still communicating strong emotions. The adaptation of metaphors in digital communication is not merely linguistic; it also carries cultural and emotional dimensions. Barranha et al., (2016) explore how metaphorical transformations in digital art help reinterpret urban spaces, which can be similarly applied to understand how digital symbols repurpose profanity. The use of phonetic similarities in the substitution of offensive terms demonstrates how cross-modal metaphors evolve within internet communication to comply with social and platform restrictions while maintaining their emotional intensity.

The second rule is the Semantic Diminishment Rule, which states that the attributes of the source domain must reduce the taboo or offensive nature of the target domain. This is achieved through several methods, such as using cute animal images, phonetic distortion, or symbolic substitutions. For instance, the term “屎” (feces) can be represented by the cartoon poop emoji. The cartoon poop symbol is a visual metaphor that diminishes the taboo and disgust associated with the word “feces” by making it humorous and less repulsive.

The third rule is the Multimodal Coordination Rule, which emphasizes that at least two modalities—such as image and text—must work together to create a complete metaphor. The Multimodal Coordination Rule indicates that at least two modalities—such as image and text—must collaborate to complete the metaphor. For example, the term “裂开” (lè kāi), meaning “crack open” or “emotional breakdown,” is often paired with the explosion emoji to visually represent the intensity of a mental collapse. While the explosion emoji alone suggests force or aggression, it is the addition of the text “裂开” that directs the viewer to the specific meaning of emotional breakdown. This synergy between image and text is a common strategy in internet memes and emojis, ensuring that the metaphor communicates its intended meaning more clearly.

Forceville (1996) highlights that multimodal metaphors cannot be fully understood without considering the interaction between all involved modes—whether they be visual, verbal, or contextual. By combining the power of both text and imagery, users of internet culture can effectively diminish the aggressiveness of a term like “操” (cào) and transform it into a harmless, often humorous expression. In McMullen (2012), the transformation of harsh language into humorous visuals is explored, underscoring how the internet serves as a space for re-contextualizing emotions, making them more digestible and less offensive.

Specific Metaphor Type Analysis Based on the Rules

Building on these three core rules, the authors now analyze three specific types of metaphors that emerge in Chinese internet culture, based on the rules identified above. The first type is the Phonetic Metaphor, where Cross-Modal Mapping is dominant. This type of metaphor occurs when phonetic similarities between words from different contexts lead to a humorous or softened substitution. An example of this is the phrase “蚌埠住了” (literally, 蚌埠 is a China’s city), which is used as a playful adaptation of “绷不住了” (meaning “I can’t hold it anymore”). The word “绷” (tighten) is replaced with the clam emoji (which is 蚌 in 蚌埠 in Chinese), which symbolizes toughness or endurance through the creature’s hard shell. However, the cartoonish nature of the clam reduces the seriousness of the phrase, transforming it into something more humorous. The phonetic alteration (using “bèng bù zhù le” for a comedic twist on “bēng bù zhù le”) works together with the image of the clam to soften the connotation, making it playful and less intense, as noted by Forceville (1996) in his study on multimodal metaphor construction.

The second type is the Imagery Metaphor, where Semantic Diminishment plays the leading role. In this case, symbols like the shield emoji and the explosion symbol are used together to represent the phrase “破防” (psychological defense breaking). The shield emoji is a metonymic representation of defense or protection, while the explosion symbol evokes a sense of a forceful breakdown. However, the cartoonish nature of these symbols—particularly the visual representation of the explosion and shield as playful and exaggerated—reduces the emotional intensity of the phrase. The combination of the text “破防” with these images creates a multimodal metaphor that communicates emotional distress while softening the aggressive impact of the original concept. Jay (2009) discusses how this type of visual softening helps make strong emotions more palatable in digital communication, adding a layer of humor and accessibility to otherwise harsh expressions.

The third type of metaphor is Metonymic Substitution, where Multimodal Coordination dominates. In this type of metaphor, an abbreviated word or concept is paired with an image to form a complete, ironic, or satirical metaphor. For example, the abbreviation “典” (which stands for “classic”) is paired with the clown emoji, implying that something once considered classic is now seen as absurd or laughable. The clown emoji adds an element of mockery, while the word “典” by itself could not express the sarcasm or irony intended. The combination of text and image here is essential, as the clown symbol enhances the satirical meaning of the word “典.” This type of metaphor relies heavily on the interaction between text and image.

In conclusion, these examples illustrate how cross-modal mapping, semantic diminishment, and multimodal coordination work together to transform vulgar language into more socially acceptable and humorous symbols in digital communication. By applying these rules, offensive language is reframed, allowing it to fit within the evolving culture of internet communication and meme creation, ultimately making it more engaging and socially tolerable.

C. Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design with an interpretive approach to examine the metaphorical transformation of profanities into visual forms in online communication. Grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and Multimodal Metaphor Theory (MMT), the research investigates how offensive terms, such as “操” (cào), are reinterpreted and mapped onto socially acceptable visual symbols like “草” (cǎo) or plant emojis, reflecting the dynamic evolution of language in digital culture.

The research procedure consists of several steps. First, frequently used Chinese profanities in online contexts were identified. Second, relevant digital content illustrating both textual and visual transformations of these profanities was collected. Each instance was then categorized according to the metaphorical mechanism applied, such as phonetic similarity, visual resemblance, or metonymic substitution. These examples were analyzed within the frameworks of CMT and MMT to uncover deeper cognitive and cultural meanings, culminating in the development of a three-stage transformation model.

Data were collected using purposive sampling from various online platforms, including social media posts, internet memes, forum discussions, and microblogging platforms such as Weibo and Zhihu. The data included screenshots, text samples, and user-generated content that visually or textually represented transformed profanities. Each data point was coded according to its linguistic and visual metaphorical components to facilitate systematic analysis.

The data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns of metaphorical transformation. These patterns were grouped into three main mechanisms: phonetic metaphors, imagery metaphors, and metonymic substitution. Each case was further examined to assess whether the multimodal metaphors reinforced or diluted the original emotional intensity of the profanity. The findings informed the construction of a "three-stage transformation" model—language symbol → multimodal mapping → cultural appropriation—that captures the cognitive, social, and cultural processes underlying the evolution of profanity in online communication.

D. Results and Discussion

1. Functional Analysis

The transformation of profanity into visual metaphors in Chinese internet culture serves not only as a linguistic creative outlet but also as a way to fulfill multiple social functions. By employing metaphorical mechanisms, internet users are able to circumvent social restrictions while still conveying complex emotions and social meanings. This study highlights that the visualization of Chinese profanities primarily relies on metaphorical mechanisms, especially through indirect expression, which fulfills the following key functions:

Bypassing Censorship

The bypass of censorship is a critical function of visual metaphors in Chinese internet culture. The constraints placed on language use by digital platforms create a demand for more creative and subtle forms of expression. Profanities that would typically be censored are transformed into metaphorical symbols that retain the emotional weight of the original terms but are allowed to pass through platforms' filtering systems. For example, “操” (cào) is replaced by “草” (cǎo), which phonetically sounds similar but has a benign meaning of “grass” or “plants.” These substitutions are accompanied by visual symbols, such as the plant emoji, which further neutralizes the term's offensive qualities. This strategy enables users to engage with taboo

language in an indirect way, sidestepping censorship mechanisms without sacrificing expressive power.

The role of phonetic metaphors in this context aligns with the broader social function of metaphor use in digital communication. Hoskins (2011) discusses how media and memory shape the way metaphor is used in digital contexts, including online spaces that deal with censorship. In this case, metaphors become a way for internet users to navigate the tight boundaries set by social norms and platform regulations.

Retention of Emotion

Despite their transformation into more benign symbols, the emotional intensity of the original profanities is often retained through multimodal metaphors. For instance, the word “操” (cào) may be replaced by “草” (cǎo), but the emotional resonance of frustration or anger remains through the pairing of text with visual symbols. In the case of “裂开” (liè kāi), the explosion emoji combined with the text continues to evoke a sense of emotional breakdown, even though the aggressive language is softened.

The combination of visual symbols like emojis with text reflects how the internet allows for complex emotional expressions through non-verbal means. Visual symbols, when paired with text, help preserve the emotional depth of the original metaphor, even when its offensive content is neutralized.

Social Communication and Humor

In addition to evading censorship and retaining emotional intensity, visual metaphors in digital media are crucial for social communication and the expression of humor. The internet has become a space where language is re-contextualized and made humorous through the combination of imagery and text. Profanities, once considered taboo or offensive, are now reimagined as playful and humorous expressions. For example, the use of the clown emoji paired with “典” (from “经典逆天” or “classic reversal of expectations”) injects irony into the term, transforming it from a neutral concept into something absurd and laughable.

The use of humor in this context is a powerful tool for negotiating social boundaries. Forceville (1996) discusses how multimodal metaphors allow for the creation of meanings that are more fluid and adaptable, providing an outlet for playful language even in the face of otherwise harsh or offensive content. Jay (2009) further explores how humor helps mitigate the aggressive nature of profanity, making it more socially acceptable in the digital realm.

2. Dynamic Evolution

The transformation of profanity into visual metaphors is not a static process. Over time, these metaphors evolve through processes such as metaphor wear and metaphor proliferation, both of which contribute to the ongoing dynamism of internet language. These processes show how metaphors adapt to changing cultural and social contexts in the digital age.

Conventionalization of Metaphor

Conventionalization of metaphor refers to the gradual erosion of a metaphor’s original meaning as it is used more frequently in different contexts (Bowdle & Gentner, 2005). As metaphors become more common in internet culture, their original connotations often become diluted, and the symbol or phrase takes on a new, more neutral or generalized meaning. This can be observed in the term “草” (cǎo), which was originally a substitution for the vulgar term “操” (cào). Over time, the metaphorical connection between “草” and “操” has diminished, and “草” has evolved into an independent symbol with less connection to its profane origin. It has become

a more neutral and playful expression, detached from its original taboo connotation. This process of semantic drift reflects how language evolves in response to constant use and shifting cultural contexts. Waytt (2021) explain that such semantic shifts occur as users continually reinterpret metaphors, leading to new meanings over time.

Metaphor Proliferation

In addition to conventionalization of metaphor, metaphor proliferation is another important process in the evolution of internet metaphors. Metaphor proliferation occurs when an initial metaphor leads to the creation of new variations, extensions, or subversions that further enhance its meaning or give rise to entirely new expressions. An example of this is the horse emoji, which originated from the phrase “马勒戈壁” (swear words, roughly insulting others’ mother”), and later gave rise to new memes like “马男” (“horse man”). This expansion of metaphors illustrates the creativity inherent in digital communication, where symbols and phrases are continually reinterpreted and adapted by users to reflect evolving cultural contexts. As Mu et al., (2024) notes, metaphor proliferation is a characteristic feature of internet culture, where metaphors continually grow and shift to meet the needs of new social dynamics.

The dynamic evolution of metaphors reflects the broader adaptability of online communication. Metaphors do not remain static; they shift and expand as they are used in new contexts and as online communities engage with them. The process of metaphor wear and proliferation ensures that these visual metaphors remain relevant, engaging, and capable of expressing new meanings and emotions.

E. Conclusion

This study has thoroughly examined the transformation of Chinese profanities into visual metaphors within internet culture, identifying the mechanisms through which profanities are altered to fit within socially acceptable digital communication norms. The analysis shows that the process of profanity transformation relies on three key metaphorical mechanisms: phonetic metaphors, imagery metaphors, and metonymic substitution. These mechanisms allow internet users to convey emotionally intense or taboo concepts without directly using offensive language, making communication more socially acceptable and aligned with online social norms and censorship constraints.

The phonetic metaphor mechanism is the most common approach, where phonetic similarities between offensive words and non-offensive substitutes are utilized. For example, the vulgar word “操” (cào) is often replaced by “草” (cǎo), as both words share similar pronunciation but vastly different meanings. This phonetic substitution helps users express emotions or ideas associated with the offensive word without breaching social norms. Furthermore, visual symbols, such as the plant emoji, replace “草” (cǎo), transforming the metaphor into something non-threatening and neutral.

The imagery metaphor mechanism involves using visual symbols to represent emotions or concepts. For instance, explosion symbols are used to represent emotional breakdowns or intense frustration, conveying strong emotional content without the harshness of verbal expression. These imagery metaphors rely on visual cues to soften the meaning of the words they replace. Additionally, color symbolism plays a significant role in softening offensive language. The color green, symbolizing calm and nature, is used to transform an aggressive word like “操” (cào) into a playful and neutral expression. This process is consistent with Forceville’s (1996) multimodal metaphor theory, which asserts that combining images and text creates richer, more complex meanings and emotional tones.

The metonymic substitution mechanism allows a part of a concept or phrase to stand in for the whole, creating new meanings through abbreviation or symbolic shortening. For example, the word “典” (an abbreviation of “经典逆天” or “classic reversal of expectations”) is often paired with the clown emoji, shifting the original serious meaning into something sarcastic or absurd. The use of the clown emoji adds irony and humor, providing a layer of ridicule that transforms the meaning of “典” from a classic expression into something laughable. This metonymic substitution highlights how visual symbols, such as emojis, can drastically change the tone of a phrase.

Multimodal coordination—the combination of text, image, and color—is key to mitigating the taboo nature of profanities. Through this coordination, offensive terms are reimagined in visually engaging and socially acceptable forms while retaining their emotional intensity. For example, replacing “操” (cào) with the plant emoji and the color green removes the offensive connotations of the word while still conveying its emotional significance. This multimodal synergy enables more nuanced expression than any single modality could achieve alone, further supported by Forceville (1996), who argues that multimodal metaphors provide a more complex and effective means of communication.

This study contributes significantly to Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) by extending its application to the realm of visual symbols and multimodal communication. Traditionally, conceptual metaphor theory has been applied to verbal language, but this study broadens its scope by examining how metaphors operate in multimodal contexts, where both visual and linguistic elements work together. By demonstrating how visual symbols and text interact to transform profanities into socially acceptable expressions, this research deepens our understanding of how metaphors function beyond traditional language-based communication. The study provides a richer framework for analyzing metaphorical expressions in digital media and online spaces.

Additionally, the study introduces the “three-stage transformation” model: language symbol → multimodal mapping → cultural appropriation. This model explains how a linguistic symbol is transformed into a visual metaphor through a process of mapping onto multimodal elements like text, images, and colors. The model then explores how this transformed metaphor is culturally appropriated within online communities, gaining new meanings and interpretations as it circulates through internet culture. This theoretical framework offers a more comprehensive understanding of how language and symbols evolve in digital communication, as users continuously adapt and reshape metaphors to fit within ever-changing online contexts.

While this study provides valuable insights into the transformation of profanities in Chinese internet culture, there are several limitations. First, the research is limited to Chinese internet culture, and the findings may not necessarily apply to other languages or cultural contexts. Future research could extend this study by comparing profanity visualization across languages and cultures to explore whether similar metaphorical mechanisms are used globally and how cultural differences shape the interpretation of visual metaphors. Understanding cross-linguistic and cross-cultural approaches would enhance our comprehension of how internet culture and taboo language interact in various digital environments (Jones et al., 2015).

Another limitation is the focus on static visual metaphors. With the rise of AI-generated memes and content, the creation of digital metaphors is becoming more dynamic and rapid. Future studies could examine how artificial intelligence contributes to the generation of visual metaphors and how these AI tools influence the complexity and creativity of internet memes. As AI-generated content continues to shape online communication, exploring its role in metaphor creation could provide valuable insights into the future of digital language.

Finally, the research does not delve deeply into the social and cultural implications of these visual metaphors. How are these metaphors understood by different online communities? What impact do they have on digital identity, social norms, or humor in online spaces? Future research could explore these questions, as understanding the cultural appropriation of these metaphors will provide deeper insights into their role in shaping digital discourse and influencing how language evolves in online spaces.

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