

The Mediated Production Mechanism of Young People's "Collective Acid Reflux" Emotional Meme: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the "Heartburn" Meme

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Abstract

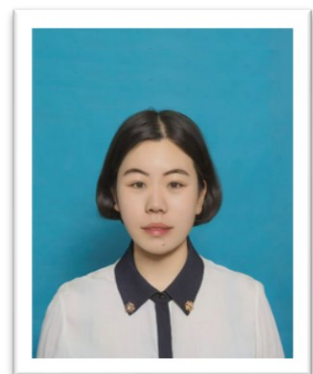
In the autumn of 2026, "heartburn" (shaoxin) evolved from a templated line in artificial intelligence (AI)-generated vernacular short dramas into an internet-wide code of empathy. The comment-section phrase "I got heartburn" and the praise-like "no heartburn" together constitute a youth emotional landscape that can be called "collective acid reflux." Using Fairclough's three-dimensional framework for critical discourse analysis, combined with semi-structured interviews and online fieldwork, this paper examines the textual structure, production-distribution chain, and social context of the "heartburn" meme. The study finds that the textual operation of the meme relies on a dual structure: The semantic reversal of the "stomach-heart" bodily metaphor and the ironic appropriation of "rules style" discourse. The templated production of AI short dramas provides a low-cost emotional "fuse". Platform algorithms identify "reliability anxiety" as an amplifiable interaction signal. Users' secondary creation and comment-section flooding complete the transformation from a template line to a collective ritual. Mediation does not manufacture discomfort. Rather, it transforms an ineffable sense of grievance into a replicable, circutable, and recognizable emotional symbol.

Keywords

Heartburn, Ironic appropriation, Algorithmic amplification, Critical discourse analysis



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Introduction

In the autumn of 2026, a line from an AI-generated vernacular short drama - "It's a bit expensive but eating

it doesn't give me heartburn". It spilled out of the narrative framework of short dramas within a few weeks

and became one of the most circulable emotional expressions on the Chinese internet.

On Douyin, topics tagged “no heartburn” quickly surpassed billions of views. On Xiaohongshu and Weibo, the expression appeared at extremely high density in product reviews, workplace complaints, and everyday social-media comment sections. “No heartburn” was used to praise a meal that did not disappoint, a service without hidden traps, or a friend who handled things reliably. By contrast, “heartburn” was reverse-forged into a generalized accusation against pre-made dishes passed off as freshly cooked, filtered homestay listings, automatic-renewal traps, and fraudulent recruitment [1]. A bodily term describing the retrosternal burning sensation caused by gastric acid reflux thus became a moral-emotional yardstick by which young people judged whether something was “reliable”.

This phenomenon is easily subsumed under the familiar life-cycle narrative of “internet memes”: accidental virality, imitative diffusion, semantic generalization, and decline in popularity. But if it is treated merely as a language game, what deserves interrogation is missed.

Unlike confrontational discourses with clear identity orientations, such as “lying flat” and “Kong Yiji literature”, the “heartburn” meme does not directly appeal to class, educational credentials, or employment structure. It appeals to a diffuse, bodily sense of discomfort. It does not organize collective action, yet in countless comment sections it completes a joint signature of emotion in an “in-unison” manner.

This paper argues that the “heartburn” meme does not convey ordinary “anger”. Instead, it embodies an emotional formation termed “collective acid reflux”. Drawing on bodily metaphor, this meme translates scattered grievance, disgust and distrust from daily consumption and existential contexts into a low-intensity, readily replicable collective moral feeling defined by ironic distance [2].

The core question of this paper is: How is this “collective acid reflux” emotion produced through mediation? What

is its textual structure, discursive practice, and social conditions?

Analytical framework and research design

From “mediated anger” to “collective acid reflux”

Research on “mediated anger” points out that online media rewrites individual resentment into collective indignation and turns it into an evocative symbol of media movements. However, if all youth discourses tinged with dissatisfaction are subsumed under the concept of “anger” differences among emotional formations may be obscured.

The “heartburn” meme rarely manifests as intense condemnation or confrontational identity mobilization. Its typical sentence pattern is “It’s a bit expensive, but eating it doesn’t give me heartburn”, and its typical scene is the repeated comment-section phrase “I got heartburn”. This paper introduces the concept of “collective acid reflux” to capture three features: Bodily character - social discomfort is translated through gastric acid reflux into a bodily sense of “can’t swallow it down and can’t spit it out”.

Diffuseness characterizes this emotion: It circulates across food safety, the platform economy, workplace ethics, and everyday services to form an atmospheric feeling. Its second feature is irony. Irony resides in the mode of “playing with memes” and “doing abstraction”, creating distance from the subject matter via parody and appropriation.

Fairclough’s three-dimensional framework is suitable for addressing this question: The textual level focuses on vocabulary choice, metaphorical structure, presupposition, and irony. The discursive-practice level focuses on how texts are produced, distributed, and consumed. The social-practice level asks about the relationship between discursive events and broader social structures, power relations, and ideologies [3]. This paper also draws on the three-level coding of grounded theory,

conducting open, axial, and selective coding of interviews and online comments in order to extract the production mechanism of “collective acid reflux” through categorization [4].

Data collection and sample

The study combines stratified purposive sampling, typical-case sampling, and intensity sampling. Interviewees were young people aged 15-31, covering undergraduates, recent graduates, previous graduates, master’s and doctoral students, freelancers, and unemployed groups. A total of 21 people were interviewed, each for no less than 30 minutes, yielding approximately 31,000 Chinese characters of interview transcripts. Online fieldwork was conducted from September 15th to October 10th, 2026.

This study adopted “heartburn”, “no heartburn”, “heartburn meme” and “It’s a bit expensive but eating it doesn’t give me heartburn” as keywords. It sampled highly liked long comments and high-interaction posts with over 1,000 likes from Douyin, Xiaohongshu, Weibo and Bilibili [5]. The preliminary dataset contained 169 items, with roughly 15,000 Chinese characters. After further expanding the retrieval scope and supplementing relevant discussion content, the total sample comprised 190 items and approximately 46,000 Chinese characters. Seventy percent of the full sample were randomly selected for open, axial and selective coding and theory construction, and the remaining 30.0% were reserved for thematic saturation testing to verify the stability of the emerging categories. Sample composition is shown in Table 1 and 2 (N=21) and Table 3.

Table 1. Basic information of interviewees (B1-Y7).

No.	Gender	Age	Education	Employment status	Internet use frequency	Public opinion participation frequency	Whether they spoke about the “heartburn” meme
B1	Male	19	Undergraduate	Student	Heavy	Frequent	Yes
B2	Male	23	Undergraduate graduating	Signed employment contract	Heavy	Frequent	Yes
B3	Female	20	Undergraduate	Student	Heavy	Frequent	Yes
B4	Male	22	Undergraduate graduating	Continuing education	Heavy	Frequent	Yes
B5	Female	22	Undergraduate graduating	Temporarily unemployed	Frequent	Occasional	Yes
B6	Female	24	Undergraduate	Temporarily unemployed	Heavy	Frequent	Yes
B7	Male	25	Previous undergraduate graduate	Employed	Frequent	Frequent	Yes
Y1	Female	26	Master’s graduating	Temporarily unemployed	Heavy	Frequent	Yes
Y2	Male	25	Doctoral student	Student	Frequent	Frequent	Yes
Y3	Male	24	Master’s graduating	Employed	Heavy	Occasional	Knew but did not speak
Y4	Male	30	Doctoral graduating	Temporarily unemployed	Heavy	Occasional	Knew but did not speak
Y5	Female	23	Master’s student	Student	Heavy	Frequent	Yes
Y6	Female	29	Doctoral graduating	Temporarily unemployed	Occasional	Generally not involved	Knew but did not speak
Y7	Female	25	Master’s	Employed	Heavy	Occasional	Yes

Note: B=young people with bachelor’s degree or below; Y=postgraduate group;

Table 2. Basic information of interviewees (W1-W7).

No.	Gender	Age	Education	Employment status	Internet use frequency	Public opinion participation frequency	Whether they spoke about the “heartburn” meme
W1	Male	22	Junior college	Freelancer	Frequent	Occasional	Yes
W2	Male	27	High school dropout	Freelancer	Occasional	Generally not involved	Knew but did not speak
W3	Female	21	Junior college student	Student	Heavy	Frequent	Yes
W4	Female	25	Junior high school	Employed	Frequent	Frequent	Yes
W5	Male	17	High school completer	Unemployed	Heavy	Frequent	Yes
W6	Female	16	High school student	Student	Occasional	Frequent	Yes
W7	Male	19	Junior college student	Student	Heavy	Frequent	Yes

Note: W=atypically employed/low-education group; codes are anonymized.

Table 3. Distribution of online text sample (N=169).

Platform	Sample size	Percentage	Main text type	Like threshold	Example keywords
Douyin	80	47.3%	Short-drama comments, secondary-creation copy	≥ 1000	heartburn, no heartburn, rules
Xiaohongshu	40	23.7%	Consumer reviews, warning posts	≥ 1000	heartburn package, no heartburn
Weibo	30	17.8%	Topic discussions, reposts and comments	≥ 1000	heartburn meme, expensive but worth it
Bilibili	19	11.2%	Bullet comments, long reviews	≥ 100	acid reflux, abstraction
Total	169	100.0%	/	/	/

Coding and analysis procedure

Drawing on the three-level coding procedure of grounded theory, this study performed open coding to conceptualize the original textual statements. This process yielded 87 initial concepts and 16 initial categories. Axial coding reorganized these initial categories into six subcategories [6]. They are “bodily metaphor”, “ironic appropriation”, “template production”, “algorithmic amplification”, “ritual consumption”, and “moral audit”. These subcategories were further aggregated into three overarching main categories: “textual structure”, “discursive practice”, and “social practice.”

Selective coding revolved around the core research thread of “how mediation transforms diffuse discomfort into a circutable emotional symbol” and constantly compared relevant interview excerpts and conceptual memos to distill and define the core category of this qualitative analysis [7].

Table 4 presents illustrative examples of open coding with original excerpts and corresponding conceptual labels, and Table 5 systematically summarises the hierarchical classification results of axial coding.

The remaining 30.0% of the reserved text sample was coded independently and repeatedly by two coders to verify saturation. No new concepts or categories appeared during this coding process.

Table 4. Examples of open coding (Excerpt).

Initial concept (level 1)	Initial category (level 2)	Example of original statement
C01 Translation of bodily burning sensation	Bodily metaphor	“What you swallow is expectation; what comes back up is discomfort.”
C02 Stomach-heart semantic reversal	Bodily metaphor	“It’s not the stomach burning; it’s the heart burning.”
C03 Baseline evaluation axis	Reversal of evaluation criteria	“No need for it to be great; as long as it doesn’t cause heartburn.”
C04 Template line expectation	Templated production	“The next line is definitely ‘no heartburn’.”
C05 Repetition erodes seriousness/ironic opportunity	Ironic appropriation	Textual structure
C06 Application to consumer reviews/ironic application	Ironic appropriation	Textual structure
C07 Superiority of seeing through the routine/ironic distance	Ironic appropriation	Textual structure
C08 Flooding comment sections/ritualized consumption	Ritual consumption	Discursive practice
C09 Password-like belonging/emotional connection	Ritual consumption	Discursive practice
C10 Erosion of everyday trust/diffuse anxiety	Moral audit	Social practice
C11 High cost of rights protection/low-intensity expression	Moral audit	Social practice
C12 Re-moralization of rules/moral audit	Moral audit	Social practice

Table 5. Results of axial coding.

Initial category (level 2)	Subcategory (level 3)	Main category (level 4)
Translation of bodily burning sensation, stomach-heart semantic reversal, baseline evaluation axis	Bodily metaphor	Textual structure
Template line expectation, repetition erodes seriousness, ironic appropriation, ironic distance	Ironic appropriation	Textual structure
Templated production, AI batch generation, replaceable lines	Template production	Discursive practice
Algorithmic recognition, high-interaction signals, echo-chamber reinforcement	Algorithmic amplification	Discursive practice
Comment-section flooding, password-like belonging, secondary-creation appropriation	Ritual consumption	Discursive practice
Erosion of everyday trust, high cost of rights protection, re-moralization of rules	Moral audit	Social practice

Textual analysis: The “stomach-heart” metaphor and ironic appropriation

The textual efficacy of the “heartburn” meme derives from the superimposition of two meaning mechanisms. The first is the “body-morality” translation at the level of conceptual metaphor.

The literal meaning of “heartburn” refers to the retrosternal burning sensation caused by gastroesophageal reflux. It occurs inside the body, is difficult to

observe from the outside, yet continuously produces discomfort. It is associated with “ingestion”: When what is taken in is wrong, the body responds with burning.

When transferred to the field of social experience, the “ingested object” shifts from food to “expectation” in consumption, services, and everyday interaction [8].

Discomfort is located “inside” and felt as a bodily backlash of “something that should not have happened but did”. Its opposite, “no heartburn” is forged into an inclusive positive evaluation: an online purchase that did

not disappoint, a friend who handled things reliably, breakfast-shop wontons made fresh, a haircut without hard selling - all can be called “no heartburn”.

The evaluative standard shifts from pursuing positive value to avoiding negative experience: “it did not disgust me”. When “reliable” means “no heartburn”, young people only expect no reflux [9]. This metaphor describes mild, lingering discomfort, not acute pain or rage. “Collective acid reflux” smolders quietly instead of erupting.

The second is ironic appropriation. Lines such as “I’d rather earn less than break the rules” and “First establish the rules, and the road will become wider and wider” appear in AI short dramas with a highly serious, even preachifying face. Their original pragmatic intention is to praise integrity and condemn short-sightedness. However, when the same set of lines appears in dozens of highly templated short dramas with almost identical sentence patterns and narrative arcs, their seriousness is eroded by their own excessive repetition [10]. Audiences no longer “believe” the text according to its expected frame and begin to detach the lines from the moral-preaching framework and apply them to heterogeneous

contexts. “No heartburn” is used to evaluate an unconventional drama, a product without obvious traps, or a friend who handles things reliably. “Heartburn package” is reverse-forged into a generalized label for cut corners and misrepresented goods.

This appropriation has a typical ironic structure: The speaker superficially uses an expression from an authoritative-preachifying context but does not undertake the serious moral commitment of that expression. The point of meaning is not “I sincerely believe in the rules” but “I have seen through the emptiness of ‘rules’ discourse in reality and mark this seeing-through by repeating it”. Irony here is not a nihilistic act of cancellation.

Instead, it is a distancing operation marked by cognitive superiority. By “doing abstraction”, young people reframe their moral dissatisfaction. Such dissatisfaction can otherwise feel too heavy or too “serious”. It might even come across as naive or dangerous. Young people turn this feeling into a discursive practice. This practice is easy to share, yet it still retains its critical edge.

Table 6 shows the frequency and examples of textual features.

Table 6. Frequency and examples of textual features (N=169).

Textual feature	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Typical example
Bodily metaphor (heartburn and acid reflux and stomach)	121	71.6%	“It’s not the stomach burning; it’s the heart burning.”
Baseline evaluation axis (no heartburn=reliable)	98	58.0%	“No need for it to be great; as long as it doesn’t cause heartburn.”
Ironic appropriation (“rules style”)	76	45.0%	“It’s a bit expensive, but eating it doesn’t give me heartburn.”
Recurrence of template lines	63	37.3%	“The next line is definitely ‘no heartburn’.”
Password-like follow-up comments	54	32.0%	“I got heartburn”, “+1”
Explicit rights-protection demands	11	6.5%	“Is there anyone who can regulate this?”

Discursive practice: AI templates, algorithmic amplification, and ritualized consumption

Templated production of AI short dramas: A “low-cost fuse” for emotion

The direct source of the “heartburn” meme is a batch of AI-generated vernacular short dramas. Their narrative

formula is highly uniform: A small vendor who insists on good ingredients raises prices slightly because of rising costs. A peer who uses inferior ingredients attracts customers with low prices and mocks the vendor.

The small vendor refuses to compromise. Eventually the low-price shop is exposed because of food-safety problems. An old customer returns and says, “It’s a bit expensive, but eating it doesn’t give me heartburn.” The

“cheapness” of this formula is obvious: Scenes are replaceable, characters are replaceable, products are replaceable. The only irreplaceable elements are the conflict structure and the concluding line. It is precisely this replaceability that enables AI to batch-generate a large number of texts that are nearly equivalent in narrative function within a short time. Templating means low comprehension cost and high expectation certainty: Audiences do not need to invest attention in understanding the plot. They only wait for a line they already know will appear. When the line appears as expected, a playful sense of satisfaction is produced. Template repetition creates a rhythm of “waiting together - confirming together”. Users share the same expectation structure with countless anonymous others: We all know what the next line is. This shared expectation precedes any exchange of specific opinions and has already woven dispersed users at the emotional level into a potential “community of waiting”. When “no heartburn” spills from the screen into comment sections, the reason it can be immediately recognized and responded to is that it has already been rehearsed countless times in the repeated performance of templates.

Platform algorithms: Identifying “reliability anxiety” as an amplifiable emotional signal

Platform algorithms did not “manufacture” the “heartburn” emotion. Rather, they recognized and accelerated an already existing emotional tendency. Recommendation mechanisms prioritize content that can stimulate high interaction, and the “heartburn” meme happens to possess features favored by algorithms: Its expression is extremely brief and suitable for rapid comment-section responses. Its semantics are highly portable and can be applied across different content scenes; and its emotional tone, though uncomfortable, is presented ironically. So, it neither triggers an excessive emotional burden nor fails to stimulate the desire for “heartfelt-hit” interaction.

Algorithms not only amplify visibility but also

participate in shaping emotional form. When users repeatedly encounter expressions such as “I got heartburn” and “no heartburn”, an emotional accessibility is established: The originally vague sense of disgust acquires a ready-made, socially recognized form of expression.

Algorithmic recommendation creates an echo-chamber effect. Under this effect, this form of expression keeps reappearing within the information environment. This reinforces the sense that “everyone is refluxing everywhere”. But what algorithms amplify is not intense indignation but low-intensity, sustainable, teasing discomfort. Algorithmic amplification of anger often fuels polarization and confrontation. In contrast, algorithmic amplification of ironic discomfort leads to generalization and routinization. The first builds up into distinct events. The second spreads out and settles into a pervasive atmosphere.

From “follow-up comments” to “passwords”: Ritualized identification in consumption

Users are not strictly “using” a proposition; they are performing acts of recognition and belonging. When a person types “I got heartburn” under a video of a delivery rider slipping in the rain, he is not stating a gastric condition, nor is he making a specific demand. He is sending a signal to an imagined community: I saw what you saw, I felt what you felt, and I let you know in the way agreed upon by the community. This exchange of signals does not produce explicit claims, but it does produce an emotional connection of mutual recognition. “Heartburn” thus evolves from a line and an evaluative term into a password-like social practice: Meaning lies not in the literal content but in the relational network activated through use. This ritualized consumption also contains a dimension of safety: “I got heartburn” retains ample interpretive flexibility and can target merchants, phenomena, or merely serve as an empathetic response. Ambiguity is not a defect but a condition for the continued circulation of “collective acid reflux”: It

allows expressers to complete an emotional co-signature without precisely locking onto a target of critique or assuming the responsibility of argumentation. Table 7 shows discursive practice chain and data support.

Table 7. Discursive practice chain and data support.

Chain link	Mechanism	Data support	Interview example
Production	AI template batch generation	63 texts mentioned “routine/template”	Y3: “After watching enough, you know the next line.” B2: “Scroll a few and there’s one.”
Distribution	Algorithm identifies high-interaction signals	Douyin samples accounted for 47.3%	W3: “Everyone is scrolling, so I scroll too.”
Consumption	Comment-section follow-ups, secondary creation	54 password-like follow-up comments	Y1: “When you mention heartburn, everyone gets it.”
Conversion	Line → password → ritual	71.6% contained bodily metaphors	/

Conclusion

What the “heartburn” meme presents is not an isolated linguistic fashion but a typical mechanism through which young people produce and express collective feelings in a deeply mediated environment. This paper uses critical discourse analysis as its path. It combines interviews with online text coding. It summarizes this mechanism as “collective acid reflux”. This emotional formation draws on bodily metaphor as a cognitive framework, ironic appropriation as a pragmatic strategy, ritualized follow-up commenting as an interactional form, and “low-intensity moral audit” as its social practice orientation. The youth emotions constructed by online media are not limited to “anger”.

Beyond explicit events of anger, there also exist a large number of low-intensity emotional discourses in the forms of irony, discomfort, teasing, and passwords. These discourses may not trigger public-opinion explosions, but over a longer time scale they may shape how young people feel about social reality, how they define “normal” and “unacceptable”, and their habits of participating in communities of public feeling. “Collective acid reflux” deserves serious attention precisely because, in a seemingly unserious way, it persistently does something serious: It provides a speakable form for a sense of grievance that is difficult to name easily. Future research may compare the mediated paths of different emotional memes. It may also

situate “collective acid reflux” within a longer history of media and youth culture.

Specifically, scholars can examine this expressive mode, which uses bodily discomfort as rhetoric and irony as tone. They may ask whether it is a new phenomenon of the digital-media age, or a contemporary variant of older discursive strategies adopted by young people facing structural predicaments.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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