A Social Semiotic Analysis of Gendered Digital Discourse in China: Cyberbullying and Mythologies in the 2024 Yang Li-JD.com Controversy

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the 2024 Yang Li–JD.com controversy as a paradigmatic case of gendered meaning-making in China's platformed public sphere. Using a social-semiotic framework, it integrates Barthes' second-order signification and Eco's cultural codes with accounts of literacy/interpretive distance (Goody; Ricœur), crowd formation and deindividuation (Le Bon; SIDE/disinhibition), and affective publics in post-truth media ecologies. Methodologically, the study undertakes an interpretive, multimodal analysis of selected verbal tokens (e.g., "普信男" pǔxìn nán, "average yet confident man"; "女拳" nǚquán, "female fist" as a derogatory slur for feminists), visual materials (promotional stills, doctored images, memes), and interactional practices (hashtags, boycott scripts, "cancellation" rituals) drawn from public reporting and platform artifacts. Findings show (1) the rapid mythification of Yang's comedic signifiers into polarized emblems (truth-telling vs. "man-bashing"), (2) code clashes between satirical irony and harmony/face norms that pre-structure decoding, (3) the undomestication of discourse through virality and engagement metrics that privilege affect over context, (4) the emergence of a coordinated e-crowd whose moralized signaling normalized cyberbullying, and (5) institutional capitulation as brands arbitrate meaning by erasing contested signs. The study contributes to social semiotics by demonstrating the analytic payoff of blending textual, visual, and processual lenses to trace how signs travel from denotation to connotation and to social sanction. It also clarifies China-specific implications for platform governance and brand risk, and outlines avenues for mixed-methods research on semiotic cascades in algorithmic environments.

KEYWORDS: Social Semiotics; Myth; Cultural Codes; E-Crowd; Cyberbullying; Post-Truth; China; Gendered Discourse.

INTRODUCTION

In late 2024, Chinese stand-up comedian Yang Li became the center of a heated online controversy after appearing in an e-commerce giant JD.com's Singles' Day promotional campaign. Within days, male netizens flooded social media with angry comments and boycott threats, accusing Yang of being "anti-men" due to her famous quips about "average yet confident" men. The backlash - replete with cyberbullying and hate speech - forced JD.com to cancel all collaborations with Yang and issue a public apology. This incident provides a telling case study of how gendered humor and feminist discourse are contested in China's digital sphere, illustrating broader social semiotic phenomena: the creation of mythic symbols, the operation of cultural codes in online narratives, the dynamics of the "e-crowd" or online mob, and the dominance of affective discourse in a post-truth era. This research study, modeled after Bankov's (2020) socio-semiotic analysis structure, integrates descriptive context with critical interpretation. It sketches an academic article that dissects the Yang Li - JD.com controversy through multiple theoretical lenses - from Barthes' mythology and Eco's codes to Le Bon's crowd psychology, Dufour's e-crowd, Goody & Ricœur's domestication of mind, and post-truth discourse - using selected verbal and visual examples (memes, slurs, images) to anchor the analysis.

Background: Yang Li, JD.com, and the Singles' Day Controversy
This section establishes the context and significance of the controversy. First, regarding Yang's persona, her breakout on the TV show Rock and Roast (2019) and her signature joke - "Some men look so average, yet are so confident" became a viral catchphrase. Her humor, highlighting everyday gender inequalities, earned her a huge female fanbase but also accusations of "man-hating" from some men. This polarized public image set the stage for later endorsement troubles.

JD.com's decision to feature Yang in its 2024 Singles' Day (Nov 11) marketing and a live-stream sales event. Yang was one of several comedians hired to promote different product categories, specifically tasked with pitching health products. A promotional image from the campaign presented Yang as a "bargain ambassador (砍价大使) with a playful pose and tagline "开卖啦!" ("Sale now on!"), visually linking her comedic persona to the shopping festival's exuberance.

Immediately after the campaign launch (Oct 14, 2024), male-dominated forums (e.g. Hupu, NGA) and social media (Weibo) erupted in protest. Within four days, a wave of negative posts accused JD of betraying its predominantly male customer base. Users cancelled accounts and demanded refunds, with one post asking if JD was "ready to give up the male market by getting a feminist". Memes and mockeries proliferated - for example, some users appropriated Yang's own punchline to deride JD's products as "average, yet confident". The online pile-on grew so intense that on Oct 18, 2024 JD.com scrubbed Yang's images from its sites and issued a formal apology for the "bad experience" caused.

JD.com publicly cut ties with Yang, declaring "no further cooperation". Yang Li herself deleted campaign-related posts amid the furor. The incident dented JD's PR image and even its stock price (reportedly dipping amid the scandal). It also reignited debates on Chinese social media about misogyny, free expression in comedy, and the power of online mobs. Notably, while many men celebrated Yang's ouster, a counter-current of support emerged: the hashtag "I'm a woman and I support Yang Li" garnered tens of millions of views, and even some male influencers argued that Yang's satire was justified and that JD overreacted. Such divided responses underscore the cultural stakes of the controversy.

Theoretical Framework: Social Semiotics and Digital Discourse

To analyze the Yang Li–JD.com controversy, this study adopts a social semiotic framework that integrates classic semiotic theory with insights into platformed, digital-era communication. In line with Bankov's socio-semiotic approach, we read the episode on two interlocking levels: (1) content—the signs, narratives, memes, labels, and images that circulated around Yang Li; and (2) process—the communicative dynamics of networked publics, including affective amplification, crowd logics, and platform affordances that shape meaning-making online (Bankov, 2020). The goal is to account for how verbal (e.g., "普信男" pǔxìn nán, "average yet confident man"; "女拳" nǔquán, "female fist" as a derogatory slur for feminists) and visual (promotional stills, doctored images, reaction GIFs) resources were recruited into mythic and ideological constructions that legitimated cyberbullying and delegitimized feminist expression, and how a digitally mediated "e-crowd" mobilized these resources to enforce normative gender boundaries in a post-truth media ecology.

Barthes' Mythologies and Second-Order Signification

Barthes' theory of myth conceptualizes how everyday signs are "elevated" into second-order signification that naturalizes ideology (Barthes, 1972). At the denotative level, Yang Li's onstage quip—"Some men look so average, yet are so confident"—functions as observational humor about gendered self-presentation. As the line diffuses across digital networks, it is re-signified at the connotative level into a myth: to detractors, the line becomes emblematic of "man-hating" feminism; to supporters, it condenses a lived experience of everyday sexism. The derivative label "普信男" ("average yet confident men") acquires mythic autonomy as a portable insult, while Yang Li's persona is re-encoded by opponents as a figure of transgression—a sign that "threatens the natural order" by inverting the moral economy of who may joke about whom.

This mythification is not merely interpretive drift but ideological work: it erases the contingency and irony of stand-up comedy, fixing the sign into a seemingly self-evident truth ("she insults all men"). By explicating this shift from denotation to connotation, Barthes' model clarifies how a commercial appearance could be re-read as a political provocation, legitimizing calls for punishment in the name of restoring moral balance (Barthes, 1972).

Eco's Cultural Codes and Polysemy Under Conflict

Building on Eco's account of codes as socially learned rules that constrain interpretation (Eco, 1976), the controversy is intelligible as a clash of code systems. A patriarchal honor/respect code (face, hierarchy, deference) predisposes some audiences to decode Yang Li's satire as disrespect and moral injury; a feminist critical-irony code frames the same utterance as punching up at structural privilege. Platformed circulation intensifies polysemy: the same sign (e.g., a JD promotional image with Yang Li's smiling pose) is overcoded with mutually exclusive readings—"humorous sales persona" versus "symbolic smirk at male consumers." Eco's perspective explains why labels such as "女拳" (nǔquán, "female fist," a derogatory slur for feminists) or "田园女权" (tiányuán nǔquán, "pastoral feminism," pejoratively mocking feminists as hypocritical or privileged) operate as code-words: shorthand triggers that pre-structure interpretation by summoning a ready-made ideological frame, thereby minimizing the room for alternative readings (Eco, 1976).

Goody & Ricœur: Domestication vs. (Digital) Undomestication of the Mind

Goody (1977) theorized writing as a technology that "domesticates" the mind—slowing discourse, enabling abstraction, and fostering reflexive distance. Ricœur (1976) similarly emphasizes how text detaches discourse from immediate interlocution, inviting interpretive depth. Social media invert these constraints: the hybrid, quasi-oral environment of live streams, comment threads, and short-form posts collapses time between impulse and expression, encouraging immediacy, emotivity, and low-cost participation (emoji, reposts). Following Bankov (2020), we call this a digital undomestication: orthographic looseness, anonymity, and memetic vernaculars lower inhibition thresholds, surfacing raw affect and facilitating knee-jerk uptake of signs. In this register, the humorous sign is stripped of context and re-emitted as a moral token; rumors and hyperbolic paraphrases outpace corrections; and memes (e.g., image macros ridiculing Yang Li) function as affective accelerants, privileging recognition over reflection. The result is a semiotic environment skewed toward fast connotation, where myth hardens quickly and becomes operationalized for social sanction.

Crowd Psychology and the Digital "E-Crowd"

Classical crowd psychology posits that anonymity, contagion, and suggestibility produce deindividuation and moral release (Le Bon, 2001/1895). In platformed settings, networked publics coalesce into what Bankov—drawing on contemporary elaborations—describes as an "e-crowd": dispersed individuals who nevertheless act as a collective via synchronized, affectively charged expression (Bankov, 2020). Hashtags, call-and-response comment chains, and ritualized performances (e.g., posting screenshots of deleting the JD app) articulate a shared crowd identity and mission ("defend men", "punish misandry").

Within the e-crowd, moral simplification is a semiotic imperative: complex, ambivalent texts (comedy, advertising) are recoded into binary narratives (victim/culprit; authentic/traitor). Imitation and one-upmanship escalate rhetoric, while license is rationalized through procedural scripts (consumer sovereignty, "customer rights"), lending ethical gloss to punitive mobilization. The e-crowd thus supplies the processual mechanism through which myths are stabilized and enforced as social norms.

Post-Truth Affective Discourse

Finally, the controversy must be situated in a post-truth milieu in which affect and experience routinely outrank evidence in public reasoning (Harsin, 2015; Papacharissi, 2015). The perceived offense—Yang Li's mere presence as a JD ambassador—operates as an affective truth that organizes interpretation before content is considered. Confirmation bias and attention economies privilege emotionally congruent messages (outrage, ridicule), while platform algorithms amplify high-engagement items (memes, derisive labels). In Barthesian terms, the myth of the feminist villain becomes immune to disconfirmation because it satisfies the crowd's emotive and moral needs.

Synthesizing these lenses, we conceptualize the Yang Li episode as a semiotic cascade: mythification (Barthes) becomes code-constrained (Eco), is accelerated by digital undomestication (Goody/Ricœur; Bankov), is collectivized by the e-crowd (Le Bon; Bankov), and is stabilized under post-truth affect (Harsin; Papacharissi). This framework underpins the article's subsequent analyses of verbal labels, visual vernaculars, and crowd practices.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive design that blends social semiotics, critical discourse analysis (CDA), and visual semiotic analysis to interrogate the Yang Li–JD.com controversy. Rather than treating the uproar as mere anecdote, we approach it as a semiotic corpus of signs and practices that materialize deeper cultural tensions. We assembled a purposeful sample of digital artifacts – verbal tokens (keywords, slurs, hashtags), visual memes and images, and interactional behaviors – that figured prominently in the online discourse. Key phrases such as "普信男" (pǔxìn nán, "average yet confident man") and "女拳" (nǚquán, "female fist," a pejorative for feminists) were selected because they became flashpoints in the debate, encapsulating the gendered antagonisms at play. Likewise, we gathered representative screenshots of social media posts, Weibo hashtags, and forum threads (e.g. on Hupu) that either mobilized misogynistic ridicule or, conversely, defended Yang Li. These textual data points are complemented by visual materials: the JD.com promotional stills featuring Yang (later deleted amid backlash), user-created image macros and doctored photos parodying her, and snippets from short videos or GIFs circulating as reactions. By including multi-modal examples, we ensure our analysis captures how meaning-making unfolded across linguistic, visual, and behavioral dimensions of online culture.

Our data were drawn from both public reporting and native platform content. First, we scoured Chinese social media platforms (primarily Weibo, but also snapshots of discussions on male-dominated forums like Hupu and NGA) during October–November 2024, when the incident peaked. We tracked trending hashtags – for example, #我是女生我支持杨笠# ("I'm a woman and I support Yang Li") – alongside counter-hashtags and viral posts calling for boycotts. We also reviewed posts in semi-public WeChat groups and feminist circles that discussed the controversy, to incorporate the less-visible reactions of women's networks. To contextualize these grassroots materials, we drew on news articles and blog analyses (e.g., China Digital Times, The East Is Read blog) that documented notable memes and quotes. These secondary sources often compiled telling examples (netizen comments, images, timelines), which we cross-verified by locating the original posts or archival screenshots when possible. Such triangulation helped us identify which digital artifacts were not only widely circulated but also symbolically resonant – i.e. repeatedly referenced as evidence of "what the controversy means." In sum, our corpus comprises a strategically curated set of textual and visual artefacts of discourse from Chinese digital platforms, as well as commentary around them, all centered on the Yang Li–JD event.

Analytically, we treated this corpus with a social semiotic lens, asking how each selected sign or practice operated within the broader cultural context. We conducted close readings of language and imagery to decode their denotations and connotations, guided by Barthes' framework of myth-making and Eco's concept of cultural codes. In practice, this meant examining, for example, how Yang Li's catchphrase about "average men" was re-signified online – what ideological load it carried in adversarial Weibo posts versus supportive ones. Here we employed critical discourse analysis techniques: scrutinizing word choice, metaphors, and speech acts in online comments to unearth implicit power dynamics and biases. For instance, when users deployed labels like "田园女权" (tiányuán nǚquán, "pastoral feminism," implying hypocritical feminists), we interpreted it as a discursive move to delegitimize feminist claims by coding them as alien or absurd. By analyzing such terms in context – their co-text and the responses they elicited – we reveal how gendered cyberbullying discourse is constructed and normalized. CDA thus helped connect micro-level linguistic features (slurs, slogans, intertextual jokes) with macro-level ideologies (patriarchal norms, nationalist narratives) underpinning the conflict.

Parallel to textual analysis, we performed visual semiotic analysis on the images and memes in our data. Drawing on social semiotics of visual communication, we examined elements like composition, symbolism, and modality in the JD.com promotional imagery and user-generated memes. For example, we analyzed the official campaign poster of Yang Li – her confident pose and slogan "开卖啦!" ("Sale now on!") – in contrast to the doctored images circulated by detractors (e.g. adding derisive captions or altering her facial expression). This allowed us to see how the same image could signify opposite messages depending on audience predispositions: a playful endorsement versus a "smirk" at male consumers. We also interpreted the semiotics of memetic adaptations: how simple image macros or reaction GIFs (such as those mocking Yang with exaggerated features or featuring sarcastic text) functioned as affective amplifiers of the hate campaign. By systematically decoding visuals alongside text, we attend to the multimodal way in which meaning and emotion were negotiated in this controversy.

Underlying our method is an understanding that these data points are not isolated: they form part of a networked narrative driven by platform logics. We thus situate our analysis in the structural context of Chinese digital media – an environment of rapid

virality, algorithmic amplification, and "e-crowd" formation. The concept of the e-crowd (electronic crowd) is critical here: inspired by classic crowd psychology (Le Bon's theory of contagion and deindividuation) and its updates in the digital age (Stage's and Dufour's insights on online affective synchronization), we approached the wave of netizen reactions as a collective phenomenon rather than disparate voices. In practical terms, this meant looking for patterns of temporal and thematic clustering: Did many users post the same phrase or meme within a short window? Were boycott calls and insults phrased in formulaic, copy-paste ways? Such repetition and simultaneity can signal that an online mob has coalesced, "becom[ing] one by sharing relatively synchronized affective processes" as Stage (2013) describes. By identifying these patterns (for instance, mass posts of "I uninstalled the JD app" screenshots or the viral spread of Yang's caricature), we could interpret how crowd logics were at work – an echo chamber amplifying outrage and validating extreme speech through sheer volume and unity.

Throughout the analysis, our theoretical framework guided both selection and interpretation of data. We intentionally sampled artifacts that exemplified the stages of meaning-making outlined in our framework: from Barthesian mythification (e.g. the transformation of a stand-up joke into a symbol of "man-hating" or feminist "truth-telling") to Eco's code conflicts (e.g. the use of honorific or derogatory code-words like "女拳" that preordain how an utterance is read), from the erosion of interpretive distance in digital communication (as per Goody and Ricœur, evident in knee-jerk, emotive comments) to crowd-driven enforcement of norms (per Le Bon, Stage, and others). Each piece of data was thus viewed through these lenses: for instance, a Weibo rant calling Yang Li a misandrist was not taken at face value alone, but analyzed as a mythic narrative fragment feeding a collective identity ("defending men's honor"); a meme was not just visual satire, but evidence of how affect outruns context in viral form (illustrating the "undomestication" of discourse in online settings). This theory-informed coding ensured that our methodology remained critically reflexive: we continuously asked what each sign meant to participants and did in the unfolding controversy (e.g. shaming, rallying, signaling group allegiance), rather than treating posts and images as neutral data.

In sum, our methodology is a multimodal semiotic analysis of a real-world digital conflict. It is interpretive – aiming to understand meaning and ideology – and contextual – situating each sign within China's platformed public sphere and its emotional currents. By combining textual analysis (CDA), visual decoding, and process-oriented observation of online virality, we capture how disparate elements (slang terms, memes, screenshots of online actions) converged into a coherent social drama. This approach reveals the Yang Li–JD.com episode as not just a sequence of events, but as a symbolic battleground where language, images, and collective behaviors all conveyed contested meanings about gender, power, and authenticity. The methodological integration of social semiotics with critical discourse and visual analyses is thus crucial: it allows us to trace how signs "travel" from personal joke to public myth, how digital affordances turbo-charge that journey, and how the resulting discourse both reflects and reproduces the broader ideological and emotional structures of contemporary Chinese digital culture.
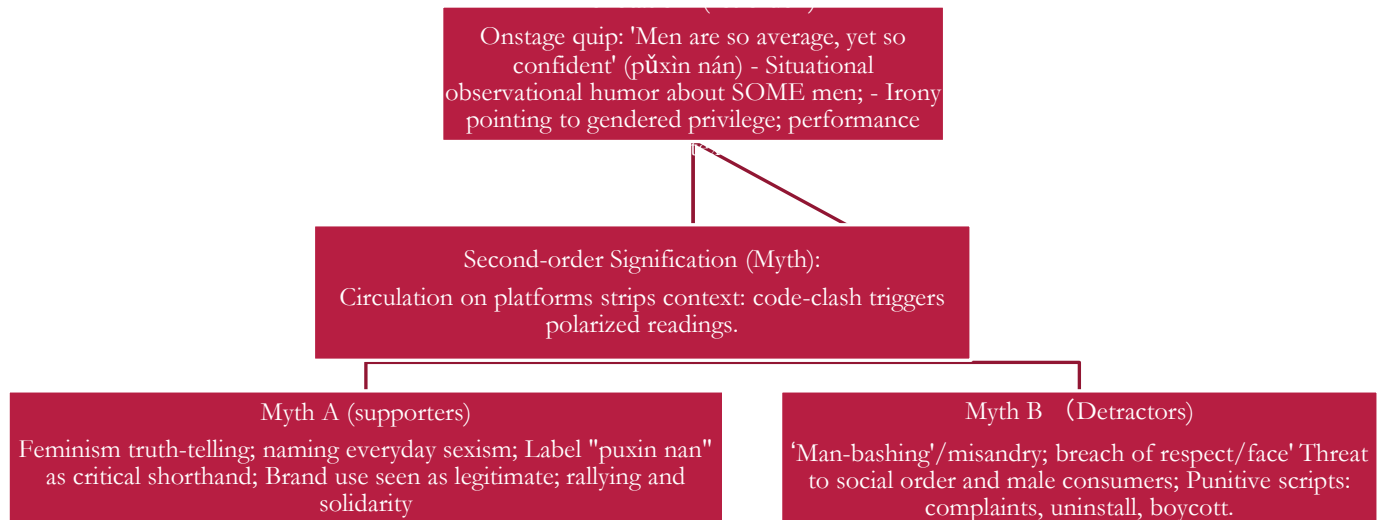
The Feminist Joke as Myth: Signification and Cultural Codes in Yang Li's Case

This section examines how Yang Li's comedic persona and signature quip— "男人明明那么普通，却那么自信" ("Men are clearly so average, yet so confident")—were re-encoded during the 2024 JD.com controversy. Building on Barthes's account of myth as second-order signification and Eco's theory of cultural codes, we show how a humorous sign migrated from denotation (a targeted, situational joke) to connotation (a polarized myth about feminism and "man-hating"), and how code clashes in China's platformed environment magnified this shift (Bankov, 2020; Barthes, 1972; Eco, 1976;).
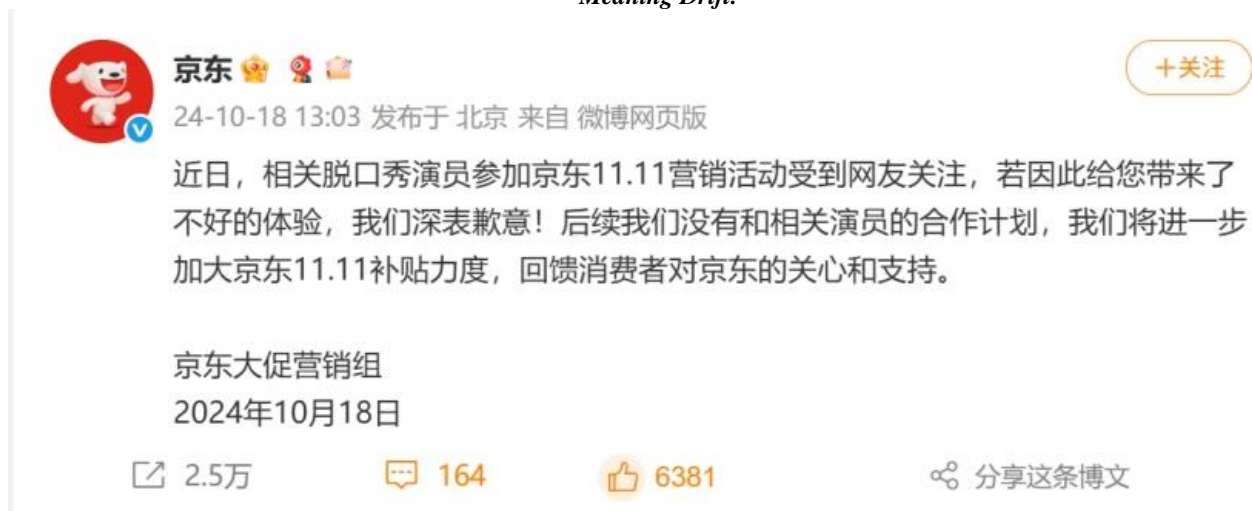
Yang Li as Signifier

In its original, staged context, Yang's line functions as observational humor: it condenses a recognizable social experience—certain men's oblivious overconfidence—into a pithy formulation, eliciting laughter and tacit critique of gendered privilege. At this denotative level, the sign indexes situational irony rather than universal indictment. Once the quip circulated beyond the club and TV format, however, it underwent second-order signification (Barthes, 1972). In the 2024 JD.com campaign and the ensuing backlash, the phrase "average yet confident" was mythified as an emblem of "misandry" by detractors—its comic intent stripped away, the line re-read literally and indignantly as an attack on "all men." By contrast, supporters mobilized the same sign as a rallying cry that validates women's lived encounters with male privilege; the derivative label "普信男" ("average yet confident man") circulated as shorthand for that critique. The same sign thus sustained contradictory connotations depending on the reader's ideological lens (Barthes, 1972; Bankov, 2020). In October 2024, JD.com apologized and canceled further cooperation after a wave of complaints and boycott calls from (mostly male) users, illustrating how the connotative myth—"Yang Li insults men"—consolidated swiftly and exerted sanctioning force in a commercial setting.

Figure 1

A Barthesian Diagram Mapping Denotation (Situational Joke about Some Men) vs. Connotation (Mythic Emblem of Either Feminist Truth-telling or Man-bashing).

Onstage quip: 'Men are so average, yet so confident' (pǔxìn nán) - Situational observational humor about SOME men; - Irony pointing to gendered privilege; performance

Second-order Signification (Myth): Circulation on platforms strips context: code-clash triggers polarized readings.

Myth A (supporters)
Feminism truth-telling; naming everyday sexism; Label "puxin nan" as critical shorthand; Brand use seen as legitimate; rallying and solidarity

Myth B （Detractors)
'Man-bashing'/misandry; breach of respect/face' Threat to social order and male consumers; Punitive scripts: complaints, uninstall, boycott.

Note: Adapted from Barthes' model of myth (second-order signification) and Eco's cultural codes.
Use: Cite Barthes (1972) and Eco (1976). Case context: JD.com apology on Weibi. OCT 18, 2024.

Figure 2

Social-media Screenshots Demonstrating the Catchphrase's Uptake as Meme/Insult and as Supportive Slogan, Evidencing Meaning Drift.

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近日，相关脱口秀演员参加京东11.11营销活动受到网友关注，若因此给您带来了不好的体验，我们深表歉意！后续我们没有和相关演员的合作计划，我们将进一步加大京东11.11补贴力度，回馈消费者对京东的关心和支持。

京东大促营销组
2024年10月18日

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Note: English translation by the author: "Recently, the participation of a certain stand-up comedian in JD.com's 11.11 marketing campaign attracted public attention. If this caused you any unpleasant experience, we sincerely apologize! Going forward, we have no plans to cooperate with the relevant comedian. We will further strengthen JD.com's 11.11 promotions to reward consumers for their care and support."

Cultural Codes and Gender Norms

Following Eco (1976), codes are learned frameworks that prime interpretation. The controversy exposes code conflict along at least two axes.

(a) Patriarchal honor/face code. In a culture where face (miànzi) and male authority remain salient interactional currencies, a woman's public teasing of men is readily decoded as disrespect—a breach of tacit hierarchy (Hu, 1944; Hwang, 1987). This code primed many male netizens to perceive Yang's satire as an illegitimate affront rather than "punching up," intensifying calls to punish the brand that platformed her (JD.com) during an ultra-sensitive sales period.

(b) Harmony/positive-energy vs. stand-up satire. Mainstream media discourse often valorizes he (和)—harmony, consensus, and "positive energy"—while contemporary stand-up thrives on irony, exaggeration, and face-threatening critique. The JD collaboration placed a satiric code inside a harmonious-branding code at the height of 11.11 competition; the result was polysemy

under conflict (Eco, 1976): the same publicity stills were overcoded either as a benign sales persona or as a smirk at the platform's male customers. JD's subsequent apology and excision of the campaign (and Yang's deletion of related posts) show how institutional actors arbitrate between codes by removing ambiguous signs to restore stability.

Feminism as Western "Other"
A further code visible in repertoires of nationalist commentary is the foreignization of feminism. Feminist claims are reframed as imported agendas that clash with "Chinese values," enabling critics to recast a commercial cameo as ideological infiltration. In the Yang Li episode, nationalist and masculinist influencers framed the campaign and its reception as a struggle against "gender antagonism" and illegitimate Westernized discourse, dovetailing with prior pressure-campaign scripts on China's internet. This coding helps explain why calls to cancel memberships and uninstall apps escalated so quickly and why the brand performed symbolic purification (apologize; cut ties).

Critical Reflection
The foregoing analysis clarifies why the controversy was never merely about one ad or one joke. It was a semiotic battleground where myths (Barthes, 1972) and codes (Eco, 1976) locked in: detractors stabilized the hostile myth through high-volume repetition, while supporters tried to re-contextualize the quip as situated critique. Rather than invoke propagandists' dicta, we point to cognitive research on the illusory truth effect: repetition increases perceived truth even when audiences "know better," especially in high-affect, low-context environments (Fazio, Brashier, Payne, & Marsh, 2015). In this light, JD.com's brief collaboration and rapid retreat illustrate myth hardening through repetition, code enforcement via boycott scripts, and institutional alignment with dominant readings. The case thus exemplifies Bankov's (2020) insight that platformed e-crowds convert contested signs into normative judgments under time pressure and affective contagion.

Digital Media and the "Undomestication" of Public Opinion
The Yang Li–JD.com controversy unfolded within a communicative environment that privileges speed, affect, and visibility over reflective, textually "domesticated" reasoning. Building on Goody's account of how writing technologies "domesticate" thought (slowing, structuring, abstracting) and Ricœur's emphasis on textual detachment and interpretive distance, recent platform affordances—live comments, trending feeds, reaction metrics—encourage a quasi-oral, low-inhibition style of participation that Bankov terms a digital undomestication of the mind (Bankov, 2020; Goody, 1977; Ricœur, 1976;). In this setting, mythic readings of signs (Section 4) do not merely circulate; they are accelerated, stabilized, and enforced through infrastructural logics of virality and crowd synchronization.

Viral Dynamics and the Collapse of Moderation
In high-velocity cycles, governance lags behind diffusion. The scale and tempo of circulation typically outpace human and automated content moderation, allowing provocative and ambiguous content to achieve salience before gatekeepers can review, contextualize, or remove it (Gillespie, 2018; Roberts, 2019). During the days in which the backlash peaked, emotionally framed posts, memes, and clipped headlines traveled faster and farther than clarifications, benefitting from platform incentives that reward engagement—likes, shares, comments—irrespective of veracity (Papacharissi, 2015). This asymmetry is consistent with empirical findings that false or misleading claims spread more rapidly and broadly than corrections in social networks, largely because such claims are novel, affectively arousing, and easily retellable (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018).

The post-truth dynamic is thus not merely epistemic but affordance-driven: ranking algorithms elevate content that elicits interaction; interface gamification (counters, badges, trending lists) further tips attention toward high-arousal, moralized signals (Brady, Wills, Jost, Tucker, & Van Bavel, 2017). In such streams, users often respond to headlines, snippets, and memes rather than to full contexts—precisely the pattern cognitive accounts warn will encourage shallow processing, reduced sustained attention, and poor source memory (Carr, 2010). The cumulative effect is a structural bias toward raw, affectively charged opinion that "hardens" mythic interpretations before sober counter-readings can take hold (Bankov, 2020; Papacharissi, 2015).

Echo Chambers and Group Polarization
A second affordance cluster—personalized feeds and homophilous communities—amplifies selective exposure and interpretive closure. Algorithmic curation and self-sorting into interest forums increase the probability that users encounter congenial cues, reinforcing prior beliefs (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015; Pariser, 2011). Under such conditions, anti-Yang sentiment clustered within male-oriented boards and like-minded circles, while supportive counter-readings circulated within feminist or sympathetic networks. Rather than a deliberative public, the result is a patchwork of parallel publics with limited cross-interpretability—a pattern consistent with research on echo chambers and group polarization (Sunstein, 2017; Bail et al., 2018). Bankov's (2020) observation about a digital "culture of navigation"—actors surfacing content that confirms existing schemas—helps explain why Barthesian myths in Section 4 ("feminist truth-telling" vs. "man-bashing") stabilized within clusters. Within each enclave, repetition and social proof ("likes," "ratified" comments) promoted the illusory truth of the preferred reading; across enclaves, mutual incomprehension deepened. For brands and institutions, such fragmentation produces asymmetric pressures: capitulating to one crowd's reading often triggers backlash from the other, thereby incentivizing risk-averse erasure (removing the contested sign) rather than contextualization.

In sum, the form of platformed communication—immediate, visual-memetic, interactive, and algorithmically ranked—is not a neutral backdrop but an active shaper of semiotic outcomes. Digital undomestication helps to explain why the controversy devolved into what observers described as a "泥潭"—a meme-driven mud-pit—rather than a reasoned debate about comedy, gender, and taste. The media environment amplified emotion, curtailed reflection, and channeled meaning toward mythic binaries, culminating in affective backlash and institutional capitulation. In the digital semiosphere, the medium is part of the message: it

configures the velocity, valence, and visibility of signs—and thereby the power of myths to govern public judgment (Bankov, 2020; Papacharissi, 2015).

The Online Crowd and Cyberbullying Dynamics

Building on social-semiotic analysis and classic crowd theory, this section examines how an "e-crowd" coalesced around the late-2024 Yang Li–JD.com controversy, how its affordances enabled cyberbullying, and how institutions responded. We treat the e-crowd not as a mere backdrop but as a meaning-making agent whose practices (hashtags, memes, mass commenting, "cancellation" rituals) shaped the semiotic trajectory of the event (Bankov, 2020; Stage, 2013).

Formation of the e-crowd

The trigger was JD.com's decision to feature Yang Li in a Singles' Day promotion in mid-October 2024; within four days, male-oriented communities and Weibo threads amplified boycott calls, cancellations, and denunciations, culminating in JD.com's apology and termination of cooperation (South China Morning Post, 2024; Yuen, 2024). The sequence—spark → viral outrage posts → mobilization (urge to cancel/complain) → mainstream visibility → corporate response—is consistent with classic crowd consolidation via shared symbols and simple rallying messages (Le Bon, 1895/2002; Stage, 2013). Observers documented mass calls for membership cancellations and pressure on JD's financial services during the peak of the backlash (The East is Read, 2024).

Anonymity, deindividuation, and toxic disinhibition

Cyberbullying intensified under conditions of pseudonymity and physical distance: users operating under handles (e.g., widely quoted pseudonyms in news coverage) employed insults and obscenities unlikely in face-to-face settings (South China Morning Post, 2024). This fits Suler's "online disinhibition effect," where dissociative anonymity and invisibility lower normative restraint (Suler, 2004). It also accords with the SIDE model: anonymity does not erase identity but foregrounds social identity, increasing conformity to salient ingroup norms—here, anti-Yang, anti-feminist scripts—thus normalizing increasingly aggressive speech (Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995).

Moralization and the rationalization of the mob

Participants framed their hostility as principled ("protecting customers," "opposing misandry"), a moral reframing that legitimized punitive behavior. Digitally, moralized content enjoys algorithmic advantages: moral-emotional language spreads farther and faster, lowering the cost of "virtuous" signaling and encouraging one-upmanship (Crockett, 2017; Brady et al., 2021). Such "high-ground" rhetoric functions semiotically to compress complexity into binary slogans (e.g., "don't use men's money to insult men"), transforming a commercial collaboration into a moral struggle.

e-Crowd versus establishment

The crowd's coordinated pressure made JD.com's brand calculus legible: removal of Yang's images and a public apology signaled institutional submission to the e-crowd's reading of the event (South China Morning Post, 2024; Yuen, 2024). As Tufekci (2017) argues, networked publics can compel rapid institutional responses by generating high-visibility, hard-to-ignore signals of reputational risk; China's consumer sphere supplies a parallel to political mobilizations, with platform logics magnifying cost–benefit asymmetries for brands.

Emotional synchrony and "crowd affect"

Stage (2013) conceptualizes the online crowd as "becom[ing] one by sharing relatively synchronized affective processes." Temporal clustering of posts, meme recycling, and echoic phrasing visible during the controversy exemplify such synchrony, which social-cognitive work links to heightened cohesion and coordinated appraisal (Cheong et al., 2023). The affective arc—shock → anger → triumph (at the brand apology) → gloating/aftershocks—was sustained by constant micro-signals (likes, reposts), entraining a common mood and lowering thresholds for further punitive speech.

Targets, scapegoats, and misogynistic scripts

Semiotically, Yang Li was reduced from person to symbol (Barthesian condensation): a stand-in for "radical feminism," onto whom diffuse frustrations were projected. The discursive repertoire featured well-documented misogynistic labels ("女拳," "小仙女") and generalized attacks on "feminists," demonstrating how scapegoats stabilize crowd affect by simplifying causal attributions (The East is Read, 2024). The shift from situational critique to categorical vilification is typical of mythic thinking under crowd conditions (Barthes, 1957/1972; Le Bon, 1895/2002).

Counter-crowds and polarization

Although the anti-Yang e-crowd dominated attention, counter-narratives defended comedic license and criticized JD.com's capitulation, producing parallel publics with minimal cross-talk (Yuen, 2024). This fragmentation aligns with accounts of affective publics: platform architectures reward within-camp resonance, not inter-camp deliberation, entrenching polarization (Papacharissi, 2015; Crockett, 2017).

Regulatory atmosphere and (un)domestication

The episode unfolded amid China's tightening governance of "online violence." The CAC's Provisions on the Governance of Online Violence Information (effective 1 Aug 2024) formalized platform duties for early-warning, takedowns, and protective features (English.gov.cn, 2024; China Law Translate, 2024). Yet in viral windows, moderation lags the speed of affective amplification—a dynamic that Bankov (2020) frames as the "(un)domestication" of the digital mind: affect and myth overrun

edited discourse before institutional correctives can stabilize meaning.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown how a seemingly routine commercial collaboration became a symbolic conflict over gender and power in China's platformed public sphere. Read through a social-semiotic lens, the Yang Li–JD.com controversy functions as a rich site of signification: Yang's comedic signifiers were mythologized into polarized emblems (Barthes, 1972), their meanings overcoded and fixed through culture-specific interpretive codes (Eco, 1976). In a digitally undomesticated environment, where immediacy, affect, and visibility outpace reflection (Bankov, 2020; Goody, 1977; Ricœur, 1976;), mythic readings gained speed and authority. Crowd psychology and e-crowd dynamics further explain the coalescence of punitive mobilization—deindividuation, affective contagion, and moralized signaling—behind the cyberbullying (Brady et al., 2017; Le Bon, 1895/2002; Papacharissi, 2015; Stage, 2013; Suler, 2004). The narrative codes that surfaced—misogynistic, conspiratorial, moralistic—were not random; they followed recognizable cultural scripts that simplified complexity into binary moral dramas, enabling institutional capitulation to reputational risk. In this respect, the case supports Bankov's (2020) claim that a "far too emotional" digital public increasingly lets affect and myth derail reasoned discourse, with material consequences for subjects and organizations.

Theoretical contribution. Methodologically, the paper demonstrates the value of a multimodal semiotic approach that integrates textual, visual, and contextual analysis. By combining Barthes's second-order signification with Eco's codes, and coupling those with Goody/Ricœur on literacy and interpretive distance, we clarified how jokes and promotional images travel from denotation to connotation, then harden as social facts. Layering in crowd psychology (Le Bon), digital disinhibition/identity (Suler; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995), and affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015) helped explain process: how platform affordances (feeds, metrics, virality) synchronize affect, accelerate myth, and license collective punishment. Juxtaposed with Bankov's (2020) European case, the Chinese case likewise hinges on gendered controversies, hate speech prevailing over clarification, and a hybrid of cultural tradition and new media—suggesting these frameworks are portable across contexts of cyberbullying and digital myth-making.

Sociocultural implications (China). Substantively, the incident reveals a persistent gender opinion gap and a threshold of intolerance toward feminist expression—even in comic form. It illustrates how corporate actors may misread latent tensions and then backpedal rapidly under e-crowd pressure. It also shows the double edge of Chinese social media: pathways that elevate feminist voices can equally empower conservative or extremist enforcement of conformity. The broader governance push for a "clean" internet complicates matters: while recent cyberviolence rules aim to curb harassment, enforcement often conflates feminist critique with conflictual speech, creating ambivalent protections for gender discourse (China Law Translate, 2024; English.gov.cn, 2024). In short, public figures—especially women who push genre or gender boundaries—operate in a volatile semiosphere primed for affective backlash.

Forward-looking considerations: Several implications are as follows. First, media literacy and critical reasoning programs can help users recognize mythic frames, illusory truth effects, and crowd escalation (Fazio, Brashier, Payne, & Marsh, 2015). Second, platforms should refine rapid-response protocols to address coordinated harassment without suppressing legitimate critique (Gillespie, 2018; Roberts, 2019)—for instance, friction for brigading, context panels, and protective affordances for targets during viral windows. Third, brands should adopt pre-emptive semiotic audits to anticipate code clashes and latent identity triggers in celebrity partnerships. Finally, research should continue to map viral sign-trajectories—combining qualitative discourse work with computational diffusion and affect tracing (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018)—to identify which memes, labels, and visuals mobilize affect most reliably across enclaves.

The Yang Li episode reminds us that signs have power—to unite or divide, dignify or destroy. In the age of the e-crowd, meaning management is paradoxically easier (anyone can mint a meme) and harder (no one controls its cascade). A heightened reflexivity about the myths we live by online is therefore imperative. As Barthes would caution, even a joke can be weaponized into myth; the semiotic task is to unveil these processes so that understanding can resist the drift toward affective orthodoxy (Barthes, 1972; Bankov, 2020).

About the Author
Siyuan Xu is a doctoral student in Social Semiotics at Shinawatra University. He completed both his undergraduate and master's studies at Monash University: a Bachelor of Arts (major in Sociology; minor in Linguistics) and a Master of Arts (major in Applied Linguistics). His research centers on the semiotics of cyberbullying, examining how memes, emojis, and platform affordances shape meaning, stance, and interpersonal alignment online. His broader interests include multimodal discourse analysis, language and power in digital publics, and cross-cultural communication between East Asian and Anglophone contexts. He has assisted teaching in academic writing and discourse studies and is developing projects that connect semiotic theory with practical online safety and media literacy.

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