Memes as Critique of Daily Life: A Study on "HomeDesign369" TikTok Videos

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Abstract

The rise of interior design short videos on YouTube Shorts and TikTok has become favourable content, offering entertainment and practical solutions for daily life problems. Recently, the popularity of these videos has surged, particularly due to the viral phenomenon of "Little John". The narratives of "Little John" and his interior problems were popularised by a Chinese TikTok account called *HomeDesign369*. "Little John" videos have taken over social media platforms, delivering interior design solutions with a unique blend of sarcastic humour and life commentary. Each video features a generated voice narration that tells the story of Little John, accompanied by design solutions using materials like 'Galvanized Square Steel' and 'Eco-Friendly Wood Veneer' which eventually become popular keywords. These elements have become memes, dominating platforms like TikTok and YouTube Shorts. Utilising Shifman's meme typology, Wiggins' elaboration and Barthes' semiology and mythology, I explored the "Little John" video meme to analyse how these videos reflect and critique contemporary living conditions. The object videos spanning from May 26 to June 1 were chosen based on Google trends 'Little John, 'Galvanized Square Steel' and 'Eco-Friendly Wood Veneer' keywords, indicating intense public interest in the video I argued that the memes respond to the struggle of many people to afford homes that accommodate their lifestyles, highlighting the trend of living in compact apartments in cities such as New York, Shang Hai and Hong Kong, as narrated in the Little John stories.

Keywords: Meme, TikTok, Interior Design, Semiology, Mythology, Meme Theory

Introduction

The rise of short video formats has become one of the pinnacles of social media trends during the 2020s. TikTok, a Chinese social media become one of the most successful apps which introduced this format ever since its rebranding strategy from Musically. As it grows to become one of the most popular social media apps, social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube released their feature to facilitate short video needs, Reels for the former and YouTube Shorts for the latter.

Short video format in general isn't replacing the traditional horizontal video, it transforms the video format into shorter, bite-size and vertical-shaped videos. Short video isn't only a format to showcase entertainment, but also a short educational and informational content. It happens also in the interior design industry where many people showcase their designs through short video formats. The short video format allows creators and brands for quick and engaging content, making it perfect for showcasing design tips, DIY projects, and before-and-after transformations. It has also led to the democratization of interior design, allowing a wider audience to access and engage with design content in a more accessible and relatable manner. As a result, interior design short videos have become a popular and influential trend, inspired creativity and sparking new interest in the world of design. As videos turn into bite-size, brands and creator turn to short video formats to seize the opportunity to market themselves, share their knowledge and promote their business.

One of the most popular home interior design accounts is *HomeDesign369*. *HomeDesign369* was originally a TikTok account demonstrating the solution to interior design problems. It gained popularity in May 2024 as it creates a story surrounding the character of Little John. Little John is often characterized as a young adult who just moved into a big city, whether New York, Shanghai or Hong Kong. He is usually depicted as someone who saves his money by working hard and having a desire to move into an apartment which he bought himself. Sometimes, he didn't get what he wanted by getting a tiny apartment. He was frustrated and decided to expand his house, so he could live and enjoy his life. The creator of the video suggested many ways to better his house condition by adding galvanised squared steel layered with eco-friendly wood veneer. In the video, the narrator explains that Little John would borrow screws from his family member, mostly his aunt, to assemble the galvanised steel. Then, Little John would create other interior solutions such as bedrooms, bathrooms, kitchens and entertainment spaces.

This story of Little John has emerged in TikTok and thus gained popularity for its absurdness. *HomeDesign369* would use Little John for many lores but with a similar plot. The lores themselves depend on *HomeDesign369* as the creator, ranging from the place where Little John lives to the absurd measure of his tiny apartment. But the plot acquires a realistic problem-solution for tiny apartments, even from unrealistic situations such as a $1m^2$ square apartment. The story of Little John is liked by audiences and thus gradually the plot becomes absurd. This absurdness is a satirical exaggeration of the housing crisis which happens in the cities where Little John's story plots: New York, Shanghai and Hong Kong. Little John story peaked its popularity in May 2024, when it became one of the most searched keywords in Google Trends. The storytelling approach of HomeDesign365 is interesting as it not only captures the solution to everyday home living situations but also criticises the absurdly small and unhealthy living conditions in an entertaining story.

To sum up these problems, I would like to ask How do HomeDesign365's TikTok videos utilise meme culture in short video formats to critique daily life such as urban housing challenges? To answer the question, I will discuss the overview of meme theory in the first part of the article. In the second part, I will discuss Barthes' semiology and mythology to encode the discourse and ideological practice that runs in the meme. By utilising these theories, I aim to seek the intersection of the meme, interior solution, and social commentary about urban housing issues as a way to criticise daily life using the narrative strategies used by HomeDesign365.

An Overview of Meme Studies

In this section, we will look at the current literature on memes. The term meme is derived from Richard Dawkins' 1976 book called The Selfish Gene. According to Dawkins, memes are small cultural units which spread from person to person by copying or imitation (Dawkins, 1976). Shifman defined memes as a group of digital items that share common traits that are awarely created, circulated, and imitated through the internet (Shifman, 2014). According to Shifman, the common traits of memes–content, form and stance–are what create memes as memes. The difference between Shifman's meme and Darwins' is her concept of meme is rather an umbrella term to refer a similar content with various forms and stance. For example, the Little John meme can come in the form of a video or a photo and will be referred to as the Little John meme. These common traits will be explained later. Wiggins (2019) added along about his definition of a meme. He argued that Dawkins' definition of a meme "ignores the discursive aspect of meme" (Wiggins, 2019). According to Wiggins, a meme is a complex cultural product which creates and spreads across the platform. Therefore, memes become synonymous with internet culture and ride along with the trends by their ability to be copied, altered, and imitated without losing their similar content, then spread through various platforms.

First, content refers to the text, which alludes to ideas and ideologies. Second, form refers to the deliverable of content, including the audio and visual inputs of certain text. Third, stance refers to the delivery of content, how to say, and what to say of specific text. Shifman borrows Jakobson's typology to talk about human communication, which includes (1) referential communication, means refering to the context, the real condition or fact; (2) emotive, oriented to the emotions of the addresser; (3) conative, is an imperative communication towards the receiver; (4) phatic, means maintaining an open conversation; (5) metalingual, means to clarify the meaning of certain text; and (5) poetic, oriented towards the aesthetic quality of the message (Shifman, 2014). Wiggins later argues that memes "are not merely content items" but rather also "visual arguments" (Wiggins, 2019). He added that meme isn't just a cultural transmission, but has a discourse power which indicates an ideological practice (Wiggins, 2019). This practice runs by seeking through the semiotics and intertextuality of memes. Semiotics and intertextuality intertwine, forming ideological practice which comes in the form of sharing, curation, and remixing (Wiggins, 2019).

Wiggins expands Shifman's memetic dimension to elaborate on how ideology, semiotics and intertextuality emerge. He argues that content is the site where ideology plays in a meme, while stance conveys the semiotics and intertextuality of a meme. This elaboration was made to analyse image-based memes, where the forms aren't as much as complex as video-based memes. Wiggins elaborated on form as the place where memes materialise with a neutral message, ranging from video and image to verbal text. The form of video-based memes can later be broken down into visual and audio forms, which can be memeified into newer

memes. For example, the Little John memes famously used a song called Morsmordre which made by Crazy Donkey, a Chinese producer. It became popular and associated with the Little John meme, and even internet users began to remix the song as a newer meme.

Barthes's Semiology and Mythology

In 1964, Barthes launched his work on semiotics called *Éléments de Sémiologie* (English: The Element of Sociology). For cultural studies scholars, semiology is synonymous with semiotics, which means the study of signs. This study also shows how signs have interpretations and meanings. Barthes's semiology is inspired by Saussure's semiotic theory, which contributed to the study of language as a system of signs. Barthes elaborated that semiology isn't only for language, but also for interpreting any other form of signs, such as images, gestures, music, and even the combinations of these signs (Barthes, 1977). Hence, Barthes argued that semiology can be used in any cultural phenomenon. Barthes' further semiotic development would lead to signs, system and syntagm, connotation and denotation, and mythology.

Barthes borrowed Saussure's concept of signs, which consists of the signifier and signified. The signifier rules over the expression, while the signified rules over the content (Barthes, 1988). He argues that the signifier and signified relationship is unstable, and depends on the context. This would later develop to uncover the meaning of a sign, not just the mental construction of a sign, but also ideological. This relationship shows that the signified and signifier is a cultural and social construction. For example, the picture of a tree is a sign. The image itself is a signifier, but the signified requires the mental characterisation of a tree; the leaves, the branches, the trunks. Depending on the context, the tree itself can hold a meaning, whether it signifies growth or protection.

The second part is syntagm and system. Syntagm is a combination of signs in a linear sequence. This combination of signs cannot be interchangeable. According to Barthes, system is a set of possible choices which can be substituted in the syntagmatic unit. Barthes explained syntagm and system in a case of fashion. The fashion system consists of garments that cannot be worn at the same time but can be used interchangeably, such as toque, bonnet and hood. Syntagm is a sequence of clothing that consists of different systems, such as skirt, blouse and jacket. The utilisation of one of these systems can create a different sign meaning to the whole syntagm, and thus create a separate meaning.

The last concepts that Barthes introduced in Element of Sociology are denotation and connotation. He introduced these concepts to explain how signs can have multiple layers of meaning. Denotation implies the first-order, the direct meaning of the sign, while connotation means the second-order which implies the cultural meaning of a sign. This includes the ideological discourse associated with the sign. For example, a rose is denotatively remarked as a flower, while connotatively associated with love and romance. Like the signified, connotations are influenced by cultural and social construction, which can signify the ideological discourse of a sign.

But semiology isn't enough to explain the ideological practice that happens in a sign. Barthes' mythology is utilised to deconstruct the ideological level, the deeper meaning of a designed sign. Seven years before launching Element of Semiology, Roland Barthes published a book called Mythologies. This book consists of two parts. The first part called

Mythologies, examined the myths in cultural phenomenon. Barthes looked for mythologies that happen in daily life such as wine, discounts, and even detergents.

The second part of the book called Myth Today, examines the myth through semiology and later its power. Barthes utilised semiology by decoding the myth as part of a sign which holds a certain meaning depending on the context. Myth therefore has its signifier and signified and considered as the second-order of semiological system (Barthes, 1972). As the second-order of semiological system, myth conveys the language system, meaning that myth acts as the whole sign or final first-order of semiological system. Hence, myth is a powerful tool to gain political power. According to Barthes, the bourgeois use myth to manipulate and maintain control over the proletarian. Using myth, the ruling class can also create neutral and status-quo imagery to maintain their power. Hence, mythology, especially that happens on a daily life basis, should be questioned to discover its truth.

Research Method

The research methodology in this article utilises Shifman's meme theory along with Wiggins's meme elaboration to explain the dimension of the meme. Shifman's meme dimension will classify The Little John's meme traits and what will be discussed in those traits. Wiggin's elaboration which includes the ideological discourse, semiotics and intertextuality is necessary to explain the topic of each trait. According to Wiggins, form is considered neutral and doesn't bear an ideological, semiotic nor intertextuality position. However, in this paper, I will use form to deconstruct the video into three signs: visual, verbal and audio signs.

From the meme theory, I will apply Barthes' semiology to search deeper for the meaning and interpretation of *HomeDesign369*'s videos. For content, I will utilise Barthes' connotation, denotation and mythology theory to explain further the memes' ideological discourse. In stance dimension, I will use Barthes' signs, system and syntagm to decode the signs and their meaning. The relationship between the meme theory and Barthes' is explained through Table 1.

Table 1: The Correlation of Shifman's Meme Dimensions, Wiggins' Elaboration and Barthes's Semiology

Shifman's meme dimensions	The locus of Wiggins' Theory	Barthes' semiology theory	Usage in this article
Content	The ideological discourse	Connotation and denotation, mythology	Decode the ideological practise
Form			Categorise the signs into three forms: verbal, visual and audio
Stance	The semiotics and intertextuality	Signs (signifier and signified), system and syntagm	Decode the semiotics

The *HomeDesign369*'s TikTok videos that are used in this article are the videos that were posted from May 26ᵗʰ until June 1ˢᵗ, 2024. These videos are chosen based on the most searched keywords that relate to *HomeDesign369* in Google Trends on the worldwide level. The keywords are: "Galvanized Square Steel" and "Little John", while there's no data for "Eco-Friendly Wood Veneer" phrase. I will explain the form and divide the signs that occur in the videos. Then, I will analyse the stance by exploring each sign, especially the repeated ones. Finally, I will discuss the content by looking for the connotation, denotation and mythology that are being used in *HomeDesign369*'s videos.

The Little John Meme: Form, Stance and Content

Form of the* HomeDesign369's *Videos

HomeDesign369's famous Little John storyline only starts in March 2024, while the Galvanized Square Steel phrase was mentioned for the first time in December 2023 (Song, 2024). The form of the meme itself has many variables. There is a generated voiceover to narrate the story of Little John, which later identified as the voice from the website elevenlabs.io with the voice name Arnold. The animated videos are made and rendered in 3D software which helped produce multiple designs and story plots.

The first time *HomeDesign369* created its own character to tell a story was on January 2nd, 2024. However, the character itself isn't Little John, but Liam. Little John only be created in their content on February 5th, 2024. The Little John lore has become popular in TikTok by a repeated narrative that tells his problem. Little John problems are diverse, ranging from surviving in a tiny apartment despite has been working hard, living in a cliff to create solution for multiple children's bedrooms.

From May 26th to June, 1st 2024, I summarised the signs to verbal, visual and audio signs in Table 2. These signs will be analysed in the next subsection to seek the repeated patterns and unique signs.

Table 2: The Visual, Verbal and Audio Signs on HomeDesign369's TikTok Videos

Date Posted	Visual Sign	Verbal Sign	Audio Sign
May 26ᵗʰ, 2024	3D-Rendered Video with Little John as the main character.	Little John; Eagle; Cliff; Size of a Coffin; Galvanized Square Steel; Borrowed Screws From Aunt; Eco-Friendly Wood Veneers; Soft Cover Against Wall; Soft Lucky Colours; Underwear; Smelly Socks; Out of Season Sheets and Bedding; Large Clothes; Trousers; Bedtime Reading Materials; Outlet Switch; Charging Phones; Induction Cooker; Veggie Washing Area; Seasoning Bottles; Bowls; Chopstick; Mirror Cabinet; Suspended Ceilings; Separate Wet and Dry Area; Dining Table; Movie Night	AI-Generated Voiceover named Arnold; Song: Morsmordre – Crazy Donkey

Date	Type	Keywords	Audio
May 28th, 2024	3D-Rendered Video with Liam as the main character	Liam; Bunk Bed; Naughty Kids; Never Do Their Homework; Old Layout Never Working Anymore; Galvanized Square Steel; Borrowed Screws From Aunt; Eco-Friendly Wood Veneers; Soft Cover Against Wall; Glass Partition; Study Materials; Charging Phones	AI-Generated Voiceover named Arnold; Song: Morsmordre – Crazy Donkey
May 29th, 2024	3D-Rendered Video with Little John as the main character.	Little John; Wife; One hundred million kids; Kick the wall; Borrow space from his neighbour; Galvanized Steel Frames; Comfy Mattress; Floor tiles; Wardrobes; The dining area;	AI-Generated Voiceover named Arnold; Song: Morsmordre – Crazy Donkey
May 30th, 2024	3D-Rendered Video with Little John as the main character	Little John; Wife; Cabinet; Neat; Organized; Induction Cooker; Sink Area; 100 years	AI-Generated Voiceover named Arnold; Song: HVOB - Dogs
May 31th, 2024	3D-Rendered Video with Little John as the main character	Be Brave and Live; Little John; New York; Helicopter; Hometown; Cave; Jade cement board; Durable for 10.000 years; Thermal insulation; Titanium-armoured door; Galvanized Square Steel; Screws from Seventh Aunt; Wood Veneer; Cabinets; Phone Charging; Soft Mattress; Studying; Movable-table; Wardrobe; Out-of-seasoned quilt; Wall-mounted Toilet; Shower; Vegetable washing area; Induction Cooker; Seasonings;	AI-Generated Voiceover named Arnold; Song: Morsmordre – Crazy Donkey
June 1st, 2024	3D-Rendered Video with Little John as the main character	Little John; Wife; Eight babies; Train; Floor tiles; Shoe cabinet; Glass door; Separate space; Galvanized Steel; Borrowed From Aunt; Wood Veneer; Durable for Ages; Mattresses; Cousin's Place; Soft cushion; Study area; Iron guard rail;	AI-Generated Voiceover named Arnold; Song: Morsmordre – Crazy Donkey

The Stance of The Little John's Meme

The videos on May 26th, 2024 to June 1st, 2024 has multiple storylines. One involved Liam as the main character, while others are Little John. The storyline of each video is described in Table 3. Little John is narrated to be struggled with his saving and ends up in live in a tiny place, having tiny space or even having multiple kids which consequently not having enough space. The overall story of Little John in *HomeDesign369*'s TikTok accounts also highlight

the working hard main character who struggle to afford his living in the big city or not enough room for their million babies. The stories always use the problem-solution format, which concluded in how the main character would have feel after the interior design solutions. In short, these problems can be concluded by the limited space that has to be solved by the main character.

Table 3: The HomeDesign369's TikTok Videos Storyline From May 26th, 2024 to June 1st, 2024.

Date Posted	Storyline
May 26th, 2024	Little John saved up his earning to buy a house. He flies to the cliff using his eagle which turns out a coffin-size room. He designed his house to create a cozy space despite the tiny space.
May 28th, 2024	Liam has two children, a daughter and a son, who shared the same bedroom. Both of the children need privacy and bother each other. The goal of the design is the supportive environment for the children to study and being private.
May 29th, 2024	Little John married his wife and become a CEO. They have 100 million kids, hence the need for bigger room. He created the design so he can raise his kids and have a big family perfectly.
May 30th, 2024	Little John has trouble with his current kitchen as his countertop has no space and the kitchen utensils placement in the cabinets are either unsafe nor waste the space. Little John sets his kitchen up to be efficient and safe.
May 31th, 2024	Little John had worked in New York and saved his earning to buy a house. However, his life in the big city takes a toll on him, so he decides to move back to his hometown. His hometown has been demolished, only left an open abandoned tunnel. Little John designed this tunnel to create a home where he can live normally.
June 1st, 2024	Little John and his wife have eight kids and it caused chaos at home. He decided to purchase a train and designed it to accommodate his family live comfortably.

As we can see through the selected contents, there are three explanations regarding the stance that can be decode. First, the repeated signs such as 'Galvanized Square Steel', 'Eco-Friendly Wood Veneer' and others are the necessary items for interior solutions. These items along with the repeated signs that has been traced in Table 2 are important for the character to create their home situations liveable. Even the exaggerated adjective on certain items, such as 'Smelly Socks' and 'Out-of-seasons bedding' serves to make this interior solution humanely possible and engage with the audience.

Second, the AI-generated voiceover sounds humorous and sarcastic tone with the chosen verbal signs. However, when we seek *HomeDesign369*'s content before the Little John nor Liam's lore, the tone and narratives are educating even utilising AI-generated voiceover. It means that the verbal exaggerated adjectives help creating a humorous vibe even using the AI-generated voiceover. According to Jakobson's typology, the contents of Little John mainly serve an emotive function. It tells the Little John emotional conditions and struggles, eventually finds a solution to housing problems. The generated voiceover added the satire layer to the content. The viewers who recognise the satire and exaggeration are entertained by the humourous tone. The humorous and sarcastic tone becomes iconic and engages well with the audience.

Third, the exaggeration and absurd stories can be perceived as entertaining the self despite unrealistic solution. However, this can be perceived as positivist way to make a way in the living situation. Little John's narrative also highlights how Little John has accumulated enough wealth, yet it isn't enough to get a proper spacious household for himself. Despite that, he always makes up with solution, no matter how worse the living condition he gets nor questioning the economy, legal, political situation. As the sign has a second-order meaning or becomes a myth, this Little John narrative is no longer presented as humorous interior design but rather a critique of modern housing.

The Content of the Little John's Meme

The content of Litte John's story provides practical interior design tips with a space for social commentary. Little John's struggles are happening because of the unaffordability of house living. Hence, Little John creatively uses many resources such as Galvanised Squared Steel, Eco-Friendly Wood Veneer and Expanding Screws to make his living bearable. Through its contents, we can see how these tools have helped improve Little John's living space. The room which only fits one bed becomes more spacious. The storytelling technique is informative and entertaining, providing the how-tos and the design process with an absurd twist. Whether the twist is in the form of flying an eagle, riding a helicopter or borrowing neighbour's wall, the current situation of Little John's living condition highlights how absurdly the real housing situation in three cities: New York, Shang Hai and Hong Kong.

The current living situation in New York, Shang Hai and Hong Kong has similar housing problems in terms of affordability (Elmedni, 2018; Sun, 2020). According to Sun, the housing prices in Chinese cities has soaring up and impacted the middle and lower-class household. In New York also had the same problem and thus creating housing programs and policy to ensure the lower-class ability to afford the house (Elmedni, 2018). To guarantee a 'cheaper' housing for the lower-class, some landlords and housing companies create new tiny apartments for a single person or small family. But the housing affordability and tiny apartments doesn't paid off. The tiny apartments had impacted the physical and mental health, especially in a family (Chan et. al., 2024).

The *HomeDesign369* story itself becomes an underlying myth that people have to adapt to smaller living spaces due to the modern housing crisis. This sarcastic, satirical and exaggeration stories is a response for a critique of the inaccessability of comfortable housing in three cities. It later becomes a myth that the *HomeDesign369* would provide the solution in a positivist way as the larger problem of the housing condition lies not in the bad interior problem, but rather in unaffordable house condition. The house privatisation in these three cities has impacted the housing cost, which creates a new problem: coffin-size houses and compact apartments.

Another consequence of living at a high cost through Little John's stories is to saving money by borrowing the family resources. The selected contents include the storyline of Little John who has been helped by his relatives for upgrading his apartments. These are the aunts who lends the expanded screw to placed the galvanized steel in multiple storylines. One storyline also talks about Little John's cousin who provides the mattress for his children. The narratives of relatives helping Little John show the condition that the family bond is still strong in the big city. It also common in Chinese cities that parents are helping and maintaining the intergenerational wealth even in the housing situation (Forrest, 2009; Niu, 2018).

At last, *HomeDesign369*'S TikTok videos eventually produce an absurdly 'expanded' looking building becomes the myth that being shared through remixing and repurposing the meme. As the famous keywords such as 'galvanized square steel', 'Little John' and 'eco-friendly wood veneer' is memeified, it also covered the real signification of the meme and thus carnivalised. According to Gorka, memes in the sense of carnivalised means that the political groups are no longer debating about the truth, but unimportant issues (Gorka, 2014). The *HomeDesign369* meme are repurposed and shared through many internet platforms outside TikTok, but retold in carnival fashion. The most popular remix was Alan Walker's TikTok post that highlighted the 'expanded' building. The video itself tried to tell how the expanded building was featured in Alan Walker's past music video. This remix showed how the building has been designed in an expanded manner. Alan Walker's music video called 'Heart Over Mind' shows that the 'expanded room design' has becoming more common in the architecture and interior design. The remixed memes are no longer talk about the underlying issues of the housing situation but rather to laugh at the satirical condition on the daily life.

Conclusion

HomeDesign369's videos with viral phrases such as 'Little John', 'galvanised square steel' and 'eco-friendly wood veneer' have become a viral sensation across the internet, especially TikTok. The videos not only provide bite-size interior solutions but also provide social commentary through the exaggerated and satirical narrative. The videos later became a video meme and its widespread engagement has resonated with its audience.

Using Shifman's meme theory, Wiggins's elaboration and Barthes' semiology and mythology, the study decodes the deeper critique of a daily in this video. It reveals that the humour and meme culture isn't only for engaging with the internet audience, but also to subtly talk about the housing crisis that happens in Little John's home whether it's New York, Shanghai, or Hong Kong. This housing crisis reflects on Little John's actions and his inability to afford a spacious house in those big three cities despite having worked hard. Another thing that happened is the ability of the family to help the character with an interior solution. The family help such as Little John's aunt reflected on how families also take part in Little John's struggle, despite living in the big city.

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