



IRONIC ONLINE BUZZWORDS ON DOUYIN  
AS POTENTIAL SUBCULTURE:  
FOCUS GROUP CASE STUDY ON SELECTED  
UTAR KAMPAR UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

CHOW SI XIAN  
22AAB02113

MR. CHANG YI CHANG

BACHELOR OF COMMUNICATION (HONS)  
JOURNALISM  
FACULTY OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCE  
UNIVERSITI TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN

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STUDENTS

CHOW SI XIAN

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CHOW SI XIAN

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## **Abstract**

This study aims to understand the interpretation and reasons for using ironic online buzzwords with potential subcultural trends on DouYin among selected UTAR Kampar undergraduate students. The global popularity of social media cannot be ignored. Most Malaysian Chinese have a Chinese background and have access to Chinese social media platforms, such as DouYin. Short video platforms such as DouYin are getting popular. It is culturally significant to observe the subculture phenomenon through DouYin. Exploring ironic online buzzwords is crucial and potentially reflects the meaning of subculture. Through this study, we can gain a deeper understanding of the role of subcultural symbols in today's Malaysian Chinese context. Through focus group discussions, this study further explains respondents' interpretation of contemporary media texts and the potential meanings of their cultural consumption. This study will be conducted an inductive approach. The respondents' answers will be analyzed and discussed. Some theories such as Dick Hebdige's subculture concept are used to provide comprehensive insights.

## **Keywords**

Subculture, Ironic Buzzwords, DouYin, Culture Industry, Media Text Decoding

## **Study Area**

HM621- 656 Culture

## DECLARATION

I declare that the material contained in this paper is the end result of my own work and that due acknowledgement has been given in the bibliography and references to ALL sources be they printed, electronic or personal.

Name: CHOW SI XIAN

Student ID: 22AAB02113

Signed: 

Date: 20<sup>th</sup> December 2024

## Approval Form

This research paper attached hereto, entitled ***“Ironic Online Buzzwords on DouYin as Potential Subculture: Focus group case study on selected UTAR Kampar Undergraduate Students”*** prepared and submitted by CHOW SI XIAN in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Communication (Hons) Journalism is hereby accepted.

Supervisor

Mr. Chang Yi Chang

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## **Chapter 1     Introduction**

### **1.1 Research Background**

#### **1.1.1. Social Media in Cyberspace: A Platform of Expression**

People use media to observe, develop their personalities, connect socially, and find entertainment (Katz & Gurevitch, 1974). People need to stay in this huge cyberspace to connect with the world. For example, people use social media to get news and to get in touch with others. It is the key component of virtual life, creating “virtual communities” (Jordan, 2015, as cited Papacharissi, 2009 & Baym, 2010). Some social media have been born for public broadcasting, while others are for private communication. They provide people with ubiquitous network connectivity, allowing people to connect globally and communicate with others without borders or time constraints. For example, YouTube is a video streaming platform, and WhatsApp is for interpersonal communication.

The trend of creating new definitions and updating old ones continues with the multifaceted development and use of social media. Social media has become the platform for creating personal profiles (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre 2011). Compared to traditional media, social media supports anyone to create and share very interactive user-generated content. Most about social media is the content, not the platform. The audience has more opportunities to create content by themselves. The emergence of various types of social media, such as Facebook, and “X” (previously known as “Twitter”) allowed users to construct their identity in cyberspace. They can become who they want on the platforms and interact with similar interest users. For instance, a 12-year-old boy loves to watch the series of “Sun Wukong” (孙悟空), and he will present himself as this heroic character in the

gaming context, which fulfills his potential and enables him to step out from the everyday persona. Social media allows individuals to present strong and colorful personal identities (Turkle, 1997). The online identity can be different from offline life. In cyberspace, people can define who they are, and build their identity as needed (Wang & Wu, 2006). This satisfies their need for escape. They can join or consume a variety of values to achieve self-identity. The exchange of various ideas is active under the catalysis of the Internet, which has sparked many new ideas. People began to break the consistent way of expression and mainstream mindset, thus developing a multi-cultural society. However, the content shown is colored by specific cultural characteristics and may resist the traditional cultures, values and norms, and social systems. When it is applied, it might be seen as a subculture that lives under the spotlight of a mainstream cultural society.

The warmth of social media lies in its ability to facilitate interpersonal interaction, sociability, and sensitivity (Hassanein & Head, 2005). Interviewees from the UK gave examples of ‘belonging’ and ‘subordination’ through group membership on social media. Respondents in this specific study indicated that they were also closer in real life to people who interacted actively on social media. “Like” and “Share” other people’s posts were seen as gestures that showed closeness. People who are not active in the mainstream culture may be marginalized, and potentially, they can find their sense of belonging through cyberspace.

Besides that, social media is not only an entertainment tool but provides a more democratic space to fulfill the desire of users to express their opinions on current global political, social, economic, religious, racial, and environmental issues freely (Lee, 2020). This open platform

allows richer cultures and opinions to exist and allows users to engage the discussions that might be marginalized in mainstream society. They may find their languages in certain communities. In summary, the Internet gave users an instrument to compose messages at their own pace, comprising a greater channel for a rational-critical form of discourse (Dahlberg, 2001).

Before the advent of social networking sites (SNS), people used public broadcasting media such as television, radio, and newspapers to convey and receive information (Miller et al., 2016). They are mostly passive audiences since can only listen and perceive. For example, Politicians published their party's ideology on the penny press to transmit the message to the public. The public watched television together to learn what was happening. The “linear model in communication” suggested by Shannon and Weaver (1949) in their publication “*The Mathematical Theory of Communication.*”, shows that traditional communication is one-way, the message only from the sender to the receiver, but the receivers lack changes to response directly to the sender. This One-way communication obstructs the public audience from giving feedback. For instance, politicians gave election talks. In this process, the politicians are the only senders. The public found it hard to respond directly, but social media made it. At least, Social Networking Services (SNS) behavior can be divided into passive use and active use (Deters & Mehl, 2012). Passive users are those individuals who only read and consume content but do not upload messages or comments. They are often called “lurkers” and do not contribute any information to the online community (Dong & Xie, 2022, as cited in Takahashi et al., 2003). People can choose to be the active audience, feel free to discuss, argue, or imitate the outside information they receive on social media. The voice of

people is unsilenced, society becomes more diverse, and more cultural ideologies emerge and develop.

Although social media are going more viral nowadays, society can't ignore that a few political leaders in power still prefer to apply one-way communication to protect the completeness of messages (Kent & Li, 2019) and control the transmission of messages. Usually, they use mainstream media or education institutes to convey political communication. Each party may have different ideologies. When a dominant culture comes into power, the minority cultures in the mass society might be marginalized, leading to their exclusion from mainstream discourse. Social media empowers users to express their cultural identities that might often challenge the dominant narratives. This may affect the prevailing ideologies and social norms of mainstream society or powerful institutions (Jordan, 2015). The raised culture may lead to movements that disrupt the traditional society structure. In this background, the social media platform becomes a battleground for cultural expression. Its rapid development fosters a more inclusive and energetic society and tries to break down the hegemonic power.

### **1.1.2 Malaysian Chinese Youth Social Media Usage**

Social media is a crucial part of social networking sites. It is an alternative for the public to share their expressions and join their interested community. According to Kemp (2024), Malaysia has 33.59 million internet users at the start of 2024, and the internet penetration is 97.4%. Comes to the year-end, it is estimated that the Internet users' number will increase to 33.98 million people. In addition, according to Statista (2024), the Internet users in Malaysia

will gradually increase every year and accumulate more than 35 million Internet users by 2029.

The range of Internet users is wide. They can be categorized into different groups, according to their age. According to the *Youth Societies and Youth Development Act* 1997 in Malaysia, youths are defined as people who are in their 15-to 40-year-olds. The Internet usage rate among 18-to 24-year-olds has reached 11.2%, while the users under 44 years old account for 52.2%, half more than the total.

With the sparking of social media, Malaysia has accumulated 28.68 million active social media users (Kemp, 2024). In quarter 3 in 2023, the average Malaysian spends about 2 hours and 48 minutes a day on social media. They have brought their lives into the digital space, surfing the online platform before getting up and going to bed. They make up the user base of today's social media, sharing content without hesitation and frequently interacting on social media. According to data from DataReportal in early 2024, Malaysians are more likely to surf Facebook (22.35 million users) and YouTube (251 million users). Another emerging trend is TikTok, with figures from ByteDance's advertising resources showing 28.68 million users aged 18 and above in Malaysia as of early 2024 (DataReportal, 2024; ByteDance, 2024). These three platforms serve as sources of information and entertainment, offering relaxation during free time. In this fast-paced era, everyone seems to prefer to stream short videos instead of long videos. The rise of TikTok among Malaysians might become more rapid. Malaysian users spend an average of 38 hours and 19 minutes per month on TikTok, ranking first among all social media (Digital Business Lab, 2024). This shows their passion



for short video and audio platforms like TikTok. This reflects audiences' preferences shift towards immersive and engaging digital content consumption.

In addition, Facebook is expected to see a decline in user numbers year by year, and by 2028, it will have 21.33 million users, compared to now it has 23.51 million users because interest in other social media platforms continues to grow (Statista, 2024). Besides that, For Generation Z and Millennials in the United States, Facebook was one of the least popular platforms used to connect with others. Gen Z and Millennials preferred video-sharing platforms, specifically Snapchat, TikTok and YouTube. In this case, a study on how short video streaming platforms affect or challenge society's culture is crucial.

One of the representative's short video streaming platforms, DouYin (抖音), the Chinese version of TikTok which is usually used by people from the Republic of China, is a popular video streaming application. It was founded in 2016 and grew rapidly in the number of registered users. According to data from the global App Store and Google Play, the total downloads of DouYin and TikTok (the international version of DouYin, known as TikTok) reached 2 billion. In China, DouYin has ranked in the top 10 most popular apps among mobile netizens, especially among high-education students, as their favorite short video streaming platform (Teng & Liu, 2020). Short video platform users are mainly under 35 years old. Those under 24 years old account for 28.5%, and users aged 25 to 40 years old account for 65.5% (Duo & Ibrahim, 2022).

Various videos, whether it is talent performances, a piece of videos that can reflect the daily life of contemporary youth, or knowledge-based videos have attracted many users who are willing to spend time “surfing” (冲浪) to make themselves become “5G” masters (5G 达人) . DouYin provides highly interactive functions such as likes, comments, and sharing, allowing them to respond to platform content on time and participate in it. It is normal to see the comment about “the comments are funnier than the video content” (评论比视频内容更好笑) , which means that every audience has the potential to create attractive content.

As mentioned before, when discussing social media, the people can't only focus on the platform but need to talk more about the content created. Everyone can be a content creator. They have the chance to become opinion leaders, not just receive passively and decode. The content creator may see as the opinion leaders, who might join their favorite culture industry based on personal preferences and may build another culture circle intentionally or unintentionally. The open online space allows different types of content creators to exist and create multi-cultural content. In this case, the emerging subculture of DouYin might be positive or negative. In the upcoming section, the researcher will introduce the concept of subculture, clarify certain subculture online buzzwords used by DouYin's users, and briefly understand the construction of these subculture products.

### **1.1.3 Subculture in the Digital Space: The Presentation of Resistance**

Dick Hebdige explained in his book *“Subculture: The Meaning of Style”* that a subculture is a niche culture that exists within a certain mainstream culture in society (Hebdige, 1979). Subcultures are identifiable, unique, and complete (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). They

independently operate under a larger social, political, and economic environment. Subculture is not equal to counterculture because it may have some differences from mainstream culture, but it does not completely oppose or deny the existence of mainstream cultural norms.

Subcultures always come with groups, groups of people with other social norms who reject the country's specific dominant culture through their unique beliefs and alternative cultural identities such as strange clothes (fashion), music, or language (Saarinen, 2022). Hebdige emphasized that subcultures bring like-minded people together and provide a space to criticize and undermine hegemony. Hebdige (1979) also labeled subcultures as a symbol, explaining that subcultures are the existence of undermining hegemony.

The development of subcultures has prompted people to move away from dividing groups by traditional labels such as social class or gender and to shift from the construction of personal identity to the construction and identification of subculture communities based on common interests (Guo, 2019). It has a unique spirit a set of common beliefs and values, and unique terminology and rituals in the group. Every existing culture has its standard values and specific norms that outsiders may not know or accept.

Subculture groups use strange clothes (fashion), music, and some languages to express their resistance to mainstream social norms. For example, people who pursue punk style prefer to wear shabby clothes to show themselves. This contrasts with the common concept of "dressing tidy". I speak through my clothes (Hebdige, 1979, as cited in Umberto, 1973). Subculture expresses social class awareness through clothing violations of clothing and more.

It is often seen to respond to hegemonic social structures and provide an outlet for marginalized groups who have different values or beliefs from the mainstream (Hall & Jefferson, 2006). It was believed that each subculture is a response to specific social pressures. Although the power of subculture is insignificant, it still means opposition to classification, unequal racial identity, and high social expectations.

With the development of social media, the space for expressing alternative identities is getting larger and larger. Borderless social media allows individual organizations to classify and present non-mainstream cultures, where “unregulated” voices are allowed, which may disintegrate hegemonic society and actively reshape cultural norms. As a social media platform for user-generated content, DouYin allows subculture members to create and share their symbols, languages, norms, and beliefs without restrictions. Subcultures can survive and develop on the platform, becoming one of the gathering places for subculture consumers. Hebdige’s analysis is still meaningful today, especially in the era of social media popularity, when the online virtual space has become a powerful tool for everyone to express themselves.

Language is a communication symbol that consists of sounds, words, and grammar (“Cambridge Dictionary,” 2024). Language is integrated with social life and is an indispensable symbol. It is an important element in cultural expression. The advent of the Internet era has emerged the cultural text that is attached to the network society, which is online language. It is the main form of language used by social media users, often carrying their psychological and ideological states (Ma, Zhang, & Zhang, 2021). Online users come into groups according to their self-identification, interests, and values, then construct their

unique language which might have a strong subcultural attribute. Different language styles reveal the values and needs of different individuals or groups. The social attributes of those who hold similar values are closer, so they are exclusive when they look at the outside community.

Online buzzwords are a part of the Internet languages, which will reflect the social phenomenon, culture, and social ideology in a certain period (Zhang, 2023). The influence of online buzzwords is increasing with the development of social media and has become a part of people's social lives. Teenagers are the main creators, consumers, and receivers of online buzzwords, and they do not follow the ordinary way of using words, step by step separate themselves from the mainstream Internet discourse, showing unique heterogeneity, flexibility, and scenario. They see the online buzzwords as the emotions and personalities container (Yan & Liu, 2023). In other words, people consume words not only for information but also get emotional effects from the messages received.

They can be categorized based on the meaning of words. There are too many types of word construction. For example, the ironic words. Ironic words refer to those words that sound positive and polite but might make someone uncomfortable and confused (Liu, Liu, & Niu, 2024). In China, people use ridiculing words, such as “6”, and “Wow, you are a nice guy” (你真是个好人/你人还怪好的咧) to present their disdain. Wang (2023) cite the ranking of Top 10 online popular words by Language Weekly and found that there are two out of ten iconic words on rank. There is “Xian Yan Bao” (显眼包) which means someone who likes

to over-show themselves, and “Wow, you are such a ‘good’ people” (你人还怪好的叻), which does not really feel that person is good.

The iconic words have gone viral in other regions, such as Mainland China. Because of the Internet without borders, investigating how Malaysians Chinese youth interpret Chinese subculture online buzzwords is crucial, and the researcher will primarily focus on UTAR Kampar students who watch DouYin in daily life and how they decode the meaning of these ironic words that are incompatible with mainstream culture in their daily lives. The researcher will delve into the online buzzwords that bring an ironic tone, to explore the interpretation and understand the stories behind the use of these online subculture buzzwords among UTAR Kampar undergraduate students.

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

Language is fundamentally passive and can be seen as a conservative power (Debdige, 1979, as cited in Saussure, 1974). With the evolution of the Internet, online buzzwords with subcultural colors have crossed national boundaries and potentially affected Malaysian Chinese communities, which have similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Some ironic words ranked in the top 10 on DouYin popular words. In this case, whether the Malaysian Chinese youth who can access DouYin in their daily interpret those ironic buzzwords, whether they conduct these words in their daily social interaction, and what their values are. It will be insightful to know whether DouYin’s subcultural buzzwords could

resonate with Malaysian Chinese youths, thus influencing their communication habits and language preferences in cyberspace and daily life.

Language is a basic symbol of culture, plays an important role in the presentation and dissemination of culture, and is also an effective way to explore the psychological state of individuals or groups (Li, 2023). Internet buzzwords have become a new symbolic system for information dissemination and an important carrier for people to express their values and beliefs. Subculture can be presented in language symbols and the buzzwords might seen as a subversive expression of existing conventional language habits, potentially expressing resistance to certain values which dominant in society. In this case, exploring people's beliefs when using those online buzzwords is important.

The use of "buzzwords" by youth first reflects a phenomenon of pursuing differences from the mainstream, but the other phenomenon of "others use it, I use it too" also reflects a phenomenon of following others to be the same as the majority. These two processes may appear in the same participant at once, which is a manifestation of young people's pursuit of group identity. In cyberspace, online buzzwords emerged and become increasingly popular, and they will be formed according to certain social phenomena (Zhang, 2023). Some people think that Internet buzzword users are just following the trend, but it is undeniable that such words have the potential power to resist social phenomena. In this study, the researcher will understand UTAR Kampar undergraduate students' multiple and complex reasons for using ironic online buzzwords.

### 1.3 Research Questions

The study proposes to ask the following research questions:

*Research Question 1:* How do the selected UTAR Kampar undergraduate students interpret DouYin's ironic buzzwords?

*Research Question 2:* Why do the selected UTAR Kampar undergraduate students participate with DouYin's ironic buzzwords?

In recent years, user-generated content has dominated major social media platforms, and everyone might become a “YouTuber” and “Tik-Toker”. People are interested in content creation, not just consumption (Lee, 2020, as cited in Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). Everyone can create content, join, and consume the interested cultural circle. The free display platform allows people to break away from the shackles of their main identity and able to criticize the existing culture in society without worrying about the pressure of reality.

Currently, short video platforms are a hot trend. At the second DouYin Creator Conference, Zhang Nan, who is the Chief Executive Officer of ByteDance (the company that owns DouYin), Beijing, presented that DouYin had 600 million daily active users as of August 2020 (). Tens of thousands of people upload videos every day, and various popular terms emerge in the endless stream. These widely spread online buzzwords have been criticized by some people, who believe that they are destroying the original language order that dominates society.



In China, Taiwan, and other regions that contain Chinese communities, many studies have explored the emergence, development, and influence of online buzzwords, and categorized them based on the meaning of the words. As estimated, Malaysia has 33.43 million population (Statista, 2024). There are about 7.49 million (22.4%) Chinese population. More related studies are needed in the Malaysian Chinese context. In this study, the researcher will focus on how selected UTAR Kampar undergraduate students' values for using words that appear to be positive and complimenting but can have another ironic meaning.

#### **1.4 Research Objectives**

- 1 To identify the interpretation of selected UTAR Kampar undergraduate students to DouYin's ironic buzzwords.
- 2 To understand the values behind the participation of selected UTAR Kampar undergraduate students with DouYin's ironic buzzwords.

#### **1.5 Scope of study**

The concept of subculture was defined by Dick Hebdige in 1979, almost 50 years ago. By his definition, the subculture is powerful to resist hegemony. But as mentioned earlier, some of the young generation use such words as they want to follow contemporary trends. Understanding their reasons for using these buzzwords offers more insights into how the youth today perceive subcultures that are often separate from mainstream social expectations.

Media texts are not only about the medium, such as television and newspaper, they are dialogic, and the decoding depends on the receivers (Kaluarachchi, 2022, as cited in Wodak

& Busch, 2004). A qualitative research method will be used in this paper to understand their interpretations and values in detail. Qualitative research allows the researcher to understand people's ideas well (Nyberg, 2012). The researcher will conduct the focus group interview with 12 individuals. The samples will be divided into three groups based on their academic performance to identify whether the hierarchies will affect their understanding of potential subculture phenomena. One group will have good academic performance, one will have average performance, and one will have poor performance. The samples who participated in the focus group interview must have watched DouYin for more than 4 years to ensure the research effectiveness.

In cyberspace, news and entertainment are constantly filling people's vision. People are able to achieve unlimited interactions on social platforms and improving media literacy is crucial because it ensures that people can browse content in a safe environment. Media literacy is defined as "the ability to utilize, understand, and generate media texts in multiple formats" ("Office of Communication, OFCOM", 2024). Media literacy should not be seen as an isolated ability because it is key to the development of free expression and access to information for active audiences (Pérez Tornero, 2008). DouYin was established in 2016, and until 2024, it has been established for eight years. From the angle of media literacy, the users who have approached this application for more than four years potentially understand more about the buzzwords that are viral online.

## 1.6 Significance of Study

In China, there are a lot of books and papers on online buzzwords. Until January 2024, 382 papers related to online buzzwords were published in Beijing University Core and CSSCI (Zhang, 2024). China started to study online buzzwords early, for example, Tang Meiyang's "Exploration of Internet Terms", published in 2010, analyzed the types and natures of Internet terms that have emerged with the development of the era. The world recognizes and accepts Mandarin (Li, 2023). In Malaysia, the Chinese education system is still well-preserved. However, there are fewer studies related to the Malaysian language subculture phenomenon. Chan and Edo (2015) discuss the "Ah Beng subculture", the "Mat Rempit subculture" was discussed by Hussin, in 2016. Since local scholars have started to discuss those subculture tendencies phenomenon, an insightful study into potential language subcultures is needed.

This study will empirically explore how the selected UTAR Kampar undergraduate students participate with the online buzzwords that potentially include ironic means, such as how they decode the meaning of "6", "Niu Bi" (牛逼), and "Wow, you are such a 'good' people" (哇你真是个好人啊). This fosters the researcher to capture the usage of these online buzzwords among Malaysian receivers. In the digital age, online communities are more active, and a variety of information comes to users' attention. The affected users incorporate these words that are abnormal from the mainstream norms into their daily communication. How students with different academic performances interpret the subculture words helps researchers to understand the meaning of language symbols in subcultures in Malaysian Chinese context.

In addition, it is worth exploring whether their purpose in using these words is to follow up with the trend of the era only or aims to counter the mainstream expectations. The trend of incorporating DouYin's subculture terms into daily communication shows how people are fascinated with the online subculture, and their possibilities to resist mainstream social norms. Understanding their reasons helps the researchers to understand students' ideas on subcultures and whether subcultures maintain as powerful tool to counter-hegemonic cultural norms in Malaysia.

### **1.7 Limitation of study**

There are a lot of limitations when the researcher is conducting this study. First and foremost, the prior research on online buzzwords that went viral on Chinese social media such as DouYin and XiaoHongShu is still in the beginning stages in Malaysia or mostly applied in foreign countries but cannot fully explain the situation in Malaysia. In addition, the researcher needs to have a good Chinese language background to research those Chinese online buzzwords. A solid Chinese background is needed to understand the information found and analyse the meaning of words. Last but not least, there is a lack of key data to show how many people use DouYin in Malaysia. There is less information about when DouYin entered the local market. Researchers can only indirectly verify its widespread by analysing its international version of TikTok users' data, DouYin's popularisation in Mainland China, and daily observation.

## **Chapter 2     Literature Review**

### **2.1 The Concept and Symbol of Subculture**

In this section, the study discusses the concept and characteristics of subculture, including representative symbols such as music, clothing, and language. The study emphasized the role of language in representing the subculture.

Scholars have discussed that a set of social norms is difficult to agree on with everyone within society and may be affected by countless factors. They might be personal values, group dynamics, and so on. People who are less adaptive to the existing norms potentially lead to cultural divisions and foster new cultural groups (Tkachivska, 2016). When people define “culture” as a group of people who share common and long-existing beliefs and norms, they are considered “normal”, while subculture is the practices against the “normal” culture (Blackman, 2014). For example, people always follow formal language norms when using certain words. “Awesome” (厉害) is a positive compliment and should not be stigmatized and turned into an ironic word. People who use “awesome” and “you’re great” as ironic words to deride others may be considered “abnormal” because they do not express the original meaning of the words when using them.

Subculture is a subdivided culture in society (Rössler, 2017, as cited in Gordon, 1947). It is a new community with a certain “abnormal” color that appears in the social structure. The community forms their trendy lifestyle, often representing members’ collective identities (Li, 2023). The researcher argues that every subculture is neither right nor wrong. Because everyone has a different definition of “normal”. Besides that, the researcher thinks that the

long-existing values and norms exercised within a society also affect people's acceptance level.

In terms of subculture, a classic study Dick Hebdige (1979)'s "*Subculture, the Meaning of Style*" deeply portrays the concept of subculture. He agrees that the subculture is always in a subordinate position because it is not subject to mainstream culture, often takes a relative position, and is deconstructive. The core of subculture lies in its "sub", or "secondary", representing a non-mainstream, non-local cultural phenomenon that is different from or less consumed by the mainstream cultural society. As Hebdige said, their subordinate status originates from the difference with mainstream culture. Therefore, the researcher assumes that subculture is not necessarily bad but possibly is an alternative culture.

People with collective subculture styles distinguish themselves from mainstream culture through distinctive behaviours. In this case, the emerging subcultures seem to compete with the mainstream dominant society. Subculture is characterised by a lot of designations that serve as a symbol for communication among them, representing their isolation, opposition and self-expression (Tkachivska, 2016). When a group of people have internal consistency in their style, but this style is opposed to the external environment, they can be defined as a subcultural group. Internally consistent style refers to the unique dress, language system, music taste, and so on within a specific subcultural circle.

Subculture groups use strange clothes (fashion), music, and some language to separate themselves from mainstream society. Walking in the alleys of less developed areas in the

United States, you may see boys with their hair standing up high. Their hair is colorful. They wear ripped jeans, hold cigarettes in their mouths, and walk swaggering on the street. This is far from the “neatly dressed” folkways. They are potential subculture expressers. Miller’s (1958) research shows that subcultures are more likely to form in rural or lower-class areas. Because of the clear hierarchy of social classes, these people at the bottom of the structure are often difficult to see. As Cohen (1955) pointed out, people’s high failure rate prompts them to create new ways to succeed. When this group of “losers” gather and begin to seek a way out in their way and appear different from mainstream society, subcultures are born. Therefore, the researcher argues that people with lower academic results may express themselves in a more subculture way than those with better academic performance.

Nelsen and Rosenbaum (1972) agree with Lewis’s research (1963) that language helps to identify users as culturally unique people, conveying specific values and norms. In other words, language can serve as a subcultural symbol and display cultural characteristics. People use language to express attitudes reinforce selective values and categorise the social environment. As Guessabi (2013) mentioned, language is more than the language itself, a particular language represents the culture of a particular social group, and learning a language is also learning social behavior and its associated customs. He also cited Krober’s (1923) research, which states that the emergence of culture begins with the birth of language and that they depend on each other and develop. They might have intertwined roots.

“Ah Beng” refers to people who show a strong tendency to show non-elite tastes, such as wearing mismatched clothes and dyeing their hair brightly (Chan & Edo, 2015). The song “Steady Bombibi” released by Malaysian local Internet influencer “Dissy” (低清) in 2021

quickly became popular on the Internet and has been played on YouTube for up to 7 million times (Dissy, 2021). They positioned themselves as “Ah Beng” and used music style and language to show their different personality. The song lyrics contain non-Mandarin words but dialect tendencies words such as “Lim Bei” (林北) and “Hoot” (meaning to hit/punch). These potential subcultural terms are not uncommon in Chinese circles.

Just as the idea of “language emerged with the formation of human society”, scholars stated that Internet language emerged with the birth of the Internet Society and formed a new social dialect (Elsamman, 2024). Tang (2010) also agreed that Internet language is not much different from real-live language but can be said as a “social variation phenomenon” caused by the emergence of the Internet. It is the result of the emergence of Internet users. With the popularisation of mobile Internet, more and more people are participating in it. Internet buzzwords often express “generational irony”, using irony to symbolise the value conflicts and aesthetic generation gaps between different generations, potentially making them become the symbol for expressing a utopian idealistic resistance (Jiang, 2022). As mentioned above, buzzwords potentially reflect certain social phenomena. Therefore, it can be seen as an expression symbol of cultural phenomena.

## **2.2 Challenging the Norms: Subculture, Moral Panics and Cultural Industry**

In this section, the researcher discusses the issue of moral panic caused by people’s feeling uncomfortable with subculture, bringing out the role of subculture as a powerful tool to resist hegemony and the mainstream. In addition, this section examines the impact of the



emergence of cultural industries on the role played by subcultures. This facilitates further discussion of the role of subculture online buzzwords in the Malaysian Chinese context.

Certain media contexts that are considered subculture content may not be understood, raising people's panic. This is the reaction to their inability to understand the subculture symbol. Goode (2017) mentioned in his study that moral panic refers to people feeling fear and being threatened when they see "abnormal" phenomena or behaviors in society. This abnormal group is regarded as "folk devils" because their behavior is unpredictable and may harm society (Rohloff & Wright, 2010). Those who always use swear words in daily interaction or use originally complementing words to present ridicule may attract critics.

People believe that "abnormality" will damage the culture, lifestyle, and core values of society. However, the researcher argues that everyone's definition of "violation" is different, so not everyone in society feels panic. For example, some people think that the popular swear word "Ma De" (妈的) is just an attack, but people can assume that some people may think that this swear word contains insults to women and mothers. Refer to Goode (2017), moral panic may also come from loopholes in national laws. People are worried that powerful agencies cannot solve social problems, so they continuously worry. This may lead to their discrimination or impose stereotypes on "abnormal culture". In other words, moral panic is related to personal beliefs or national mechanisms.

Hebdige (1979) explained that the core values of the class and power society are sobriety, ambition, and obedience. Powerful people want to control as much as possible to consolidate

their power. Subcultural values such as hedonism, contempt for authority, and the pursuit of “abnormal” symbols are seen as threats that may replace these values (Cohen, 1955). If some words are originally positive but infect ironic meanings when they become online buzzwords, it seems like contempt for the language system. De Kloet (2010) stated that the subcultural styles are a response to hegemony and surveillance.

Additionally, Rössler (2017) mentioned that Dick Hebdige defined subculture in more detail in his other publication *“Hiding in the Light”* (1988), stating that the subculture is a volatile concept, usually about resistance, but sometimes with obedience. One of the schools of thought on subculture, Birmingham School, believes that “subculture resistance” actually is a way to seek cultural identity.

Unfortunately, the meaning of subcultures as a powerful resistance tool faces the dilemma of commercial exploitation. Some people might be trapped in the culture industry. According to Adorno and Horkheimer (1944), those in power in the culture industry determine what the audience sees. They blur the audience’s perception and aim to maximize profit. Under entertainment and media monopolisation, people are shaped same culture and norms. Subcultures are packaged by capitalists and appear in mainstream media. After being absorbed, they lose their resistant nature (Hall & Jefferson, 1993). Hip-hop culture was originally a subculture developed by poor and oppressed black people when they lacked social, economic, and political status (“DigitalNC”, 1990). It was a channel for them to speak out and be heard. After being packaged by capitalists, a program called *“The Rap of China”*

was born, in this program, the rappers compete for the final championship to gain fame. The original meaning of Hip-Hop culture has been blurred.

In this study, the researchers discussed the significance of subculture language symbols, focusing on how Malaysian Chinese users interpret and engage with ironic online buzzwords. Specifically, it examines users' values to understand whether these buzzwords still have subculture resistance functions or have been absorbed into the cultural industry. By situating this analysis in the Malaysian Chinese context, the research contributes to understanding the subculture theories in a localized context.

### **2.3 The Role of Social Media in Solidifying Subculture**

In this section, the researcher emphasises social media, especially DouYin's role in carrying on subculture. The nature of social media may give more opportunities to the users to consume their subculture. Scholars have studied buzzwords before the popularization of social media, this ongoing phenomenon should be looked into within the social media framework.

Numerous studies have stated that the media has a role in integrating society and in cultural communication (Hasebrink, 2023; Wibowo, Hanna, Ruhana & Arif, 2023). The politicians in the past broadcasted their political speech on television, to influence the public. Besides that, the Penny Press played a major role in defining American society in the early 19th century ("UBC Blogs," 2013). All these traditional media are powerful to shape the audience's understanding.

The advent of the Internet has brought about earth-shaking changes in the media landscape, since digital technology has entered every aspect of people's lives (Mishra, 2020; Hassani, Xu, & Silva, 2021). When ordering food in the restaurants, restaurants may no longer provide physical menus, but instead allow customers to scan a QR code to complete the ordering process. When people go out, they do not need to bring their wallets, because their mobile phones can complete payment, parking fees, and other matters. In addition, the spread of information and culture has transcended social and geographical boundaries (Belmar & Glass, 2019). Sound, images, and text are exchanged between countries or regions, and the exchange of information can be completed instantly (Kramer, 2022). Social media information is not even delayed. Just use your fingers to operate and type on a simple page, press the send button, and in about two seconds, your family in the southern hemisphere can receive your message from the sender in the United States.

The advent of the internet has given rise to social media which enables the people to stay connected with each other, and the audience may become active, to post, to share and to comment with each other. Social media is a set of Internet-based applications that allow for the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2012). In terms of the phenomena in cyberspace nowadays, people potentially know that digital media is trending. Youth are recovering or creating their language and culture by participating in and using social media technologies to create online communities. Social media has become a means of spreading their voices (Hinton & Putra, 2020). When studying minority languages, Li, Razi, & Yaakup (2023) mentioned that this type of “dialect” is an important part of minority culture and can also be conveyed through social media. This allows users of

minority languages to form virtual communities directly through social media without relying on the government or other forces, providing breathing space for their languages (Belmar & Glass, 2019, as cited in Fishman, 1991). Similarly, the researcher argue that the popular online words derived from subcultures may seem strange, incomprehensible, or even obscene to mainstream society. That may simply be because mainstream cultural consumers do not know or understand. Because they cannot be relieved in real life, this group of subculture network language consumers will seek other ways out and turn to social media platforms. In a social media environment with minimum language restrictions, social media has become an important channel for a “minority” to participate in culture (Lai et al., 2020).

Social media has promoted subculture to a certain extent, allowing more group members to be exposed to their own culture (Kramer, 2022). This means that social media has contributed to the spread of subculture. He conducted a study on one of the local ethnic minorities in the United States, the Lakota Nation, to explore their role in protecting marginalised local dialects through social media. Most respondents said that they would use social media to learn about cultural activities. Some participants agreed that social media is one of the ways to regain the status of their indigenous languages, especially among the younger generation. In other words, social media provides a way to protect their language. In general, social media has revitalised marginalised languages that are almost “extinct” and has given subcultures, which have been crushed away by mainstream culture, a chance to survive. In this context, the meaning of online buzzwords may be preserved, and their status may be maintained.

Boy's Love (BL) is known as the homosexual love between men, which is not easily accepted by mainstream society in China. The BL fan community used to be a marginalised subculture group, and social media has allowed them to export their suppressed discourse and co-exist with mainstream culture (Min, 2017). Social networking sites are the basic platform for China's BL community to expand their voices, as members of this subculture do not need to reveal their real identities and communicate with others face-to-face. The Internet allows and becomes the main channel for the creation and dissemination of BL artworks. Online, BL authors create their works and fans exchange their views on the stories. The chat room function in social media provides a space for online communication between authors and fans who are unable to participate in BL culture in reality. In summary, the subcultural groups gain the power to build virtual communities via social media, express their cultural demands, and develop a collective identity that confronts mainstream society. It is an alternative outlet for those cultural identities being marginalised and suppressed by mainstream society. Based on this idea, people seem to have greater freedom of expression on social platforms. Perhaps people will not be scolded for incorporating vulgar and unfashionable words into communication and using ironic words to express dissatisfaction or desire is rarely criticized.

As mentioned earlier, subculture consumers are a circle with a smaller population than the mainstream culture, but with their own language and unique culture. They are authentic and independent, but they seem dependent because of social phenomena. In the era of mass media, mainstream media is the only carrier for presenting minority cultures, but the content of mainstream media is argued because it may have the problem of insufficient

representation of minority cultures (Li, Razi, & Yaakup, 2023, as cited in Ira & Mt, 2001). Subculture groups that appear to be weaker than mainstream culture have always been the focus of mainstream cultural groups, but most of them are from the perspective of mainstream culture, and subculture groups themselves have very few voices (Li, Razi, & Yaakup, 2023, as cited in Wang, 2021).

Stereotypes presentations and portrayals of subculture consumers have always existed in news and film works (Dixon, 2019). For example, the “Mat Rempit” groups in Malaysia. The term Mat Rempit was introduced and popularized by the Malaysian mass media to refer to individuals who use powerful small motorcycles to participate in illegal races (Hussin, 2016). The Royal Malaysian Police (PDRM) describe them as the “road bully” and try to use this word to replace the term, Mat Rempit. In a behavioral study of these mat rempits by Mia, Amin, Shuib, & Mannan (2013), it was found that only a few respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the ridicule and abuse from society because they believed that society had no right to judge them. The existence of stereotypes is related to the media’s presentation, and on the other hand, it is related to the fact that minority groups have fewer channels for speaking out. In this situation, social media, which is a space of free expression, becomes important for subculture circles. It may help to decrease or solve these challenges.

As mentioned before, social media encourages candid communication and self-expression, and people can speak out their ideas and beliefs with relatively less restriction on social platforms. Therefore, Internet spaces can be seen as “safe spaces”, are the areas where subcultural languages do not have to compete with the majority language (García, 2009).

These spaces need to be protected so that users of subcultural languages can use their languages as usual. As Belmar and Glass (2019) cited from Androutsopoulos (2014), Virtual communities seem to be the perfect tool for subcultural language audiences to gain their place in the “survival of the fittest” market of the Internet. From the researcher’s viewpoint, more such spaces are considered reasonable, or can say that they are necessary.

DouYin may be a good tool for understanding and participating in subcultures because people can freely use search functions to watch videos of interest repeatedly. The online buzzwords may be spread widely through the borderless Internet service. DouYin is a short video sharing mobile application launched by the Chinese company ByteDance. DouYin is a household name in China, with 748 million monthly active users as of September 2024 (Statista, 2024). It is similar to the well-known social media platforms such as Instagram and its international version TikTok. According to the same statistic, TikTok has more than 27 million users in Malaysia, ranking behind Indonesia, Vietnam, Philippines, and Thailand but still higher than other Southeast countries. After DouYin shows out users' Internet Protocol Addresses (IP Addresses), many users' pages appear with “Malaysia”, showing their location. In addition, the company of TikTok, which is ByteDance, has set its office in Malaysia. In other words, DouYin has a high penetration rate and many active audiences. Its complex data algorithms, interesting features, user-friendly oriented, and powerful content put DouYin as the leader edge in the digital industry. Its emergence has enabled users to shift from pure viewing to interactive communication (Jiang, 2022). Given the popularity of DouYin, more researchers should join in and discuss the cultural significance of its existence.



Among the content uploaded by DouYin creators, short videos account for the largest proportion. Fragmented narratives are clearer at a glance, allowing the audience to decode the content presented, and it is more suitable with the fast-paced life (Chen, 2024). The construction of virtual communities on short video streaming platforms originated from the common hobbies of users. People gain a sense of belonging from the group and then develop a youth subculture (Liu, 2019). Highly interactive platforms bring together like-minded people and online communities emerge as the times require. In the past, people were individuals interested in something, but now, DouYin brings all these individuals together. They find themselves in the community and gain a sense of belonging.

Dong and Xie (2024) analysed DouYin's users' watching motivation, and the result can be summarised into six categories: seeking new things, and habits, maintaining social relationships, releasing pressure, killing time, and escaping reality. In other words, DouYin allows the users to become who they desire, without realistic concern. DouYin is not only a platform for entertainment and social interaction, but also a transmitter of new ideas. As a cultural medium, it will have a profound impact on the values of young people. DouYin culture has a profound impact on young people's language expression, aesthetic preferences, and social behaviour (Chen, 2024).

The term Dopamine Dressing was proposed by American fashion psychologist Dawnn Karen. It comes from the happy substance "dopamine" released by the brain when people feel happy. Dawnn Karen believes that bright and vivid colors or patterns will affect emotions and using them to dress yourself can stimulate the secretion of dopamine, thereby

enhancing happiness and well-being (“ELLE,” 2023). Many new trends, such as fashion dopamine dressing (colourful dressing styles that make people feel happy and secrete dopamine), memes, and music have originated from DouYin and spread widely. They formed their culture group. In this case, the users of buzzwords meet on DouYin and shape common expressions. Potentially, the buzzword users see them as the loop of participant language subculture.

#### **2.4 Youth Participation in Subculture**

This section explores how youth use the convenience of cyberspace to develop subcultures and emphasizes the role of online buzzwords in expressing oneself and resisting hegemony.

Youth in Malaysia are people between 15 and 40 years old (Women and Youth Empowerment Division & Resilience and Social Development Department, 2019, as cited in National Youth Policy, 1997). However, this study only focuses on how the gap in academic class affects youth’s beliefs about subcultures. In addition, previous academic studies have given the idea that the main creators and users of subcultures are people around 20 years old. Therefore, the age range covered in this study is not as wide as the definition of state.

Prensky (2001) uses the terms “Digital Natives” and “Digital Immigrants” to describe contemporary youth. They have grown up with the development of Internet technology and new media and live in the digital age (Jain & Yadav, 2019). In other words, Internet

technology can be described as the good friends of young people nowadays because they are growing up in the Internet technology environment.

As stated earlier, cyberspace takes the role of carrying subculture. According to the “2019-2020 China Internet Trend Report” released by Tencent Holdings Ltd, more than half of the people know or participate in at least one subculture. This data is particularly evident among young netizens. Among the research samples under the age of 20, 75.9% pay attention to subcultures, and 19% of them are loyal fans of subcultures (“Sohu,” 2019). Online communities allow youth to reorganize or shape culture, and help to cultivate unique styles, behaviors, and interests, thereby forming new cultural norms and practices in their community (Jain & Yadav, 2019). This provides youth with a subcultural identity that is different from the established identity. They can be whoever they want to be.

Hebdige (1979) believes that the youth use their exclusive subcultural styles to rebel and make trouble to find pleasure, which is a manifestation of their incompetence, but also a symbol of their power. As mentioned before, the marginalized groups are difficult to see in society. In this case, they use subculture as a channel to be discovered and enjoy being discovered. Subcultural youth use their “abnormal” style to launch a “symbolic guerrilla war” against mainstream culture (Hebdige, 1979, p. 105). In other words, subcultural style enables a group to recognize themselves and also be discovered by others (although they may be weird and incomprehensible to the people who lives in mainstream society). At least, power can be widely communicated, and even can be communicated to subculture outsiders (Gelder & Thornton, 1997, p. 373).

The virtual society has disintegrated the group identity in traditional society. Virtual and free cyberspace has become a social outlet, countering the hierarchical relationship that has been deeply ingrained in society (Wang & Wu, 2006). In the virtual cultural space, young people are far away from the troubles and frameworks of the real world, allowing them to exist independently, showing youth are trying to get rid of educators such as parents and teachers. They can be understood when they use ironic online buzzwords.

Entertainment is only superficial; the core reflects reality. There is an assumption that youth participate in subcultures for change (Yan & Liu, 2019). As Geoffrey Pearson showed in his study “Hooligans”, subcultural youth are seen as troublesome, they do not follow the rules, always violate social norms, always attract people’s dislike, and even moral panic (Pearson, 1983). They are performing themselves to the mainstream social group, trying not to follow and challenge the dominant cultural norms, by showing a strong oppositional nature.

Online buzzwords follow a strategy of “micro-change”, that is, it hopes to slowly penetrate society through tiny forces and change some deep-rooted concepts. In cyberspace, young people constantly break conventional language expression and writing norms, mix letters, numbers, symbols, and words together, and create many buzzwords. This has formed a unique subculture style with a certain degree of exclusivity, presenting an opposition to mainstream culture (Yan & Liu, 2019). The researcher assumes that the online buzzwords are the positive attempts made by the youth to realize their true selves. Usually, the users of subculture products such as online buzzwords are also the youth who are more innovative

and have more active thinking. Therefore, the online buzzwords are often more novel, lively, and vivid (Zhang, 2024).

However, as mentioned above, the emergence of cultural industries may blur the rebellious nature of subcultures. Whether the youth today realise that participating in subcultures potentially expresses dissatisfaction with the mainstream, rather than just trendy entertainment? Therefore, the researcher started this study to interpret the motivations of UTAR Kampar undergraduate students who participate in potential language subcultures on DouYin. From this, the researcher roughly builds the basic theoretical framework in the Malaysian Chinese context.

## **2.5 Online buzzwords: Ironic expression**

This section mentions the phenomenon of online buzzwords and explains their role as a product of cyberspace. In particular, ironic online buzzwords are mentioned as potentially containing subcultural properties, exploring their concepts while discussing the role of these words in reflecting social discontent and expectations.

The popularity of the Internet and the development of new media increase communication power, pushing society into an era where “everyone can speak up.” (Zhang, 2023). In the researcher’s opinion, the Internet gives opportunities to people who have no space to speak. The language only stops changing when the social life is not changing anymore (Li & Li, 2018). In other words, language develops with the development of society. When new things or new relationships emerge, new words might appear. Online buzzwords are the most

realistic portrayal of public status (Zhang, 2024). The researcher can discuss that the online buzzwords potentially reflect the users' needs and meet people's expression needs.

Online buzzwords are the projection of social issues, reflecting the social and cultural atmosphere in people's real lives. They are the result of the joint action of multiple backgrounds and variables in society (Liu, Liu, & Niu 2024). Buzzwords are not only a language game, but they reflect the current concerns and issues within society. Buzzwords are historical. Because of the instantaneous nature of online buzzwords, the researcher argue that some online buzzwords will lose their popularity after the specific social phenomenon they represent disappears.

Online buzzwords are not only a linguistic phenomenon but also a mirror of social psychology in a certain period (Liu, 2023). In other words, one or more subjective thoughts were hidden behind the online buzzwords. These buzzwords represent the rise of grassroots power. People might release their ideas through various buzzwords to strengthen or counter mainstream values. For example, "Tang Ping" (躺平) means that people accept anything that happens instead of arguing. They lose the motivation to fight. This word appears to be a compromise, but in fact, it is a peaceful way to rebel against this highly pressured society. These online buzzwords reflect people's resistance to real life. "Tang Ping" (躺平) shows that they cannot change the status quo and have no choice but to laugh at themselves (Li & Li, 2018). As mentioned earlier, there are multiple subcultures within society and the issues that each subculture group pays attention to may shaped their different buzzwords (Li, 2014). Online buzzwords also have "market segmentation". It is common for two groups of

people to feel confused when they look at each other's buzzwords (Liu, 2023). In the process of message transmission, words are constantly split, deconstructed, and reorganized, and new meanings emerge according to hot social topics and social dynamics, thus forming their new user groups. They reflect the rapid changes in national social life and people's values. They have become a tool to record the changes in people's thinking patterns, value orientations, moral cultivation, and so on. They are the most authentic records of social life (Li & Li, 2018). The buzzwords may have both positive and negative colours (Zhang, 2023). They can be categorised into many categories in different ways, either constructing-based or meaning-based. Very few internet buzzwords can be completely inducted into a single category (Elsamman, 2024).

As mentioned before, buzzwords can be categorised based on meaning. Some of these buzzwords bring ironic meanings. Irony is essentially negative, a linguistic phenomenon in which "what is said" and "what is referred to" are in opposition (Jin, 2023, as cited in Grice, 1975). Online buzzwords are a common way to express irony. After the addition of rhetoric such as ridicule and exaggeration, the ironic effect was achieved. Among the three types of irony, verbal irony, situational irony, and dramatic irony, verbal irony is the most common (Shao, 2024, as cited in Lv, 2021). It is a way of expressing attitude and spreads rapidly on social platforms. It reflects that Internet users have changed their expressway: instead of directly using swear words to attack and express anger, they express their dissatisfaction in a witty and humorous way (Jiang, 2022). This way is more obscure and euphemistic, and at the same time, it attracts attention because of its unique style.

Why do some words have different meanings from what the public generally believes them to mean after they become online buzzwords? Tang (2010) proposed that the Internet communication process may change the genes of words, causing their original meanings to change and produce another meaning, then counter with the language system. Based on this idea, this study interprets the decoder's answers to know whether these "metamorphism" words have become one of the ways for subculture groups to resist the language system. Such as, "cute" (可爱) potentially reflects "pitiful, unloved" (可怜没人爱), and "genius" (天才) may mean "born fool." (天生的蠢材). For example, "You are so smart, I can't keep up with your IQ" (你真聪明, 我跟不上你的智商) is a statement that pretends to praise the other person's intelligence, but some use it to express worrying to another person's IQ.

In fact, the emergence of irony represents people's dissatisfaction with certain events, people, actions and opinions (Shao, 2024). The use of ironic online buzzwords to express disagreement seems similar with the resistant nature of the subculture. For example, "I wish you success" (我祝你成功) seems to be a perfect blessing, but it is actually a comment made by Chinese singer Na Ying (那英) on the performance of actress Zhang Ziyi (章子怡) in a music program. Zhang's poor performance dissatisfied Na, but Na did not want to disrupt their relationship.

In some cases, irony is a way of expressing expectations. For example, someone comments "Guo" (郭老师), who is famous on DouYin because of her nonsensical style as "You are



so quiet” (你好文静啊), “You are the most dignified Internet celebrity I never seen” (你是我见过最端庄的网红) . In addition to irony, it also reflects peoples’ expectations, which hope to see a more normal image on Internet celebrities (Shao, 2024, as cited in Pan, 2014). Based on the subculture tendencies inherent in these buzzwords, we conducted research to understand the users’ motivations for using them and to gain insights into the roles and development of current subcultures language.

With the tendency of the Internet and social media, people are more exposed to a variety of speech and expressions, which has led to changes in the meaning of words. Words that originally had negative connotations may gradually lose their offensiveness and become common slang or buzzwords (Liu, Zhang, & Li, 2024). Nowadays, swear words are no longer real “swear words”. Sometimes people regard them as commonly used neutral words, and they are not accompanied by insults or attacks when they are spoken (Liu, Liu, & Niu, 2024). For example, when playing games with friends, you say “Wo Cao (卧槽) , why are you playing so bad?”. The word “Wo Cao” here is usually a word used to express the degree of surprise. Someone will say “6” (六, 谐音牛) to present their degree of agreement or disagreement. In this case, people are difficult to identify the real meaning of the message encoder. It is crucial to understand whether the audience considers this contradictory expression to be a subcultural symbol that affects the ordinary language system and common communication patterns among people.

Another concern is that online buzzwords take advantage of people’s conformity. When everyone is using a buzzword, those who do not understand it appear abrupt (Liu, 2023).

Conformity refers to the behavior of an individual's cognition, judgment, concept, and behavior that conforms to the majority behavior under the influence of external group behavior. It is also called "following the trend" (He, 2021). This may also be an effect of the cultural industry. If all your friends are using buzzwords, you may follow suit, and buzzwords will lose their underlying meanings which is resist to social phenomena but become daily fun only. This involves not only curiosity but also the sense of fear of being left behind (Zhang, 2024, as cited in Deng & Zeng, 2023).

Through this study, we can explain the role of these ironic internet buzzwords among young people in Malaysia and understand whether they apply this potential subculture symbol as a tool of resistance or have looped into the culture industry, all usage is to follow trends and seek fun.

## **2.6 Decode, Meaning and Interpretation**

This section explores the audience's message interpretation. Stuart Hall's reception theory is used to explain how culture language background, and personal knowledge will affect the message decode. In addition, this section emphasizes that cyberspace without physical boundaries allows Malaysian Chinese with Chinese backgrounds to access and even integrate into Chinese social media. Therefore, the subcultural idea underlying ironic online buzzwords needs to be explored in the Malaysian Chinese context.

The Birmingham school of thought argues that regardless of the text creator's intentions, audiences will approach media texts with their cultural values to shape their understanding

(Sullivan, 2012). Social class is the primary audience's lens through which to form symbolic responses to media (Murdock, 2017). Therefore, audiences who come from different social classes may produce different understandings of the same message. Then, the reception study is well-suited to explain subcultural trending buzzwords that are popular on social media, as the theory discusses how different audiences receive, interpret, and respond to specific media texts (Bullo, 2014). In this idea, the researcher argues that the media text may not have independent meaning when it is generated and is only meaningful when readers understand the text through their literacy and ideals. In other words, the dissemination is considered completed when there are audiences.

Stuart Hall's (1973) reception theory mentioned communication's encoding and decoding procedures, emphasizing that the encoders edit the text according to their own consciousness and subjective ideas, the reader will understand or interpret media text based on their own background and cultural values. He stated that the media text understanding is affected by age, social class, race, and other social factors.

As mentioned earlier, the meaning of the text is based on the audience's interpretation. Therefore, the researcher argues that different people may have different understandings of media content. In other words, the audiences may shape different decodes to the same media content. Those youth who perform well potentially understand the meaning of ironic online buzzwords as subcultural symbols more than those with poor academic performance. Because of the lack of knowledge, students with poor academic performance may lack relevant awareness. For them, using online buzzwords are only for fun or entertainment. The

content pushed by social media algorithms is all packaged as entertainment, which may cause people to ignore the essence of subcultures and lose critical thinking. Therefore, understanding how youth who consume DouYin but have different academic performances interpret and engage in subcultural trending ironic online buzzwords roughly reflects the interpretation of media text within a Malaysian framework.

Encoders, such as politicians, press, scriptwriters, and even everyone you meet in your daily life who talks to you, convey information and let the audience “decode” the information. For example, you edit a buzzword message to reply to your friend’s previous message: “6...you are so talented lol”. Your friend can understand the message as “My friend admit my behaviour and is praising me”. However, the audience’s understanding to buzzwords may be very inconsistent with the encoders. In this case, reception theory emphasizes understanding and misunderstanding during the transmitting process. Using the example above, the decoder (friend) may understand this whether praise or irony in this way: “Is she praising me? Or she is laughing and disagreeing with me?” Everyone is constantly trying to “make sense” of what they perceive. The more questions people ask, people can evaluate the information and react to it in a better way (accepting, rejecting, or retaining it) (“Center of Media Literacy”, 2005). For example, the friend may continuously ask: “Are you complimenting me?” Based on the response, the friend decode the message appropriately.

Hall (1973) also in his work that a group of readers who have a common or similar cultural or linguistic background will find it easier to accept and understand the encoder’s text. In contrast, if their backgrounds are different, they will be less able to recognize the encoders.

This phenomenon not only highlights the influence of cultural and language background on decoding but also emphasizes the intersection between context, individuals' cultural capital, and language systems.

Language is an important link between people, presented when people exchange thoughts and feelings through language (Wang, 2017). As mentioned before, when people explore a language, they are exploring the historical and cultural background of this language. The Minority Rights Group Report on the Chinese in Southeast Asia (1992) mentioned that Malaysia has the most comprehensive Chinese language system of education in Southeast Asia. The establishment of the New Era College in 1996 completed the establishment of the Malaysian Chinese education system (Raman & Tan, 2015). The other parts include Chinese primary school and Chinese independent secondary school. Currently, there are more than 60 Chinese independent secondary schools in Malaysia. The Malaysian Chinese school organizations, Jiao Zong (教总) and Dong Zong (董总) were established to protect the status of Chinese education in Malaysia. Within the Chinese cultural preservation background and the borderless nature of social networking sites, the researcher explores the reasons and the decode of Malaysian Chinese towards Chinese social media content.

If people share the same language, communication and information exchange become easier (Li, 2023). Chinese still dominates the family and community languages of Malaysian Chinese and is supported by the media (the preservation of Chinese newspapers) and education (the existence of the Chinese education system) (Wang, 2012). Usually, Malaysian Chinese can speak Mandarin. However, Malaysian Mandarin may mix with some foreign

elements such as dialects (such as Hokkien and Cantonese), English, and Malay to form a fusion language (Wang, 2017). This shaped the unique phenomena in language use.

As China's online technology soared, the number of social media users in China exploded, and several social media with international influence were born, such as WeChat, Weibo, DouYin, and XiaoHongShu (Yu & Alizadeh 2023, as cited in Lipschultz, 2017). Du et al (2022) found that Chinese youth mainly use DouYin to seek entertainment. Unrestricted use of Internet technology has shrunk the world into a "global village" where national boundaries are gradually blurred in cyberspace (Jain & Yadav, 2019). Malaysians can download and log in to Chinese apps such as XiaoHongshu and DouYin. People browse and consume local content from different countries or regions on their own. As a result, new phenomena may emerge in the local social and cultural fields. Under the Chinese background and the trend of Chinese social media, it is necessary to explore how Malaysians Chinese youth interpret and use the ironic Internet buzzwords that have become popular on these platforms to gain a deeper understanding of the status of subcultural symbols among youth in the Malaysian Chinese context.

After reviewing the cited literature, the researcher found that the concepts of subculture, cultural industry, and online buzzwords have matured. Hebdige (1979) emphasized the status of subculture symbols and styles in his work, explaining that the formation of a subculture may be a response to hegemony or mainstream. Similar views have been discussed in depth in the studies of Cohen (1955), Miller (1958), Blackman (2014), and others. These scholars have established a strong framework to explain the formation and meaning of subculture.

Entering the modern era, exploring the underlying language symbols in subculture from the context of social media can be effective in understanding the development of contemporary subculture. In addition, the paper mentions Adorno and Horkheimer's cultural industry views, emphasizing that some cultures have lost their art expressions and cultural significance under the manipulation of capitalists. This adds possibilities to the role of modern subculture, so the researchers attempted to map the values of some social media buzzwords from the responses of UTAR Kampar undergraduate students.

Although scholars have long established a series of concepts about subculture, few related studies have been conducted within the digital era framework, especially in the Malaysian Chinese context. Scholars focus more on behavioral subcultures, such as Ah Beng and Mat Rempit. They rarely talk about the role of language as a symbol. In addition, the popularity of short video platforms such as DouYin has provided more channels for subcultural groups to express themselves, allowing people to recognize and pay attention to them. Malaysian Chinese can access this platform and become participants in the online buzzwords culture. Therefore, this study uses ironic online popular language as a case study to fill the gap of subcultural language symbols and form a preliminary framework or model for the value of subculture language symbols in the Malaysian Chinese youth context.

## **Chapter 3    Methodology**

### **3.1 Overview of Qualitative Research**

This study aims to understand the interpretations and motivations of selected UTAR Kampar undergraduate students to subculture tendency ironic online buzzwords. In this study, the researcher will conduct a Qualitative Research Method to gain a deeper understanding to participants's beliefs about online buzzword phenomena. In this chapter, the researcher explains the Qualitative Research Approach.

According to Denzin & Lincoln (1994), qualitative research methods involve interpretation. It is suitable for studying phenomena that occur in natural environments, and researchers understand and interpret phenomena based on people's reactions to certain phenomena. As Atkinson (2017) stated, Qualitative research methods are a way of understanding in-depth information, such as the underlying meaning of an event, and the lived experience of a population and culture. Qualitative research is important in the social sciences because it helps researchers to deeply analyze human science and social phenomena. It is a tool for decoding society.

In qualitative research, researchers do not set an aimed hypothesis framework but only explore research questions. In other words, the emergence of answers that are different from personal values or general social phenomena allows researchers to discover new continents. In contrast, quantitative research tends to prove hypotheses with data, and the research will not far deviate from the initial setting. Qualitative data is the non-numbers information collected by researchers (Tesch, 1990). The most obvious difference between it and



quantitative research is that qualitative research explains phenomena that cannot be expressed in numbers and codes. The results cannot be visualized and measured in units. In this situation, human beliefs or social phenomena are non-numerical. This study aims to explore people's interpretations and reasons for engagement with certain phenomena. Therefore, qualitative research may help to interpret these understandings well.

In addition, sampling in qualitative research focuses on quality rather than quantity, and researchers look for participants who can provide in-depth and constructive responses to research questions (Geertz, 1977; Holloway & Wheeler, 1996). The core of qualitative research is on responses. Through qualitative research, researchers understand and better explain social dynamics. Besides that, qualitative research usually uses a small sample unit, and researchers deal with small groups or documents, or even individual interviewees (Nicholls, 2009). It is suitable for studying the target population to gain a deep understanding of their social lives.

The results of qualitative research are solid because it is closely interpreted according to respondents' answers, leaving no space for fabrication. In addition, its in-depth investigation makes the research results more detailed in explaining the complexity of society (Denscombe, 2010). This research of selected UTAR Kampar students' interpretations and motivations towards subculture tendency ironic online buzzwords on DouYin is exploratory and interpretative research that helps people to understand in-depth reasons, motivations, and responses. Understanding youth's interpretations of online buzzwords extended from subcultures and their motivations for using these terms helps researchers explore the

ideology of contemporary youth and understand the function of subcultures in Malaysia. In other words, do the youth understand that subcultures reflect social problems and are tools to resist the mainstream? This study chose qualitative research methods because they can provide specific explanations for people's beliefs and social phenomena. The researcher needs to understand the target population's tendency to participate in subcultures in Malaysia to understand their underlying values.

### **3.2 Interpretative Qualitative Research**

Elliot and Timulak (2021) stated in *“Descriptive and Interpretive Methods in Qualitative Research - A Generic Approach”* that the interpretive method emphasizes explaining people's subjective beliefs about specific phenomena. Researchers deeply engage in participants' narratives, aiming to understand how cultural, historical, and other backgrounds influence participants' values. The interpretive method is suitable for exploring complex and fluid human psychological processes, such as their motivations for engaging in specific behaviors. It focuses on understanding rather than generalizing, interpreting themes, and emphasizing the beliefs of individuals or groups. By inserting the research results into a broader cultural and theoretical framework, researchers conduct analysis and contribute to theoretical development. Descriptive research provides a statement of “what happened”, while interpretive research delves into “what this thing means to people”, which is valuable for research focusing on personal meaning construction and social phenomena. Subculture online buzzwords are rooted in specific cultural backgrounds and involve the process of constructing personal meaning. Therefore, the researcher will apply ethnography research to interpret participants' beliefs. The characteristics and needs of ethnography will be briefly

introduced in the coming section. Besides that, instead of summarizing “users often use which buzzwords”, the interpretive approach provides a deeper understanding of “what do subculture online buzzwords mean and why do the users use them.” It has more theoretical insights and improves the application of the theory.

### **3.3 Inductive Qualitative Approach**

Creswell and Clark (2007) state that the deductive approach is “top-down”, building hypotheses from theories and obtaining data to prove the hypotheses or disprove them (Soiferman, 2010). This is meant for quantitative research. Induction is the opposite. It is a “bottom-up” process, constructing broader themes from the participants’ values, and then constructing theories that relate the themes to each other. The researcher tends to understand the audiences’ values to provide a simple theoretical framework for Malaysian subculture. Therefore, the inductive approach is in-line.

The inductive approach is to discover inherent or frequent patterns from a large amount of complex initial data, coding them in a content analysis model. It is a process of compressing raw data into themes or categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this process, labels will be generated. Each label is represented by a term or phrase. In contrast, the deductive approach is often limited by structured premises (H1, H2, H3) and inferred as a corollary by meticulous logic. As a result, key themes in the deductive approach may be hidden (Thomas, 2006). Researchers use the inductive approach to observe the data obtained and draw conclusions. The results will be influenced by the samples’ beliefs. The conclusion drawn is not always valid in every society because of the inclusion of subjective arguments. In other words, the

premises of the argument in the inductive approach support the conclusion, but the correctness is not guaranteed. In the coming chapters, the researcher will provide a simple framework to explain the ironic online buzzwords phenomenon among selected Malaysian Chinese youth. This is in line with the inductive approach.

In this study, the researcher focuses on analyzing selected UTAR Kampar undergraduate students' interpretations and motivations for the use of subcultural tendency ironic online buzzwords. The researcher looked for answers from a sample where differences existed and then answered the theory. This is a bottom-up approach. These participants present ideas from their daily observations, and the researcher can only infer probable phenomena from the content obtained. The conclusions drawn do not represent everyone in the society.

### **3.4 Case Study**

Qualitative research uses various methods to answer research questions, such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and so on. The case study is a powerful tool for gaining in-depth insight into a particular social phenomenon (Crowe, Cresswell, Ann, Huby, Avery, & Sheikh, 2011). It is utilised in various disciplines, especially in the social sciences sector. The case study involves an interpretive approach. The researcher asks 'why' and 'how' to understand specific social phenomena. It is the exact opposite of large-scale research, where researchers focus on one case to gain insights that may have a wider impact. Its value is to explain the reasons that lead to a certain result, not just to find the result (Denscombe, 2010). This study uses ironic online buzzwords in the subculture as the case. These buzzwords tend to become popular online and step into mainstream society. In this case, the researcher

operates further observation, including respondents' interpretations, usage, and motivations, to understand their significance. This study aims to induct the phenomenon and recognize the regularity of interviewees' responses. This shapes a primary understanding of the selected theory application status in the specific context.

### **3.5 Focus Group Discussion**

Qualitative research uses various methods to answer research questions, such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and so on. A Focus group is a research approach that collects data from small group discussions on specific topics determined by the researcher (Morgan, 1997). Qualitative focus groups hope to bring together different opinions and explore rather than represent a large number of views (Nicholls, 2009). It is a powerful tool for researchers to understand group and organizational dynamics.

As Morgan (1996) stated, focus group members share their ideas while also comparing theirs with others. The participants not only interact with the researcher but can also ask questions and exchange ideas with each other. Catterall and Maclaren (1997) cited Hess (1968) and described the benefits of focus groups as having snowballed and stimulating effects. In this study, group members with commonalities in academic performance came together to exchange their beliefs in using subcultural ironic online terms. They exchanged values and beliefs allowed the researcher to discover more underlying social phenomena. Before the focus group discussions, the researcher will reinforce members' understanding of ironic online buzzwords to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of the study.

This study uses structured interviews with standardized questions to ensure uniformity. Although structured interviews are not as flexible as semi-structured interviews, they reduce potential misunderstandings in the process and ensure that the interview results can be accurately coded into suitable categories (Flick, 2021). This improves the reliability of the research results. In Malaysia, there are not many studies on the subcultural tendency of online buzzwords. The researchers tried to build a preliminary theoretical framework to deepen concepts of this field. It is more appropriate to use structured interviews because it reduces the risk of deviation in the results. Deviation in the results will affect our analysis of the actual application of the theory, so they must be avoided as much as possible.

In addition, all interview questions will be designed based on themes. This ensures that the research areas are covered. Themes allow researchers to generate each question appropriately and facilitate researchers to handle multi-layer information. This is particularly important when studying a complex social phenomenon. In Chapter 4, the researchers will identify the themes. The researchers will not pre-hypothesize and aim to prove certain theoretical frameworks. All the conclusions obtained come from the focus group observation. Then, using inductive methods to interpret and summarize. This helps to explore the deeper meaning of complex social phenomena.

In qualitative research, there are three traditions since they have different research targets. One of them is the ethnography. Ethnography focuses on describing a culture (Fetterman, 1989). It attempts to understand human behavior in the cultural context in which it is exercised. This study focused on the interpretations and motivations of UTAR Kampar

undergraduate students to subcultural ironic buzzwords on DouYin. These online terms are mainly in the Chinese context. From an ethnographic perspective, it is more appropriate to conduct focus group discussions in Mandarin because it can minimize misunderstandings between the researcher and the participants or among the focus group members. Some Chinese buzzwords cannot be translated well into English. Discussing in Mandarin helps the researcher to capture the subtle cultural meanings appropriately. In addition, using Chinese is more in line with the mother language of the participants, potentially inspiring them to have deeper discussions. In English, they may not be able to express their beliefs appropriately. This makes the research results more authentic and in line with the cultural background and practical values of the participants. In this case, the researcher is responsible for ensuring every focus group member has solid Chinese language-based media literacy. The researcher ensures they can communicate in Mandarin fluently, rather than having only a superficial understanding of the language.

Online focus group discussions involve real-time interactions that simulate face-to-face focus groups' conversational interactions (Moore, McKee, & McCoughlin, 2015). Synchronous focus groups are more empathetic and can collect immediate values from participants (Stewart & Williams, 2005). During the focus group, every second is shared among the researcher and participants, and the sense of immediacy ensures effective interaction. The researcher can most realistically experience the participants' emotions and best understand their values. Computer networks bring the flexibility of time and space breaking through physical limitations for researchers and participants. People in different places "gather" and discuss together. The distance created by online focus group discussions

or involved discussions in their comfortable environment (such as home) reduces potential pressure and makes participants more comfortable (Marques et al., 2020). This also engages more honest and open discussions.

Before the discussion, the researcher will reveal the questions to the focus group members. They can prepare in advance by organizing and recalling their values. This may stimulate their potential critical thinking and enable them to express their ideas more clearly. The researcher believes this may improve the quality of the discussion and ensure the process.

### **3.6 Verbatim Transcript**

Transcription is an important step in content analysis (Bailey, 2008). Transcription involves repeated close listening and/or observation to observe the initial data obtained, helping the researcher to get a clearer understanding. Each record is viewed as a whole, rather than a discrete response, making it easier for researchers to refer to key points. Organising audible conversations into written text makes the result easy to read and meaningful. In this study, verbatim transcription will be used to capture the respondents' answers meticulously to ensure the accuracy of the study. Non-verbal language such as "ah", and "hmm", will also be included in the verbatim transcript because obvious fillers potentially reflect certain values.

### **3.7 Research Ethics**

Non-relevant information, such as the respondent's date of birth, is meaningless to the study. The core point is that careful protective actions must be taken by the researcher to minimize



the risk of harming the participants by exposing them to exploitation or loss (Barrow, Brannan & Khandhar, 2017). To take care of respondents' privacy, the personal information of the respondents such as actual name, living address, and so on will be kept confidential in this study to avoid them being threatened or subjected to potential suffering. In the verbatim transcript, the identity of the interviewees will be replaced by alphabets from Interviewee A, Interviewee B, and so on. In other words, this study will ensure anonymity.

## **Chapter 4 Findings and Analysis**

In this section, the results of three focus group discussions will be presented. The researcher will discuss two key research questions through the values and reasons for the use of the ironic buzzwords on DouYin by the selected users. The researcher transcribed the respondents' answers into text and then categorised them into different themes to discuss with the theories in the literature review chapter. There are 7 themes in this section, including the group members' values of subcultures and cultural industries, which help to establish a theoretical framework for the use of ironic buzzwords in part of Malaysian Chinese youth. The first focus group (Group 1) is for those hold with average grades in their academic performance (Cumulative Grade Point Average, CGPA, 3.0000-3.6999), the second group (Group 2) is for those with excellent grades (CGPA 3.6700-4.000), and the third group (Group 3) is for those with unsatisfactory grades (CGPA below 3.0000). As Cohen (1955) mentioned a high failure rate potentially prompts people to create new ways to succeed and Miller (1958) stated that subculture communities are more likely to form among lower social classes society, thereby the researcher divided the respondents by the academic performance to observe whether they will have different ideas on the potential subculture symbol, ironic buzzwords.

### **4.1 Theme 1-The usage of DouYin among the selected UTAR Kampar undergraduate students**

The use of DouYin by selected UTAR Kampar undergraduates helps the researcher understand the ideas of the respondents. As China's dominant short video platform, DouYin has greatly shaped users' ideas about trends, language, and subcultures. It provides an online

environment that blends entertainment and social interaction. Each person reads personalized content driven by powerful algorithms. This theme discusses the respondents' exposure and average usage time of DouYin. It tends to find out whether there are differences in their consumption of DouYin content among students with different academic performances. This is crucial for research as it helps researchers understand whether their social media habits affect subcultural understandings.

“……我也是 2018 这样开始有用抖音。尤其那时（MCO 时期）就是睡醒，然后可能就看了一段时间，然后吃东西，然后可能玩一下游戏然后继续看的那种，它会比我用 IG 啊 Facebook 那些来的多。基本上就是只要不忙的情况下，我会看一下抖音。”

（“……I started using DouYin in 2018. Especially during the MCO period, I would watch it for a while after waking up, eat, play some games, and then continue watching. **I watch it more than I do on Instagram or Facebook. Whenever I'm not busy, I'll watch DouYin.**”）

——Group 1, Respondent C, 9/2/2025

“2018 年这样开始刷。MCO 时期的话，基本上那个可以刷三，呃（回想），最 minimum 是 3 个小时起……现在 Assignment 忙的时候会稍微少一点，但是基本上晚上不刷抖音，真的是睡不着的那种啊。”

（“……I started using it in 2018. During the MCO period, I could browse it for three hours, um (thinking back), the minimum was 3 hours……Now when I am busy with assignments, it becomes a bit less, but **basically, I can't sleep if I don't play DouYin at night.**”）

——Group 1, Respondent D, 9/2/2025

“我半小时内吧，除非有单个影片时长比较长，如电影解说，才会导致整体时间变长。没什么沉迷。”

（I'll play **within half an hour**, unless there are some long videos, such as movie commentaries, which will make the overall time longer. **I am not addicted to it.**）

——Group 2, Respondent D, 17/2/2025

“……印象中是 2019 年开始刷。目前、现在来说刷小红书更多，比较喜欢小红书上的内容，不是因为抖音不好。抖音好几个月才打开一次。”

（“……I remember that I started using it in 2019. Currently, I am more on playing XiaoHongShu and I like the content on XiaoHongShu, not because DouYin is bad. **I only open DouYin once every few months.**”）

——Group 2, Respondent B, 17/2/2025

“……18、19 年抖音刚开始盛行就刷了，断断续续的话，一天最多可以刷到 7/8 个小时。主要是抖音太多东西了，感兴趣的旅游啊、运动啊的相关视频都有，看不完。”

“……I started using DouYin when it first became popular in 2018 or 2019, and I would watch it for up to 7 or 8 hours a day sporadically. **The main reason is that there are too many videos on DouYin, such as travel and sports videos that I am interested in. Can't finish watching them.**”)

——Group 3, Respondent A & B, 24/2/2025

“我刚刚考完 SPM 的时候是会一天可以就是 24 小时，我可以刷 12 个小时的那种……我觉得是因为他的时长的关系，因为你知道抖音其实多数都是短视频，他就会一个视频，一个视频慢慢滑过去，你就会发现那个时间不知不觉的过去，然后你其实是没有发觉的，但是他的视频就是因为可能特别短吧，所以让你没有发觉那个时间其实已经过得这么快。”

“When I just finished my SPM, I could watch DouYin videos for 12 hours out of 24 hours per day……I think it's because of the length of the video. **As you know, most of the videos on DouYin are short videos. You watch one video after another slowly, and you will find that time has passed unconsciously, and you don't notice it. The videos are short that you don't realise that time has passed quickly.**” )

——Group 3, Respondent C, 24/2/2025

DouYin was released in 2016 and became famous around 2018. The responses from the focus group showed that all Malaysian UTAR Kampar Undergraduate students had long exposure to DouYin, so their responses have reference value. There were obvious differences in terms of DouYin consumption among students who have different academic performances. The respondents from Group 1 usually spent a lot of time on DouYin, especially during they had less academic pressure. Despite the academic burden decline in their engagement, they still see DouYin as the major source of entertainment and relaxation. DouYin was integrated into their lives but did not overwhelm other responsibilities. Therefore, the researchers proposed that students with average academic performance adopted a balanced and habitual use.

In contrast, the respondents from Group 2 showed controlled and selective use. They prefer specific types of content rather than long periods of aimless browsing. This is in line with the idea that people do not completely adopt symbols when interacting with potential subcultures (Aaker & Schmitt, 2001). Another respondent in this group also said that his

current social media preference is XiaoHongShu. Therefore, the researchers inferred that excellent academic performance respondents intended selected content and were less likely to follow trends. Meanwhile, some respondents in Group 3 will spend half of their day on DouYin, demonstrating super-high engagement. This reveals the immersive and addictive nature of DouYin, where the short duration, personalised recommendations, and rich content keep them unaware of the passage of time. In addition, one respondent mentioned that DouYin has a variety of content types, it can't finish watching. This reveals the rapid development of the cultural industry, where content creators produce a variety of videos to gain exposure, gain traffic, and thus make profits. In the coming sections, the researcher will discuss the subculture and culture industry.

The differences among the three focus groups reinforce the boundaries of subcultures, distinguishing heavy users from those who consume less. This pattern shows how subcultures, especially digital subcultures operate through inclusion and exclusion. It often shapes individual experiences based on their level of participation and consumption habits.

#### **4.2 Theme 2- Subculture symbol: Ironic Buzzwords**

Subculture is a set of values that is relatively different from mainstream culture and has fewer identifications. Each subculture has its representative vibes or symbols, such as terminology, gestures, clothing, and so on. Most of these subculture elements are conspicuous and peculiar. Subcultures usually use these “differences” to attract people’s attention and make society pay more attention to their needs or issues. Scholars such as Millers (1958) and Bermingham School believe that lower social class individuals or

marginalized groups are more likely to form a subculture community to express their resistance to mainstream society and culture, thereby getting self-identity and a way out. This theme will discuss the selected respondents' ideas on subcultures, including the symbolic characteristics of subcultures, whether subcultures are a space for marginalized groups to be liberated, and the resistance function of subcultures.

“……如果我们讲阴阳怪气，它一定是诡异的，它一定是不符合常理的。有时候你不一定看得懂，只有他们的人才会懂。有一点像我用火星文来留言，那如果对面没有接触过火星文，他就根本不可能看得懂……而且平台（抖音）的监管机制下，导致你不能很直接、很粗俗地去骂人，但人在生气或不满的时候骂人的需求始终存在，因此才会衍生出阴阳怪气流行用语。”

（“……If we talk about ironic buzzwords, it must be weird and it is a bit repugnant to common sense. Sometimes you may not understand it, **only they (the insider) can understand it.** It's a bit like I leave a message in “Mars” language. If the other party has never been exposed to the “Mars” language, he will not be able to understand it at all……Moreover, under the regulatory mechanism of the platform (TikTok), you cannot curse people directly or vulgarly, but people always have the need to curse when they are angry or dissatisfied, that's why the ironic buzzwords emerged.”）

——Group 2, Respondent A, 17/2/2025

“……如果有个朋友他用这种阴阳怪气的用语来跟我说话，这样我会觉得，原来你也知道这个梗，这样子就是会有共鸣。就觉得蛮好玩的，就我们可以一起玩……”

（“……If a friend said this kind of ironic language to me, I know that he/she also knows this tactic. I will have some resonate with them. I think it is quite fun and **we can play together……**”）

——Group 2, Respondent D, 17/2/2025

“……我不觉得它是低级的一种表现行为，也不能说低俗。因为本来这个级别都是人去定义的，看个人想法。……而且在这个互联网很普遍的时候，每个人都可以用到不同的社交媒体。像小红书、抖音啊都很普遍，很多人都在用。所以我觉得这个流行用语的使用和你的成绩或者社会等级没有关系……”

（“……I do not think that these ironic buzzwords are low-class. It also cannot be considered a vulgar expression. Because the definition of high class or low class is also defined by everyone, it depends on personal definitions. ……Besides that, everyone can access different social media in this advanced Internet age. Platforms such as XiaoHongShu and DouYin are very common and used by many people. So, I think the use of Internet buzzwords has nothing related to your grades or your social class……”）

——Group 2, Respondent B & C, 17/2/2025

“……我反而觉得……甚至成绩不好的人会用这些（阴阳怪气流行用语）还少过成绩比较好的人……”

（“……Instead, I think that...**people with poor grades will use these (ironic buzzwords) less often than people with better grades**……”）

——Group 1, Respondent C, 9/2/2025 & Group 2, Respondent D, 17/2/2025

“……我觉得是和社会阶层或成绩有一定关系，但不能一概而论。……因为它并不局限于某个社会阶层，就是很多大学生啊。然后职场的那些人，或者是高知的那些群体，他们也会用的……”

（“……I think it has something related to social class or academic performance, but it can't be generalized. ...**Because it's (the usage of ironic buzzwords) not limited to a certain social class, it's also used by higher education students, working individuals, or those with high intellectual**……”）

——Group 3, Respondent A, 24/2/2025

“……我认为这个东西**根据个人性格**吧。可能说一个人比较开朗，他能接受新的潮流的东西，那他也会使用这些（阴阳怪气流行语）。如果一个人比较 emo，不爱跟人交流，他无论学习好还是不好，都是不会去使用这些网络用语的……”

（“……I think it **depends on personalities**. A person who is more outgoing and can accept new trends will also use these (ironic buzzwords). If the person is more emotional and doesn't like to communicate with others, he will not use this online buzzword whether he is in high or low classes……”）

——Group 3, Respondent B, 24/2/2025

“……我觉得它一定程度上是反映了一些人的价值观。比如说……“资本家看了会流泪”这种，其实我感觉他是对现实社会的调侃吧，年轻人会用这些话去自嘲，然后同时可能会表达一些对社会的不满。“资本家看了会流泪”是对社会太过看重利益和资本至上而压榨劳力的现象的批判。……但是也不一定的，一半一半吧。有些只是因为互联网趋势或朋友，自己也跟着而已，就不代表什么了……”

（“……I think it reflects people's values to a certain extent. For example, “capitalists will cry when they see this”, **I think it is a dissatisfaction with real-life society. Young people will use these words to tease themselves. They may express some dissatisfaction with the society. “Capitalists will cry when they see this” criticising the phenomenon of overemphasis on profits and capital supremacy, thereby exploiting labor.**…… But it's not necessarily, maybe some of that only. Some is just follow the Internet trend or friends, then it doesn't mean anything.……”）

——Group 3, Respondent A & B, 24/2/2025

“……我是觉得阴阳怪气流行语不会反映一个人的价值观，因为现在很多人都是有样学样，就是看到别人做什么，他就要做什么，别人讲什么就讲什么，这样子。可能有些人会觉得，哦，这个东西很有趣，然后他就会去使用这样子，可是这样其实没有反映到这个人的价值观吧。……”

（“……I think that ironic buzzwords do not reflect a person's values, **because people nowadays always following the trend, they do what others do and say what others say.** Some people may think that these buzzwords are interesting, and then they just follow, but this does not reflect their values.……”）

——Group 2, Respondent C, 17/2/2025

“……其实它不能反映出一个人的信仰和价值观，就是可能他用这些流行语只是当成一个正常的沟通，或者是就可能当成一个衔接词来用罢了，就不代表它一定是吸引注意力。另

外，如果他是拍成视频上传，跟互联网潮流获得流量，也不代表他的价值观，因为他只是网络媒体工作者，为了赚钱，保住自己的工作。这不代表个人想法。所以我觉得没有反映到个人价值观吧……”

（“……In fact, it cannot reflect a person's beliefs and values. **These buzzwords may be used as normal communication habits, or as a linking word during the conversation. It does not mean that people are trying to attract attention. In addition, if he uploads a video to gain traffic and in line with the Internet trend, it does not represent his values, because he is just an online media worker who wants to make more money and keep his job.** This does not represent thoughts. So, I don't think the usage of ironic buzzword reflects personal values……” ）

——Group 1, Respondent C, 9/2/2025

In the second group, a participant mentioned the nature of subculture: it is always odd and different from mainstream culture. The interviewees agreed that the ironic buzzwords bring the attributes of subculture and used “Mars” language as an example to further describe the symbols circulated within the subculture circle. These symbols may be obscure or unacceptable to outsiders. Furthermore, the respondent understands the emergence of ironic buzzwords was caused by the authority's regulation. It proves that the existence of powerful authority or the limitations of mainstream norms make subculture symbols such as ironic buzzwords become the alternative way to express people's anger and dissatisfaction. Another interviewee in the same group said that they can sense and resonate with one another easily if they present the same cultural symbol. This shows the subculture is interactive in both online and offline communication. However, the interviewees in the other two focus groups did not mention related content. Therefore, the researchers inferred that the high-achieving students are more detailed and keener in observing the attributes of subculture.

All focus groups are totally agreed that the individual's social class or academic performance did not influence or only minimally influenced an individual's use of ironic buzzwords. According to their observations, university students, and individuals with wealth knowledge



and social experience also join in the ironic buzzwords. Some respondents believe that higher achievers are more likely to use this kind of buzzwords that potentially carry subcultural nature. In addition, according to the respondents' analyses, the popularity of social media and personality differences are closely influenced the use of ironic buzzwords. The openness of online communities allows people to access, join, and delve into different cultural elements at any time. This suppresses the uniqueness of the symbols of subcultural. Subcultures do not always remain marginal or unpopular status. Subcultures may evolve into mainstream culture as social or technological trends change (Holme & Grönlund, 2005). The researcher infers that this phenomenon has spread among Malaysian Chinese Youth. The researcher will further discuss the absorption of subculture in the upcoming section.

When it comes to the resistance function of subcultures to social phenomena and the dominant powerful culture, the respondents in Group 3 contribute some constructive views: the use of ironic buzzwords is a powerful tool for satirising or indirectly expressing dissatisfaction with social phenomena. Interviewees believe that ironic buzzwords can criticise social injustices, such as the exploitation of labour by capitalists for profit. They observed that young people in contemporary society would use more subtle but not offensive self-deprecation to express their anger at being oppressed by powerful capitalists. Hence, the ironic terminology carries the significance of subcultural resistance. However, the respondents who expressed this opinion still had reservations and believed that the current use of ironic buzzwords may be the result of the online community. They mentioned that not all ironic buzzword users are rebelling against mainstream social phenomena. Participants in Group 2 believed that people would "follow the trend". The influence of the social media

community or peers over a long period has made ironic buzzwords trendy but not rebellious. Respondents in Group 1 proposed a different value: buzzwords may be a means for the media or Internet celebrities to create discussion, attract attention, and increase traffic, therefore do not represent personal values. In the upcoming section, the researcher will mention and discuss more about the impact of the culture industry on subculture.

### 4.3 Theme 3-Ironic Buzzwords as Potential Subculture Expression May Lead Social Conflict

As a space for alternative expression, subculture allows marginalised groups to challenge mainstream culture and create identity. However, subcultures and mainstream cultures are not necessarily compatible with each other and always coexist peacefully. When the ideas and expressions of subcultures clash with mainstream values, they may trigger misunderstandings and sharpen social disputes. In today's popularity of DouYin, many ironic buzzwords may carry radical emotions such as insults and personal attacks. Whether they are used to challenge authority, criticise certain social norms, or purely for entertainment and jokes, they have inadvertently made the digital space become a battleground for different ideologies. This theme interprets whether the use of ironic buzzwords on DouYin has created more complex social divisions or has developed into an entertainment-driven linguistic trend among the selected UTAR Kampar undergraduate students.

“……如果那个人的 comment 是虽然讲阴阳怪气啦，但是是没有人身攻击的话，我是觉得 OK，就蛮好笑的，可是如果是那种 OKU 还是什么（弱势群体）在唱歌（谋生计）然后还这样阴阳怪气他们，我就觉得不舒服。……礼貌玩梗算是幽默，如果是那种越界啊，就觉得很过分啦！……”

(“……If the person's comment is ironic **but does not personally attack someone**, I think it's OK and funny, but if it's OKU or something (disadvantaged group) singing (for living) and people still be ironic, I feel uncomfortable. ……Polite jokes are humorous, **it's too much if cross the line!**……”)

——Group 1, Respondent A, 9/2/2025

“……嗯，我不会有有什么特别的反应哦，就是跟着一起笑而已。我觉得都没什么的，大家只是在玩闹。……”

(“……Well, I don't have any special reaction, I just laugh along. I think it's nothing, everyone is just having fun……”)

——Group 1, Respondent B, 9/2/2025

“……刚开始就下定论、泼脏水的（流行语），比如说“xxx是这样”，以偏概全。或者是挑起性别对立、激化社会矛盾的那种。我更加反感和厌恶。……”

(“……I'm more disgusted by those (buzzwords) which make judgments **without any reason at the beginning and generalising**, such as 'xxx is like this', or **the kind that provokes gender confrontation and intensifies social conflicts**……”)

——Group 2, Respondent A, 17/2/2025

“……我觉得是要看情况。在轻松的场景下，我会觉得很有趣。我懂那梗，然后对方也懂那个梗，然后我们就可以很像继续聊天，更有话题……但如果对方乱用，感觉对方的言语当中就很像带有恶意、攻击性，羞辱人家，看了会很像不舒服。我觉得没有必要……而且阴阳怪气流行用语有时候容易让别人误会这样子，造成我们关系恶化之类的……使用过分的阴阳怪气流行用语让我觉得那个人情商比较低……”

(“……I think it depends on the situation. In a relaxed scenario, I felt it was interesting. I know that joke, and the other person also understands, and then we can keep chatting and be more conversational. … But if the other person is using it maliciously, aggressively, and humiliatingly in their words, I will feel uncomfortable. This behaviour is unnecessary. … Sometimes people will get wrong ideas when facing ironic buzzwords, then the relationship between us becomes worse……Overuse of the ironic buzzwords makes me feel like that person has a low EQ and is relatively low class.……”)

——Group 2, Respondent C, 17/2/2025

“我认为如果一个人他用阴阳怪气流行用语去攻击别人，它造成的伤害比直接坦荡的骂人来得大。……牵扯到社会议题的话，我也会比较敏感，比如将“女权”说成“女拳”，来讽刺女性对女权的过度捍卫。……另外，还有用人名来阴阳怪气别人的。中国大陆的综艺节目《再见爱人》中的麦琳就是其中一个，她因为不讲理的“疯婆子”形象被人认识。渐渐地，人们用她的名字来去嘲笑或者讽刺社会上其他有类似性格的女生。我觉得很不好，很不尊重麦琳……”

(“……I think that if a person attacks someone with ironic words, the damage caused is more than the direct name-calling. ……I'm also more sensitive when it comes to social issues, such as saying 'women's rights' as 'women's fists' to satirise women's over-defense to women's rights. …… Someone uses people's names to shade others. One example is Mai Lin from the mainland China variety show 'See You Again', who is known for her unreasonable 'crazy woman' image. People use her name to describe other women in society who have similar personalities with Mai Lin. I feel bad and disrespectful to Mai Lin.……”)

——Group 2, Respondent D, 17/2/2025

“……那些故意嘲讽别人外表和智商的讽刺性流行语让我很反感。例如，有些人会说“懂的都懂”，却不跟你说他们懂什么了，有优越感嘲笑那些不懂的人……我觉得玩阴阳怪气是可以的，但不能太过火，上升人身攻击、侮辱智商和挑起性别对立。”

“……The ironic buzzwords that deliberately mock people's appearance and intelligence are offensive to me. For example, some people will say 'those who know will know', without telling you what they know, and then mock those who don't know with superiority…… I think it's okay to play with the ironic buzzwords but cannot over to the point of personal attacks, insults to IQs, and stirring up gender rivalries.”

——Group 3, Respondent A & B, 17/2/2025

The results show that most focus group members are aware of the aggressiveness of DouYin's ironic buzzwords. Most of the respondents agreed that ironic buzzwords can be either a form of entertainment or a source of social conflict. They are disgusted by such buzzwords. Only little respondents considered these buzzwords harmless humour, usually used to enhance conversations.

Respondents generally agreed that using ironic buzzwords was acceptable in a social context but would feel uncomfortable when used against vulnerable groups as it crossed over the moral norms and became the tool of attack. Most of them mentioned some of the ironic buzzwords will provoke gender antagonisms and personal attacks (e.g., IQ shaming with a sense of superiority, appearance, and personality mockery. The creation of negative labels (such as 'Mai Lin' became an adjective to describe mad women) or the ridiculing of feminism will harm certain communities, worsen relationships, and stimulate social conflict.

When ironic buzzwords are unethically offensive, they will trigger mainstream resentment and discomfort. This is consistent with the key feature of subcultural expressions, which is subculture challenging mainstream values. When subcultures disturb social harmony, they will cause division and conflict (Cohen, 1955; Wang, 2023). This is consistent with

Hebdige's (1979) view that subcultures create meaning through symbolic resistance, but they may often be misappropriated, leading to opposition and moral panic from mainstream society. Thereby, the researcher assumed that such linguistic trends are not only passive cultural artifacts among certain Malaysian Chinese youth but maintain a role in shaping social tensions. This highlights the intertwined relationship between subcultural buzzwords and social power dynamics. The ironic buzzwords may be jokes at the beginning but later developed into rebellious narratives that potentially deepened social divisions. The researcher will do a discussion about subcultures raising moral panic in the further theme.

#### **4.4 Theme 4- Subculture and Moral Panic**

As mentioned in the previous theme, subcultures may cause social discontent and lead to an escalation of conflicts. If the values promoted by a subculture counter to those of the dominant culture or values, it may lead to moral panic. Cohen (1972) introduced the concept of moral panic in his famous work *Folk Devils and Moral Panic*, explaining how media amplification and public anxiety can raise society's fear of "deviant" groups. He discussed hedonism, contempt for authority, and anomalous symbols bring threats to mainstream beliefs. The "deviants" are also known as folk devils, which refers to those who are unpredictable and potentially harmful to society in the subculture community. In the age of social media, subcultures gone viral on the Internet, such as the ironic buzzwords on DouYin, have the potential to provoke a similar situation, especially if people feel that these buzzwords are inapplicable in formal settings and seen as disrespectful. While it cannot be ruled out that some people see these buzzwords as playful entertainment, others feel ironic buzzwords as a threat to mainstream cultural values. This theme develops a discussion of

ironic buzzwords on DouYin caused moral panic, discussing whether they cause arguments, distort norms, or deepen cultural change in society.

“……这个属于华语范围，所以他（阴阳怪气用语）就把这整个华语的内容产出造成了一定的打击，就是说啊，他就整个变成你拉低了整个（标准）。”

(“……This belongs to the scope of the Chinese language, so it (ironic buzzwords) has caused a certain blow to the content output of this entire Chinese language, it pulls down the whole (Chinese standard).”)

——Group 2, Respondent A, 17/2/2025

“……如果那个人的 comment 是虽然讲阴阳怪气啦，但是是没有人身攻击的话，我是觉得 OK，就蛮好笑的，可是如果是那种 OKU 还是什么（弱势群体）在唱歌（谋生计）然后还这样阴阳怪气他们，我就觉得不舒服。如果对方乱用，感觉对方的言语当中就很像带有恶意、攻击性，羞辱人家，看了会很像不舒服。”

(“……If the person's comment is ironic but does not personally attack someone, I think it's OK and funny, but if it's OKU or something (disadvantaged group) singing (for living) and people still be ironic, I feel uncomfortable. If the people are using it maliciously, aggressively, and humiliatingly in their words, I will feel uncomfortable……” )

——Group 1, Respondent A, 9/2/2025 & Group 2, Respondent C, 17/2/2025

“……我觉得玩阴阳怪气是可以的，但不能太过火，上升人身攻击、侮辱智商和挑起性别对立……”

(“……I think it's okay to play with the ironic buzzwords but cannot over to the point of personal attacks, insults to IQs, and stirring up gender rivalries……” )

——Group 3, Respondent A & B, 24/2/2025

“……我是尽量不用（阴阳怪气流行用语），因为我觉得这种词……有点掉价的感觉啊，好像会让别人觉得自己不 profession。”

(“……I do try not to use it (ironic buzzwords) because I think this kind of word ..... is a bit of a low class, as it will make others feel that I am not professional.” )

——Group 1, Respondent B, 9/2/2025

“……如果真的是在跟对方有一些 argument 的时候，就会觉得对方有点幼稚，就为什么要用这种方式（阴阳怪气）去跟我讲话，就不能用好一点的方法去讲话吗？我们在讨论一件事情，比如我们的 assignment，那你就讲有用的东西出来。其他比如玩闹、聊天的时候就 OK，就会很好笑，很有趣喽。”

(“……If we have some arguments, I will feel that you are a bit childish, why would you talk like this (ironic way)? Can't you use a better way? We are discussing something, such as our assignment, so you should talk some useful things. Other than that, it's OK. Play and chat like that is interesting and funny.”)

——Group 1, Respondent A & D, 9/2/2025

“……我大部分情况下觉得用这些阴阳怪气流行用语很有趣、很有创意。我觉得很厉害，就怎么会想到把这些字这样使用。在那种轻松搞笑、无伤大雅的视频评论区看到的话我也会点赞。但在比较正经的视频下，比如这个 video 说的是某些社会问题，全部人却还在阴

阳怪气，我就会觉得这个风气不好。怎么说……在正式场合（阴阳怪气流行语）还是上不了台面吧，要看场合说话。它不是通用的。”

（“……In the most context, I found that it (ironic buzzwords) is fun and creative. I think it's awesome: how people think of using these words in this way. I'll also leave my likes in the comments if they are kind lighthearted, funny, and harmless. **But in a serious situation, for example, it is talking about some social issue, and all the people are still ironic about it, I'd think that's a bad vibe. How can I describe ..... (ironic buzzwords) are still unsuitable in a formal setting. It still needs to depend on the occasion.** It's not the normal way of speaking.”)

——Group 2, Respondent B, 17/2/2025

“……其实阴阳怪气流行用语发展到现在已经变质了，一开始确实觉得蛮好玩的，可是后来我就觉得为什么要这样子去回复一个人，有时候好好讲话，正常点讲话是不行吗？……它们渐渐变成讽刺、辱骂的用语。在开玩笑的时候，你当然可以用啊，就是去炒热一下气氛什么的，但在讲一些比较沉重一点的消息就不太适合出现在那边吧？……比如我最近遇到一个“那咋了”，每次听到都会生气。因为我试图好好沟通、想办法解决问题，你却说“那咋了”，敷衍和不尊重我。更多的是在合理化你不合理的行为。”

（“……Ironic buzzwords **have gotten worse**. At first, I thought they were funny. After that, I wondered: why do reply to someone like that, can't you just speak properly? ……**They have gradually become sarcastic and abusive**. You can use them in jokes, you can use them to heat the atmosphere, but **they don't suitable for heavy news, isn't it?** …… For example, I get angry when I hear “So what?”. Because I'm trying to communicate and figure out how to solve the problem, and you said, “So what?” in a perfunctory and disrespectful way. You are trying to rationalise your irrational behaviour.” )

——Group 3, Respondent C, 24/2/2025

“……如果我是在比较重要或严肃的场合下，我不是很喜欢有这种阴阳怪气的讲话方式出现。……我也感觉现在很多人用这类词故意去抬杠和讽刺，比如什么“你长成这样你是真牛啊”，来嘲讽别人的外表。我非常不喜欢这样的行为。……我本身也是会使用这类阴阳怪气流行用语，但我不会太过度，否则会给人留下没有礼貌和刻薄的印象。”

（“……If I'm in an important or serious situation, I do not like the ironic speech. …… I also feel that a lot of people nowadays use these kinds of words to intentionally be sarcastic and ironic, such as “you are awesome to have this appearance”, to mock other people. I don't appreciate that kind of behaviour. …… **I do use these kinds of ironic phrases, but I won't overuse them. It may leave some impolite and mean-spirited impression.**” )

——Group 3, Respondent A, 24/2/2025

The study found that respondents had varying opinions about the use of DouYin ironic buzzwords. Three focus group members presented similar views: these buzzwords have entertainment value, especially in relaxed and funny scenarios. However, when certain irony contains strong offensive connotations or is used excessively and in inappropriate contexts, they undermine their play nature and turn into impoliteness and anachronism tools. This is

relatively in line with the concept of subculture raising moral panics, as moral panics do not necessarily occur at every moment or cause panic in everyone. Smaller segments of society may develop a fear of being threatened by their traditional norms, long-term values, outside influences (government or media exaggerate), and so on (Goode, 2017).

Respondents generally panic when they see people using irony to slander, attack, or criticise social issues. The researcher argues that such fear comes from these malicious attacks out of their maturity and inherent moral values. If ironic buzzwords are used superficially, it is harmless. In addition, most respondents said that the ironic buzzwords are still not suitable to use for formal occasions. This way of speaking is “childish”, “unproperly” and “Increases obstacles without solving the problem well.” This reflects the general communication preference of society for directness, efficiency, and sincerity. The ambiguous meaning and irony of subcultural language symbols are countered by these mainstream values.

Last but not least, one of the top-performance respondents presented a constructive value: the widespread use of ironic buzzwords hurt the Chinese language. The respondent said that the prevalence of such buzzwords will “lower the standard”. The researchers speculated that the language trends will weaken the language standard of mainstream communication and encourage more fragmented and simple words as subcultures become more popular. Linguists or traditionalists may form moral panics due to the degradation of language values. They see these subcultural expressions as obstacles to the long-term development of society



or language. Members from Group 1 and Group 3 did not discuss the impact of ironic buzzwords on language development.

In summary, the respondents acknowledged the fun and existence of irony. They also understand that the overuse of such buzzwords is a destructive force that provokes conflict. This also reflects the power of subcultures in the digital space. As an alternative expression space, social media plays a centered role in the idea of subcultures and moral panics.

#### **4.5 Theme 5- The Absorption of Subculture**

Subcultures often use unique symbols such as language and gestures to distinguish themselves from mainstream culture. However, with increasing popularity driven by the Internet environment and the spread of symbols in daily social circles, symbols have undergone a process of absorption and may be losing their initial uniqueness and subversive meaning. Users unconsciously adopt subculture symbols through repeated exposure or peer influence, which became their unconscious habit rather than subculture expression. Subculture symbols that served as a tool of expression have been diluted and lost their critical significance, becoming casual slang or commercial amusement. On some entertainment platforms such as DouYin, the constant flow of the latest entertainment topics potentially speeds up this phenomenon. This theme discusses how the entertainment environment erodes the meaning of subcultures and whether the powerful subversive symbols have become empty and normalized expressions in digital space.

“……我最开始不理解为什么这些阴阳怪气流行用语会走红。一开始的印象是疑惑。到后来我的朋友圈有在使用，我就跟着模仿……我自己的朋友圈，包括我年龄比较相近的亲戚，

比如表亲，都是会使用这些阴阳怪气流行用语的……我自己蛮常使用的，但没有恶意，都是为了增加对话幽默感或是拉近（与朋友）之间的距离。举例，我和我的表亲半年甚至一年才见一次面，很少有机会一起聊天，我发现他们很会玩这些词，为了跟他们有更多话题，我就会一起玩（阴阳怪气流行用语）。”

（“……I didn't understand why ironic buzzwords went viral at the beginning. The first impression was confusion. Then, my friends were using them, and I followed them…… My social circles, including my relatives who are close in age to me, such as cousins, also use these ironic buzzwords…… **I use them quite often, but not offensively. It's just to increase the conversation's humor or bring people closer together.** For example, my cousins and I only meet each other once every half-year or even once a year, so we rarely have a chance to talk together. I found that they play well with these words, so I joined them to use them for more conversation.”）

——Group 1, Respondent C, 9/2/2025

“……我一开始也是不理解（阴阳怪气流行用语的趣味性），后来了解了是什么，就会去模仿。我的朋友们基本上不刷抖音，也不知道这些流行用语，可是他们会被我影响，现在也会说。甚至现在比我还厉害，比我跟得上新的流行用语的潮流……你平时刷很多类似的视频，就会被影响，你有时候会不自觉用这样的方式去讲话，是 **unconsciously** 的。”

（“……I didn't understand (the fun of ironic buzzwords) at first, but later I started to imitate it after I knew what it was. My friends don't watch DouYin and don't know these buzzwords, but they are influenced by me and now they also use these buzzwords. Some of them are even better than me now and can keep up with the trend of new buzzwords…… **If you watch a lot of similar videos, you will be influenced, and sometimes you will unconsciously speak in this way. It's unconscious.**”）

——Group 1, Respondent D, 9/2/2025

“我觉得这是互联网趋势。人们的表达、人们的思维在长时间浸泡于社交媒体后逐渐变得扁平化、肤浅化，很少进行深入思考，所以开始跟风使用某些流行用语，就它属于自然趋势……而且就算有一个流行用语被禁用，还会有第二、第三个出来，所以我说它是网络中的自然趋势。……人在观看大量短视频内容的时候，会进入一种随波逐流、不思考的状态，因此思想观念无意识地被影响。你的自主意识没有启动、没有刻意去防范的情况下，非常容易受到外界信息影响。……你的行为或讲话方式代表了你所接受的烙印，这个烙印来源于你的常用信息源。我可能看知乎比较多，我说话就反映了知乎的风气。怎么说……变成了这个社区的代言人。”

（“……I think this is an Internet trend. **After being immersed in social media for a long time, people's expressions and thinking have gradually become flat and superficial, and they rarely think deeply, so they start to follow the trend and use certain buzzwords. This is a natural trend…… Even if a buzzword is banned, there will be a second or third one, so I say it is a natural trend on the Internet……When people watch a lot of short video content, they will enter a state of going with the flow, so their thoughts and ideas are unconsciously influenced. If your consciousness is not activated and you don't deliberately take precautions, you are very susceptible to external information.…… Your behavior or way of speaking represents the values you have accepted, and these values are sourced by your common-use platform.** I read more about “Zhihu”, and my behaviors and words reflect the atmosphere of Zhihu. How to describe... I have become the spokesperson of this community.”）

——Group 2, Respondent A, 17/2/2025

“……现在很多人都是有样学样，就是看到别人做什么，他就要做什么，别人讲什么就讲什么，这样子……”

(“……People nowadays always **follow the trend**, they do what others do and say what others say. Some people may think that these buzzwords are interesting, and then they just follow……” )

——Group 2, Respondent C, 17/2/2025

“……我们会被朋友的行为影响，比如说你的朋友有在用抖音，他跟你讲了很多（流行用语），你就会开始也用这些流行用语。这个是社交的一部分吧，可能是为了融入特定圈子，跟他们做朋友。”

(“……**We will be influenced by our friend's behavior.** For example, if your friend is using DouYin and he tells you a lot of (buzzwords), you will start to use these buzzwords as well. This is a part of the social interaction, probably to fit in a certain social circle and make friends with them.” )

——Group 2, Respondent D, 17/2/2025 & Group 3, Respondent B, 24/2/2025

“……我是会用这些阴阳怪气流行用语的。如果你一天起码有3-4个小时在刷抖音，也看到很多这类流行语，你很难不被同化。……处在这个环境里面久了，见得多了，觉得好玩就开始用。”

(“……I will use these ironic buzzwords. **If you spend at least 3 to 4 hours a day on DouYin, you will see a lot of these buzzwords, and it is difficult not to be assimilated. After staying in this environment for a long time, you will start using them if you find them interesting.**” )

——Group 3, Respondent C, 24/2/2025

“……我觉得很多流行语都是年轻人在用，因为他们会玩网络。他们的主要信息来源是社交媒体，很容易受到影响。网络是染缸，可以改变和影响一个人很多。”

(“……I think a lot of buzzwords are used by youth because they use the Internet well. **Their main source of information is social media**, and they are easily influenced. **The Internet is a dye vat that can change and influence a person a lot.**” )

——Group 3, Respondent A, 24/2/2025

The results show that the influence of peer groups and the entertainment-oriented social media environment have greatly promoted the absorption of subcultural elements, resulting in the dilution of their original resistance values. Two of the respondents from Group 1 with average academic grades said that they did not understand the ironic buzzwords at first, but with frequent interactions in their peer group, they consciously used the ironic buzzwords to join and enhance conversations or promote relationships. Therefore, their use is not a subculture expression but is the result of repeated exposure and social imitation. This

illustrates how subcultural expressions may spread beyond their original circle through indirect contact and turn into mainstream language habits.

In addition, the wide dissemination of ironic buzzwords on social media platforms such as DouYin has accelerated its generalisation. Some respondents pointed out that long-term consumption of DouYin content led people to assimilate and unconsciously integrate those buzzwords into daily communication. This is consistent with the idea that digital space encourages passive consumption. The individuals continue to absorb information without critically thinking about its meaning (Rahayu & Fauzi, 2023). Subcultural symbols have thus lost their subversiveness. The interviewee with excellent grades emphasized “deliberate prevention”, expressed concerns about passive consumption of entertainment content, and demonstrated a cautious attitude towards Internet entertainment trends. The interviewee also mentioned the substitutability of ironic buzzwords: even if an ironic buzzword is restricted or no longer popular, there will be a lot of similar popular terms appearing and replacing it. This further weakens their resistance meanings to mainstream society. This rapid replacement difficult for any symbols to retain their original meaning as the life cycle is short and unstable. Subculture symbols circulate in a specific loop and then are forgotten or discarded. They are no longer a symbol of long-term resistance.

Although ironic buzzwords may have the potential to resist mainstream culture, the interviewee's experience shows that the influence of peers and the digital entertainment ecosystem has diluted the subculture's meaning and caused it to lose deeper social criticism.

The absorption power of the digital mainstream culture shows that social media has eroded the meaning of subculture symbols, making them slowly become a fleeting trend.

#### 4.6 Theme 6- Personal background influences the usage of ironic buzzwords

The use of subcultural ironic buzzwords is influenced by various personal background factors, including age, gender, personality, family background, and the habit of social media usage. As mentioned earlier in the literature review, the younger generation is more aware of the self-expressive meaning and rebellious function of subcultural symbols. In contrast, traditionalists or elders may feel panicked by subcultural symbols. In addition to age, men and women possibly have different views on subcultural symbols under the constraints of different gender norms, and there may be certain differences in the way or frequency of use between different genders. In addition, family style and personality will also affect individuals' exposure to and acceptance of online buzzwords. Individuals with open minds or who have certain media literacy are potentially more receptive to unusual subcultural language. In addition, different social media will develop different cultural environments. Individuals' choice of social media platforms potentially affects their use of ironic buzzwords. This theme elaborates on how personal factors such as age, gender, personality, family background, and social media habits affect the use of ironic buzzwords.

“.....我身边也有很多会用阴阳怪气流行用语的人。基本上都是年轻人。长辈可能不太能get。比如我和我妈妈说这样的流行用语，她不刷抖音的，基本不懂这些潮流。我会和她解释，但再上一辈，到我爷爷奶奶啊，我就不讲了，解释了他们也很难理解的。”

(“.....**Many people around me use ironic buzzwords. Most of them are youth.** The elders may not understand. For example, when I talk to my mother about these buzzwords, she doesn't watch DouYin and doesn't understand these trends. I will explain to her. However, I won't talk to the elder generation, such as my grandparents, because they also cannot understand even I explain.” )

——Group 1, Respondent C, 9/2/2025

“……我也观察到身边不少人会用阴阳怪气流行用语。基本是 18 到 29 岁的年轻人。长辈很少会看到……而且比起男生，女生更会（阴阳怪气）。我身边的男性朋友会直接骂人，比较不会婉转。”

（“……I noticed that many people around me have used ironic buzzwords. **They're mostly young people between 18 and 29 years old. Rarely the elderly...and girls are more likely to use ironic buzzwords than boys. The male friends around me always curse directly and are less likely to be tactful.**”）

——Group 1, Respondent B, 9/2/2025

“我也是在同龄朋友面前才会说这些（阴阳怪气流行用语），在长辈面前讲了他们也不懂，没有什么乐趣。……我觉得流行用语的使用还跟你刷的 **social media** 有关系，如果是 ABC, banana, 基本不刷抖音，就不会知道这些流行用语……不过他们用的 twitter 之类的应该也有类似的流行语，只是我们不懂。”

（“……**I only say these (ironic buzzwords) in front of my peers. The elders do not understand when I chat like this, so it's not fun. ... I think the use of buzzwords is also related to social media choice.** If the person is 'ABC', a 'banana' (who is Chinese but more familiar with English), and you don't use DouYin, you won't know these buzzwords……They probably have similar buzzwords on Twitter, but we don't know. ”）

——Group 1, Respondent A, 9/2/2025

“……我认同 A 说的 **social media** 选择会影响。比如我的朋友们是 english 更像 mother language, 他们有时候会不懂我用的流行用语。所以我觉得（阴阳怪气流行用语的使用）和家庭的教育背景有关，因为他们没有华文语言背景的话，就会比较 blur to 这些抖音的流行语。”

（“**...I agree with what A said about social media choices causing impact.** For example, my friends who used English as their native. They don't understand the buzzwords I use. So, I think (the use of ironic buzzwords) is related to the family's educational background. If they don't have a Chinese language background, they will be confused by these DouYin buzzwords.”）

——Group 1, Respondent D, 9/2/2025

“……我的说话方式会因为谈话对象的不同而有差。如果是朋友，我就会用阴阳怪气的语气讲话。如果是长辈，或者是陌生人，不大熟悉的人对话，我觉得就不是很合适。”

（“……**The way I speak will be different depending on who I am talking to.** If the person is my peer friend, I will use these ironic buzzwords. If the person is an elder, a stranger, or someone I am not familiar with, I will not. It is inappropriate.”）

——Group 2, Respondent C, 17/2/2025

“……我是没有什么用这些阴阳怪气的流行语啦。因为我讲话方式和个性比较直接，就不会想到要使用这些蛮创意和间接的流行语。”

（“……I rarely use these ironic buzzwords. **Because my speaking style and personality are more direct, I wouldn't think of using these creative and indirect buzzwords.**”）

——Group 2, Respondent B, 17/2/2025



“……我觉得社交媒体的选择有影响到（阴阳怪气流行语的使用）。好像抖音的小红书之类的，比较偏中国。西方国家就会有他们自己的流行用语……生活背景的话，应该也不影响吧，因为父母时代的潮流和孩子、年轻人的不一样。”

（“……I think an individual's social media choice will impact (the use of ironic buzzwords). For example, DouYin and XiaoHongShu show more Chinese content. Western countries have their buzzwords…… In terms of family background, it doesn't matter because the trends of the generation are different.”）

——Group 2, Respondent D, 17/2/2025

“……要说我对阴阳怪气流行语的使用……更多来讲是依据原则行事吧，比如我觉得无伤大雅的我就会去用。如果是带有恶意的，我会避免使用。我是比较跟随自己认为对错的东西来决定我的言行……另外，我觉得阴阳怪气流行语的使用跟社交媒体选择没有很大关系。因为这些流行语都是很好理解的，就我可能只需要花费 5-10 分钟的时间，消化一下我就会明白它要表达的意思，进而开始模仿……就算你平时刷 instagram 比较多，你看到抖音的内容还是会慢慢明白和适应，只是门槛比较高，需要一点点努力。这个也 depend on 一个人的文化或语言底蕴。”

（“……For my use of ironic buzzwords... more on personal principles. For example, I will use those that I think are harmless. If they are malicious, I will avoid using them. I tend to follow what I think is right or wrong to act……In addition, I think the use of ironic buzzwords has little to do with social media choices. Because these buzzwords are easy to understand, it may only take me 5-10 minutes to decode and imitate…… I think even if you watch more Instagram content, you will be able to understand and adapt DouYin's content although the requirement is relatively high. It requires your effort. This also depends on a person's cultural or language background.”）

——Group 2, Respondent A, 17/2/2025

“……我觉得很多流行语都是年轻人在用，因为他们会玩网络。他们的主要信息来源是社交媒体，很容易受到影响。网络是染缸，可以改变和影响一个人很多。”

（“……I think a lot of buzzwords are used by youth because they use the Internet well. Their main source of information is social media, and they are easily influenced. The Internet is a dye vat that can change and influence a person a lot.”）

——Group 3, Respondent A, 24/2/2025

“……我认为这个东西根据个人性格吧。可能说一个人比较开朗，他能接受新的潮流的东西，那他也会使用这些（阴阳怪气流行语）。如果一个人比较 emo，不爱跟人交流，他无论学习好还是不好，都是不会去使用这些网络用语的……”

（“……I think it depends on personalities. A person who is more outgoing and can accept new trends will also use these (ironic buzzwords). If the person is more emotional and doesn't like to communicate with others, he will not use this online buzzword whether he is in high or low classes……”）

——Group 3, Respondent B, 24/2/2025

“……我觉得比起家庭背景，年龄会对阴阳怪气流行语的使用程度造成更多影响。其实现在很多小孩子从小就刷抖音，一直在接触网络用语。我见过 4-5 岁的儿童已经很会用这些流行语了。他长期处于一个被流行语包围的环境，并且还没有足够的是非判断力，还不会分辨这个东西是好的还是不好的……他们像是一张白纸，他接触到什么，他就会在他那张纸上涂什么。”

(“.....I think age has a greater impact on the use of ironic buzzwords instead of family background. Many children nowadays have been using DouYin since very early and early exposed to Internet buzzwords. I have seen some 4 and 5-year-old children who are very good at using these buzzwords. They stay in a buzzwords-surrounded environment for a long period. They do not have enough awareness to judge either right or wrong.....They are like a piece of blank paper, scribble whatever they approach on their paper.” )

——Group 3, Respondent C, 24/2/2025

According to the focus group result, several respondents from different groups indicated that they tend to use ironic buzzwords with their peers only as their elder generations may not comprehend their meaning and talking style even if explained. In this case, the researcher assumed that the younger generations are more immersed in digital culture and social media. So, they are more capable of decoding and utilising ironic buzzwords. This aligns with the idea of subcultures often driven by youth and serves as a tool to divide with mainstream groups (Williams, 2012). The generational gap in using these buzzwords highlights the tension between subcultures and the dominant culture. Moreover, a respondent from Group 3 considers the age factor. The respondent highlights that kids nowadays also use buzzwords fluently because they grew up with the social media trend. Additionally, a respondent from Group 1 observed that females are more likely to use ironic buzzwords, while males prefer to express themselves directly. This difference may be related to broader gendered communication patterns, where women need to be more elegant and subtle. Subcultures provide the space to reinforce or subvert gender norms (Hooks, 1994).

The result shows that personality is vital in determining an individual's engagement with ironic buzzwords. A respondent from Group 3 suggested that those with an open-minded or outgoing personality are more likely to adopt such buzzwords, as they are more willing to participate in new trends. One of the respondents from Group 2 held a similar answer to him, emphasizing that the use of buzzwords is dictated by personal principles. Subculture



suggests that individuals selectively engage with certain cultural symbols based on their identity, beliefs, and social environment (Hebdige, 1979). The respondents' idea that subcultural participation is a choice aligns with the subcultural concept.

Social media habits further shape the adoption and understanding of ironic buzzwords. DouYin and XiaoHongShu are deeply rooted in Chinese culture. It cultivated a different linguistic environment with other social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram. The respondents who have general academic performance noted that individuals who primarily consume English-language content or grew up with an English background may face difficulties in grasping DouYin's buzzwords. However, a respondent who has an excellent academic background argued that the personal language or cultural background is not as important as thought. People will understand all the terms from different platforms although it may need more effort. Thereby, the researcher summarises that the digital divide may reflect different subcultures' symbols to create solidarity while excluding outsiders. In addition, the ability of individuals will affect the fluidity of subcultures.

The focus group results indicate that the use of ironic buzzwords may be influenced by generation, gender, personality, and social media habits. Younger individuals are more immersed in ironic buzzword culture. Gender differences also influence expression styles. Personality plays a role, as open-minded individuals may be more likely to adopt these buzzwords. Other than that, the choice of social media brings impact. Ironic buzzwords became the codes of subcultures, strengthening identity while maintaining exclusivity from one group to another.

#### 4.7 Theme 7- Culture Industry

The concept of cultural industry proposed by Adorno and Horkheimer (1944) criticized the mass production of culture, which turned art into a tool for profit will cause the loss of ideological expression and authenticity. The rise of the cultural industry may heavily impact the operation of subculture, causing the expression of subculture to lose its uniqueness and become a commercial product. The meaning of resistance gradually disappeared under the capitalists' manipulation. The entertainment-driven nature of platforms such as DouYin potentially fastens this process. In the social media era, subcultural symbols are repackaged by influential individuals or brands to stimulate traffic and maximize the participation of audiences or consumers. In this process, subcultural tools as alternative expressions lose their subversive meaning and become commercial products driven by the market. This theme discusses the erosion of cultural industry among selected Malaysian Chinese youth, and studies whether subcultural symbols integrated into entertainment platforms have been swallowed up by capitalism and become a tool for profit.

“……我觉得日常情况下，一个人使用这些流行用语只是为了好玩，或者当成口头禅、讲话中的衔接词而已。不代表它是在吸引注意力。可是如果是网红拍成视频，然后发布上网之类，我就觉得他们在以跟得上趋势的方法去找流量。可是我觉得这又没有什么问题，也不能反映出这个网红的真实价值观。可能他是一个很正经的人，可是他的主业就是网络媒体工作者之类的，所以他一定要吸引流量来保住自己的工作，可能目前最好的方式就是拍阴阳怪气流行语的视频。所以我可以接受他们这样，也不觉得他的视频代表他的真实面貌。

（“……I think in daily situations, a person uses these buzzwords just to look for fun, as a catchphrase, or as a connecting word in the conversation. It doesn't mean that they are attracting attention. **But if an internet celebrity makes such videos and posts them online, I think they are finding traffic in a way that follows the trend.** But I don't think there is anything wrong and it doesn't reflect the personal values of this celebrity. Maybe he/she is a serious guy, but their main job is online media worker, so they must attract traffic to keep their job. The best way now is to film videos using ironic buzzwords. So, I can accept it, and I don't think their videos represent their true self.”）

——Group 1, Respondent C, 9/2/2025

“……你平时刷很多类似的视频，就会被影响，你有时候会不自觉用这样的方式去讲话，是 **unconsciously** 的……我觉得如果是为了博眼球的话，为了红来使用这些流行语，有点 low……普通情况下，和朋友开玩笑，我觉得是 ok 的。”

（“…… **If you watch a lot of similar videos, you will be influenced, and sometimes you will unconsciously speak in this way. It's unconscious……I think if you use these buzzwords to attract attention or become famous, it's a bit low-class…… If in a normal context, such as joking with friends, I think it's OK.**”）

——Group 1, Respondent D, 9/2/2025

“……我是不反感的，不会觉得这类阴阳怪气流行语很 offense 或者 low，就当乐子看。跟着朋友一起开玩笑会用。”

（“……I don't mind it. I don't think this kind of ironic buzzword is offensive or low-class, **just fun to me, and I will use it when I'm joking with my friends.**”）

——Group 1, Respondent B, 9/2/2025

“……亲近的密友还是会使用类似的，但是其用意是在调侃而非阴阳怪气，就朋友之间的乐趣。没有攻击性……发行内容的人因为这个趋势，从而能够更加从容的、更加毫无费力的发行这一类娱乐性的内容，然后因为互联网加速普及，然后刚进来的新的用户也不怎么进行思考，没有能力去处理过于深奥的内容，就只能就观看这一类更具娱乐性的内容，双方需求互补出现的结果。因为有娱乐市场，才会有更多的流行语被 **produce** 出来。”

（“I will use these ironic buzzwords with my close friends, but the intention is to tease rather than be sarcastic, it's just for fun but no aggression……**Content creators can publish this type of entertaining content more calmly and effortlessly when digital media is becoming more common. New users always join without critical thinking and are not able to handle profound content, so they watch entertaining content. This is the result of the complementary needs of both parties. Because there is an entertainment market, more buzzwords are produced.**”）

——Group 2, Respondent C, 17/2/2025

“……我觉得它一定程度上是反映了一些人的价值观。比如说……“资本家看了会流泪”这种，其实我感觉他是对现实社会的调侃吧，年轻人会用这些话去自嘲，然后同时可能会表达一些对社会的不满。“资本家看了会流泪”是对社会太过看重利益和资本至上而压榨劳力的现象的批判。……但是也不一定的，一半一半吧。有些只是因为互联网趋势或朋友，自己也跟着而已，就不代表什么了……”

（“……I think it reflects people's values to a certain extent. For example, “capitalists will cry when they see this”, I think it is a dissatisfaction with real-life society. Young people will use these words to tease themselves. They may express some dissatisfaction with the society. “Capitalists will cry when they see this” criticising the phenomenon of overemphasis on profits and capital supremacy, thereby exploiting labor.…… But it's not necessarily, maybe some of that only. Some just follow the Internet trend or friends, then it doesn't mean anything.……”）

——Group 3, Respondent A & B, 24/2/2025

“……我是会用这些阴阳怪气流行用语的。如果你一天起码有 3-4 个小时在刷抖音，也看到很多这类流行语，你很难不被同化。……处在这个环境里面久了，见得多了，觉得好玩就开始用。”

“……I will use these ironic buzzwords. If you spend at least 3 to 4 hours a day on DouYin, you will see a lot of these buzzwords, and it is difficult not to be assimilated. After staying in this environment for a long time, you will start using them if you find them interesting.” )

——Group 3, Respondent C, 24/2/2025

“……在我这里的分2个派系。就是分他是自媒体工作者或是普通大众。首先自媒体工作者我觉得他们使用这些阴阳怪气流行用语更多是在哗众取宠，因为这些趋势是“流量密码”，让更多人来看他的 video，博人眼球，不是他本意……如果是大众来说，真的是为了跟风、娱乐，如果说有没有反映到自己的价值观或者对社会的不满，我觉得也有，因为讲话的水准可以暴露一个人大概是什么样的。如果他很粗俗地讲话，可能他就是一个没有什么礼貌的人。”

“There are two factions here. They are self-media workers or ordinary people. First of all, I think self-media workers use these ironic buzzwords to attract attention because these trends are "the secret of traffic". It lets more people to watch the videos and attract attention. This is not his original intention... For the general public, it is to follow the trend and for entertainment. If you want to say whether it reflects their values or dissatisfaction with society, I think it does, because the standard of talk can reveal how is the person. If he always speaks vulgarly, he may be an impolite person.” )

——Group 3, Respondent C, 24/2/2025

The study found that the production of content creators further weakened the resistance significance of subcultural symbols by incorporating buzzwords into their works. They used buzzwords to create videos, attract traffic, and increase interaction. This caused the commercialisation of subcultural symbols. Despite their differences in academic performance, members from Group 1 and Group 3 give similar views, believing that ironic buzzwords have developed into “the secret of traffic” and are no longer a means of expression. Buzzwords potentially became trendy slogans and formed mainstream culture under the repackaging of the entertainment industry.

There are some gaps among groups in their ideas. The respondents from Group 1 said that although buzzwords have become a trend, they can understand the profit-making purpose of social media workers and have not made any criticisms. Another respondent from the same group said that buzzwords are fun, and he does not interpret or criticise them in depth but

just follows the trend for amusement. In contrast, the respondents from Group 2 with outstanding academic performance criticised the rise cultural industry, emphasizing that social media speeds up passive consumption. It causes people to join the trend unconsciously. In addition, due to the popularity of social media such as DouYin, and the low joining requirement, anyone can browse the content. Strong demand may lead to the creation of lower-quality content. Over time, the demand and supply relationship are established. Group 3 members are aware of the resistance meaning of buzzwords, but do not deny that it is used as entertainment in many cases.

Overall, the results show that the entertainment-driven environment of social media such as DouYin has reshaped subcultural expressions and weakened their subversive power. The use of ironic buzzwords has transformed from a potential form of cultural expression to a market-driven product that serves interest. Although some respondents still recognize the rebellious meaning of buzzwords, the development of the cultural industry has weakened the meaning of subcultural symbols.

## **Chapter 5     Discussions and Conclusions**

### **5.1 Discussion**

This chapter aims to answer the research questions and succinctly summarise the findings. This study discusses the interpretation and values of participation in DouYin ironic buzzwords among selected UTAR Kampar undergraduate students to understand the meaning of certain subcultural symbols in this social media context. Through focus group discussions, the researcher successfully interpreted the ideas of subcultures from the angle of the media text receiver and obtained valuable results that are worth discussing. While acknowledging certain limitations on the Final Year Project level, the researcher completed an intersectional study based on the subculture, culture industry, and moral panic fields to explain the ironic existence and meaning of ironic buzzwords.

#### **5.1.1 The resistance meaning of the subculture symbol**

This study explores how selected UTAR Kampar undergraduate students interpret DouYin's ironic buzzwords and why they engage with DouYin's ironic buzzwords. In this section, the researcher mainly discusses the differences in interpretation and reasons for using DouYin's ironic buzzwords among students with varying academic performances. The researcher effectively answered the two research questions as the respondents' results help clarify the basic meaning of subculture symbols within the Malaysian Chinese context through this mapping study.

***Research Question 1: How do the selected UTAR Kampar undergraduate students interpret DouYin's ironic buzzwords?***

Results of the focus group discussion show significant differences in the time spent on DouYin among students with varying academic performances. There are also some gaps in terms of their content choices. Students with good academic performance are less immersed in DouYin, have selective content preference instead of aimless browsing. They make a critical analysis of DouYin's buzzwords, such as their characteristics being "weird" and "unreasonable". This is consistent with the concept that subculture communities often hold exclusive symbols to distinguish themselves from mainstream society (An, 2023). However, only one of the respondents noticed that using ironic buzzwords is a way of expression under the platform's regulations. The others only interpret this kind of ironic buzzword as funny words and for social interaction purposes. Their adoption is lower, mostly for entertainment. The researcher assumed that academic achievers who fulfill mainstream expectations are less prone to marginalization and therefore have fewer alternative expression needs. Furthermore, subcultural awareness is shaped by personal experience. Students with strong academic performance are usually not deeply engaged in specific online amusement communities. They prefer a learning community most (Khalid, 2019). They are more likely to engage in academic, research, and education fields online. This factor hinders their ability to interpret the resistant meanings of subcultural symbols. Thus, one of them typically emphasizes surface-level analysis, like labelling these symbols as "weird," while rarely exploring the in-depth social or emotional motivations. In this case, the researcher answers the first research question that the subcultural symbols can be recognized, but the resistance meaning is not obvious among the students with good grades. Their interpretation of ironic buzzwords is "a humor tool for jokes" or "a way to join or interact with peers".

Students with average academic performance spend more time on DouYin's content, mostly for relaxation. They have mild awareness about the characteristics of subculture language symbols or the potential meaning of subculture-subversive expression. They interpret and use ironic buzzwords as a way of fun. They generally agreed that ironic buzzwords did not convey personal values when used. The researcher assumed that, due to capitalists' entertainment manipulation, fewer and fewer people see these symbols as having unique meanings but see them as part of the popular culture. Their content consumption pattern is more passive and has a lower awareness of the subculture's resistance meaning. Thus, the researcher answers the first research question that their interpretation of ironic buzzwords is most likely to have entertainment or social needs.

Furthermore, the poorer academic group "heavily relies" on DouYin, consuming a variety of content, and staying the longest, up to 12 hours per day. A key finding is that potential subcultural language symbols still retain a certain degree of subversive significance for students with relatively poor academic performance. For example, people's dissatisfaction with capitalist exploitation. This sensitivity may stem from their closer proximity to marginalization on the social level. According to Mason (2014), in Asian countries, especially those that adopted Confucian heritage cultures, students need to perform as brilliantly as possible to strive for a good future. There is a strong belief that education plays a vital role in upward mobility. Students who fail to meet the requirements may be more inclined to challenge the original elitism. Unfortunately, under mainstream pressure or social media supervision, they cannot directly challenge authority. Therefore, the subversive nature of ironic buzzwords has been widely internalized as a channel for voicing out. The researcher



here answers the first research question that the resistance meaning of subcultural symbols can be slightly identified by respondents with poorer academic results. Their interpretation of DouYin's ironic buzzwords is more constructive and meaningful since some of them can identify the resistance nature behind the surface entertainment nature.

Overall, only a few respondents clearly interpret DouYin's buzzwords as an alternative expression to express dissatisfaction with mainstream social phenomena and powerful regulation systems. They are the respondents who have good or poor academic results. Apart from the less impacted by academic performances, their personality, social media preferences, and other factors are more impactful on their interpretation of DouYin's ironic buzzwords. The level of success and classes are no longer the main factors that influence their potential subcultural symbol beliefs, since their resistance power is not obvious. Combined with the majority of the interviewee's ideas that the potential subculture symbols such as the ironic buzzwords are a means for entertainment or a way to attract more audience's attention and make profits, the researcher speculates that the resistance meaning of subculture symbols has been eroded by the cultural industry, which will be discussed later.

***Research Question 2: Why do the selected UTAR Kampar undergraduate students participate with DouYin's ironic buzzwords?***

Hebdige's (1979) subculture theory suggests that youth create distinct symbols, including languages, to differentiate themselves from mainstream culture. However, findings from three focus groups reveal that more Malaysian Chinese youths utilize subcultural symbols

based on their individual personalities and social media behaviors. Establishing social identity and fostering friendships are their main reason to use DouYin's ironic buzzwords. These ironic buzzwords have become a common means of connecting with friends. The elements of emphasizing their uniqueness or distancing from mainstream culture are not prominently displayed. The researcher's findings illustrated this empirical phenomenon and answered the second research question.

Cohen (1955) and others proposed that a high failure rate group has more potential to form subculture communities to attract social attention. However, the researcher here argues that lower performance has little impact on the use of contemporary subculture symbols based on the discussion results. Some respondents even suggested that those with good performances are more likely to use potential subculture symbols. The results show that an individual's age, personality, social background, or social needs have a greater impact on their use. The researcher assumed that one of the factors is that the nature of social media and the borderless Internet trend blur the distance between communities. People do not have strong class distinctions and could integrate into or cross communities and gather for interaction on DouYin (Papacharissi, 2011). Over time, the symbols intersect with each other. As mentioned before, subcultures are dynamic and may hold different social statuses according to social development. Some subcultures are not always marginalized and may also be gradually noticed and recognized by mainstream society due to other factors, such as the manipulation of the cultural industry, although this process may take a long time. This idea aligns with the idea of Fiske (2006), in which the dominant will absorb oppositional cultural expressions to neutralize their resistance. Thus, the researcher states that social

media gives space for cultural exchange. Furthermore, it is obvious from the research results that the meaning of subculture - resisting powerful forces or subverting mainstream society is gradually being forgotten in the digital environment. The researcher found that more respondents used these ironic buzzwords as “fun entertainment in daily life”, and the reason for using them is to integrate. There is no reflection of certain social atmospheres or mainstream hegemony when using them. Until here, the researcher had answered that the reason they use ironic buzzwords is for fun and social needs.

Last but not least in this section, the researcher would like to emphasize that although those with poor academic performance realize that ironic buzzwords are an alternative way to express dissatisfaction, they do not deny their entertainment nature. They strive to emphasize that they believe the ironic buzzwords are commonly used to ridicule or have a joke only in the current context. They absorb and internalize the buzzwords. In this scenario, the researcher argues that the buzzword loses its original resistance when it becomes a word-of-mouth. This transformation from a niche symbol of identity or dissent to an everyday language habit reflects a broader sociocultural shift: the commodification and normalization of subcultural language. Ertürk & Akçam (2018) examined how the fashion industry’s appropriation of subcultural elements diminishes their symbolic significance, concluding that commercialization will strip away the original radical meaning of these symbols. When niche elements are mass-produced, their original and unique values become diluted. In the digital media space, ironic buzzwords encounter similar issues. DouYin algorithms and abundant content erode the authenticity of subcultures, primarily aiming to maximize profits. The balance between social media entertainment and subcultural symbols has shifted,

reflecting a cyclical process in which external cultures often absorb subcultural elements, evidencing the widespread erosion caused by commercialization, which is further explored in the next section.

### **5.1.2 Culture Industry Absorption to Subculture Meaning**

This study explores how selected UTAR Kampar undergraduate students interpret DouYin's ironic buzzwords and why they engage with DouYin's ironic buzzwords. This section explores the power of the culture industry in absorbing subculture resistance by using DouYin's ironic buzzwords as the case. This mapping study is contributed as the researcher answers two research questions to understand whether the selected subculture language symbol still maintains its resistance role or has gradually lost balance under the manipulation of the culture industry in the Malaysian Chinese youth context.

#### ***Research Question 1: How do the selected UTAR Kampar undergraduate students interpret DouYin's ironic buzzwords?***

The cultural industry theory, originally proposed by Adorno and Horkheimer (1944), believes that popular culture absorbs and neutralizes subcultural resistance, transforming it into consumable and marketable products. In this process, subcultures are gradually accepted by the public, their uniqueness fades, and they lose their original resistance meaning in the end. In this study, the respondents took the ironic buzzwords on DouYin as examples. The results show that most of them simply interpreted the potential subcultural symbols as entertainment and humorous jokes, mapping the erosion of subcultures by the cultural industry among Malaysian Chinese youth. The ironic buzzwords that once carried implicit

criticism of social reality have become a means of traffic attraction and marketing strategies for DouYin creators. They are integrated into works or brands to make profits. In addition, some interviewees mentioned that even if a subcultural symbol is banned or forgotten, many new symbols will appear. Then, fades out of the public's view again. This phenomenon is endless. This reflects the life cycle of subculture from grassroots expression to appropriation, packaging, and profit orientation (Ajmal, 2024). Continuous commercialization will weaken the original subversive meaning of the symbol, making it mainstream entertainment and losing its irony. Therefore, the researcher answers the first research question, for which the respondents interpret DouYin's ironic buzzwords as playful purpose, only next to small interpret them as a powerful resistance tool.

This highlights that the substantial profit accumulation in the cultural industry has led people to stop engaging in deep thinking about buzzwords (Waldman, 1977). Their mild awareness of interpreting the resistance nature of ironic buzzwords aligns with the idea that the cultural industry fosters passive consumption. As mentioned earlier, social media serves as an alternative space where individuals from various circles can connect and even merge. Based on the values of the respondents by using DouYin as a case study, individuals may unconsciously enter a state of emptiness while browsing content. After mindlessly consuming a large amount of algorithm-recommended content, they become “branded” (烙印) by the community. Moreover, some respondents view ironic buzzwords as a means to cope with social pressure and express dissatisfaction. However, due to the influence of social circles and online content creators, these symbols have gained popularity and are no longer considered “exclusive terms for insiders.” Their meanings have become fluid as different

communities may interpret symbols differently. This recontextualization can cause ironic buzzwords to lose their authenticity and uniqueness. As mentioned earlier, their rebellious significance dissipates once they become part of word-of-mouth humor or entertainment.

***Research Question 2: Why do the selected UTAR Kampar undergraduate students participate with DouYin's ironic buzzwords?***

The researcher posits that tension exists between digital platforms as powerful conduits for alternative expressions and the preservation of subcultures. It is indisputable that the creators of DouYin have facilitated the creation and dissemination of ironic buzzwords. Their efforts have made a variety of buzzwords familiar and internalized. These ironic buzzwords, which are both obscure and creative (often containing humorous elements), provide a more discreet means for those in need to express themselves and evade harsh sanctions.

However, the amplification and promotion of the platform's formidable algorithmic control to maximize participation undermines the true purpose of ironic buzzwords. The researcher here can answer the second research question that most of the reasons for using these ironic buzzwords are for social integration and following trendy entertainment, based on the focus group results. This represents that these symbols have transformed into popular language trends, continuously circulating within the platform's ecosystem. This cyclical phenomenon mirrors the life cycle of subcultural symbols previously discussed, revealing the commercial logic of digital culture under capitalist influences. Over time, people's self-control and critical thinking regarding algorithm-recommended content have become another topic deserving of attention. As the interviewees remarked, the content on DouYin is "endless"

and “diverse in type, and I enjoy it all, resulting in “addiction” symptoms such as “basically starting to watch DouYin when I wake up” and “not being able to sleep without watching DouYin.” After a long time of staying in the life cycle, they unintentionally internalize these ironic buzzwords in their daily usage.

Then, the researcher wants to highlight the importance of media literacy in coping with the ever-changing digital cultural landscape. The study found that ironic buzzwords are increasingly absorbed by the culture industry or influenced by algorithmic mechanisms. Thus, the researcher gets the results of more respondents use ironic buzzwords for daily amusement. They lose critical thinking to the meaning behind the symbol. Critical media literacy allows individuals to understand the potential power structure of social platforms (Cho et al., 2022). Therefore, the researcher argues that users need to increase their media literacy, be more critical of online content, and often be skeptical to avoid manipulation traps. Then, they consume the content actively and consciously.

Overall, this section emphasizes the contradictory nature of DouYin’s ironic buzzwords: they are both expressions of subculture and tools for capital to manipulate trends. By answering two research questions, the researcher found out that the potential subculture symbol, including DouYin’s ironic buzzwords has gradually evolved from a subculture expression to a means of maximizing benefits under the manipulation and development of culture industry. This reflects the fluidity of subculture symbols and showing the process of absorption between capitalism and symbols.

### **5.1.3 Excessive Subculture Symbols Raise Moral Panic**

This study explores how selected UTAR Kampar undergraduate students interpret DouYin's ironic buzzwords and why they engage with DouYin's ironic buzzwords. This section discusses whether the subculture symbols raised moral panic within the Malaysian Chinese youth community based on the researcher's map findings. The findings are significant because they portray the basic situation of moral panic caused by the use of subcultural symbols within the local context.

This study reflects that DouYin's ironic buzzwords, which are seen as symbols of subculture, cause a certain degree of moral panic. Some respondents interpret certain ironic buzzwords as harming the moral ethics. The interviewees discussed scenarios where buzzwords lead to the degeneration of memes in the Chinese language, excessive buzzwords provoke social contradictions, and the inappropriateness of buzzwords in formal settings, revealing that subculture symbols can incite varying levels of moral panic. As previously mentioned, when a niche or marginalized social phenomenon is perceived as a threat to mainstream societal values, it induces anxiety among people. The amplification by the media or the regulatory actions of powerful institutions also influences public beliefs. In this section, the researcher will focus on the moral panic theory proposed by Cohen (1972) and utilize three of the five elements of moral panic summarized by Goode & Ben-Yehuda (1994) - worry, hostility, and volatility as supplementary discussion points. Coupled with the values of the interviewees, the researcher answers both of the research questions, which effectively helps to understand the values of DouYin's ironic buzzwords within the context of Malaysian Chinese youth.



Before this, the researcher highlights a key finding from the focus group discussions: ironic buzzwords are a form of digital entertainment. Many respondents noted that these expressions serve as a powerful means of coping in social interactions. Almost everyone agrees it has an entertaining nature. This connects to the impact of the cultural industry discussed earlier. Here, the researcher primarily discusses the ironic buzzwords in offline social interactions, indicating that the subcultural symbols on DouYin can shape the daily communication habits of contemporary Malaysian Chinese youth. Online and offline communities are highly interactive. Many respondents identify whether the other party is “one of them” based on the others’ understanding or use of DouYin’s buzzwords. Therefore, the researcher posits that the presence of moral panic is minimal when it comes to entertainment purposes.

***Research Question 1: How do the selected UTAR Kampar undergraduate students interpret DouYin’s ironic buzzwords?***

Only one respondent with excellent grades clearly expressed concerns that the use of ironic buzzwords may erode the traditional Chinese language. The respondent can interpret the disadvantages of ironic buzzwords, which may go against the traditional language memes. The memes of buzzwords that widely spread on social media platforms like DouYin have possibly transformed. Some positive compliments, such as the words ‘beautiful’(漂亮), ‘genius’(天才), ‘awesome (厉害), and ‘you are the best’ (你最厉害), have become subtle ways to express irony in certain conversation scenarios. Such transformations of memes challenge the original meaning of Chinese words and cause concern. This aligns with the

concept of moral panic. The balance between entertainment and language norms needs further exploration.

Secondly, many respondents perceive hostility in some ironic buzzwords. They struggle to accept buzzwords that escalate into personal attacks (such as mocking disabled individuals who work hard for a living) and provoke confrontations between opposing sides (such as gender stereotypes). Subcultural symbols that incite social disputes foster widespread moral panic. The researcher argues that moral panic arises when individuals' moral values are challenged. People are frequently taught to be respectful and polite, and mocking others' appearances and weaknesses undoubtedly violates moral principles (Schaefer et al., 2021). The researcher argues that vulnerable groups are often prioritized and protected to minimize disadvantages in society. Mocking their flaws in a joking manner may bring secondary harm to victims and provoke criticism. However, the boundaries for ironic buzzwords are difficult to divide. When they cross the line from humor to attack, they may lead to cyberbullying or violence, inflicting pressure on victims. Thus, the researcher answers the first research question: some respondents will interpret DouYin's ironic buzzwords as a threatening tool to break down the Chinese language and people's moral values.

***Research Question 2: Why do the selected UTAR Kampar undergraduate students participate with DouYin's ironic buzzwords?***

The focus group results show that only some respondents will utilize DouYin's ironic buzzwords frequently, usually for entertainment or social interaction purposes. More respondents even unconsciously avoid engaging with these words since they interpret the

ironic buzzwords are disadvantaging their social relationships or moral values. They reduce the use to protect their social values.

Firstly, some respondents indicated that frequent use of subcultural buzzwords in daily communication undermines the efficiency of conversations. Thus, they intentionally avoid or reduce their behavior. As the respondents mentioned, employing ironic buzzwords when discussing serious topics trivializes the conversation and reduces communication efficiency. This suggests that although ironic buzzwords are popular among youth, their adaptability and acceptance in broader social contexts remain limited. The researcher discusses that language is an important means of maintaining social order, expressing responsibility, and showing sincerity in the Malaysian Chinese society, which advocates Confucianism (Cheah, 2021). Another study by Chin (2020) pointed out that Chinese culture attaches importance to “clear and unambiguous” expression. Therefore, the respondents who have long-term adopted this idea show their insistence on order and language norms. As a result, there are concerns that the ironic buzzwords of a subculture nature will damage the language or cause inconvenience to communication. The respondent generates moral panic when they face this threat.

Additionally, the respondents minimize to use of the ironic buzzwords because they feel some buzzwords will provoke social conflict between two or more groups of people. One of the topics concerned is the balance between genders. The contemporary society advocates for gender equality. The traditional views of “men earn for living while women manage the household” and “women do not need education since their main role is childcare” are no

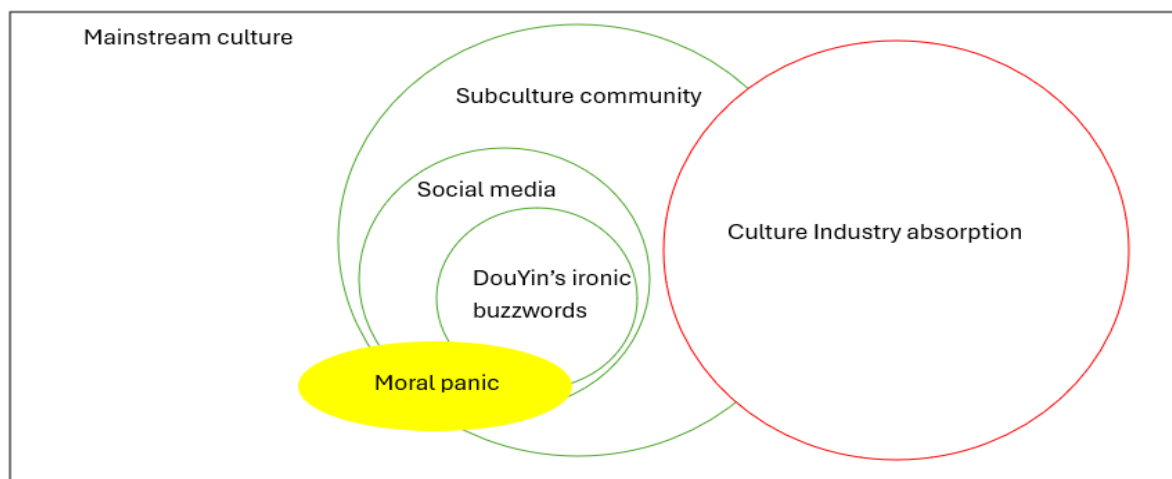
longer widely accepted and promoted, as women have higher participation in education and labor market (Oláh et al., 2018). The rise of feminist movements, such as the #MeToo movement, and the establishment of women's organizations heightened awareness of gender issues. Women's social status is increasing. Thus, the researcher answers that the reason behind using ironic buzzwords among the selected UTAR Kampar undergraduate students is mostly for social needs. They will reduce their use since they feel panicked by certain excessive buzzwords, which will cause misunderstanding.

Finally, as mentioned before, moral panic will transfer or diminish with the passage of time or interests. This highlights its volatility and instability. Focus group results also reveal that DouYin's ironic buzzwords are rapidly generated, disseminated, and forgotten. Some buzzwords are time efficiency and emerge in response to specific social phenomena. This reflects the characteristics of subcultural symbols: the chain reactions sparked by social phenomena may transform or disappear as issues are resolved, influenced by the cultural industry, or impacted by prominent institutions. As new buzzwords replace old ones, the intensity of moral panic lessens. This supports Goode & Ben-Yehuda's (1994) assertion that moral panic is a reactive phenomenon rather than a long-term social crisis.

From the observation of focus group results, the researcher believes that DouYin's ironic buzzwords have indeed caused a degree of moral panic among Malaysian Chinese youth. Although the types of panic vary slightly, including considerations of language norms or social contradiction, they all point to one result: subcultural symbols have caused more or

less anxiety. However, not all moral panics will last long or exist in everyone's minds, but will be affected by the individual's levels of acceptance.

#### 5.1.4 The Mapping Framework of Subculture within the Malaysian Chinese Context



*Table 1*

After conducting the inductive study by using the DouYin's ironic buzzwords as a case study, the researcher formulates a model to explain and understand the meaning of subcultural symbols. Table 1 illustrates the complex coexistence and erosive relationship between subculture and the cultural industry within the Malaysian Chinese youth context. Diverse subcultures exist within mainstream society. On their expression space, usually digital platforms such as DouYin, these groups create distinctive symbols to differentiate themselves from the mainstream and express criticism using ironic buzzwords. However, the findings prove that the growth of the cultural industry is a formidable force that dilutes the resistant nature of ironic buzzwords.

This study discusses the values of potential subcultural language symbols by using DouYin's ironic buzzwords as a case study. Through focus group discussions, the researcher analyzed the interpretation and reasons for using ironic buzzwords by selected UTAR Kampar undergraduate students. This mapped the meaning of subculture within the current Malaysian Chinese youth community. Based on their ideas, the researcher constructed a basic theoretical framework in the local context to decrease the research blank.

According to the classical research, which is Hebdige's "Subculture: The Meaning of Style," published in 1979, subculture is a value that is relatively less recognized. They are marginalized since there is a dominant value accepted by the mainstream. When it comes to the digital media era, social media platforms such as DouYin provide a virtual space that allows individuals to escape the pressures of reality and shape their online identities. Although the platform may be subject to varying degrees of regulation, it remains an alternative exit for suppressed voices. Some subcultural groups attract attention and challenge the mainstream through distinctive symbols. The results prove that DouYin's ironic buzzwords possess subcultural attributes, serving as subtle critiques of certain social phenomena, such as the exploitation of capitalists. Furthermore, the findings validate the claim that some subcultural expressions trigger moral panic. When the symbols surpass common moral norms, individuals may feel uncomfortable and believe these symbols undermine their values. Evidence provided by the respondents reflects the subcultural characteristics of DouYin's ironic buzzwords, demonstrating that they maintain a degree of resistance and critical significance within the local framework.

However, as entertainment platforms evolve into tools for capital manipulation, concerns arise regarding the erosion of subcultural expressions by the cultural industry. This study found that many respondents do not recognize the subversive essence of online ironic buzzwords, instead perceiving them as pure entertainment expressions. Their interpretations and reasons for using these buzzwords tend to focus on social needs and humor. The responses illustrate how the cultural industry erodes subcultural symbols and highlights the fluid nature of subcultures. Once subcultural symbols are absorbed into the mainstream and occupy market space, their rebellious meaning gradually diminishes. This study examines DouYin's ironic buzzwords as a case study to highlight the evolution of subcultural symbols in digital spaces, revealing that although social media serves as an alternative platform, the power structure creates intricate relationships of interest and speeds up the dilution of subcultural meaning. In this way, the researcher successfully mapped the current model of subculture meaning within the Malaysian Chinese youth society.

## **5.2 Research Contribution**

In terms of theoretical contribution, this study has contributed to the Media, Culture & Society research field. There is a niche to contribute more intersectional research as the dynamic among the media industry, cultural studies, and society is closely related and inseparable. For the empirical contribution, the researcher used an inductive approach to build a model and mapped the subculture phenomenon under the Malaysian Chinese context. This is crucial since ironic buzzwords are everywhere to see on accessible social media and potentially integrate into offline communication. Thus, analyzing the receiver's

interpretation and the reason behind their use of certain media texts is useful to understand the dynamic changes in the values of media text.

### **5.3 Recommendations for future research**

The researcher discusses that this study has various limitations. A major limitation faced during the research process was time pressure. The researcher only had 7 weeks to complete Chapters 1 to 3. This may lead to an incomprehensive literature review. It is recommended that more time be given to allow the researcher to review the past literature. Then, they have a clearer understanding of the topic to conduct the research. In addition, it is recommended that more Malaysian researchers discuss the different symbols of subcultures such as clothing and gestures, especially in the context of the digital media environment. It is worth studying whether the other potential subcultural symbols retain their meaning or have been reshaped by external factors such as the rise of the culture industry. The researchers can use more respondents to ensure generalizability. Due to time constraints, this study was conducted by mapping, so it is possibly insufficient to represent the values in general. Besides that, future researchers are suggested to study the meaning of subculture from gender, generation, or other longitudes, as this study shows these factors may influence their subculture interpretation and use. Finally, this study may not be able to explain the phenomenon a few years later because society and buzzwords are updated rapidly. Thus, the researcher suggests that more follow-up or innovative research is needed.



## 5.4 Conclusion

This research applied inductive qualitative methods to investigate the understanding and reason behind the use of ironic buzzwords on DouYin among specific undergraduate students from UTAR Kampar. Through focus group discussions. It maps the meaning of subculture within Malaysian Chinese youth. The findings show that while ironic buzzwords on DouYin remain a little subcultural attribute, which express resistance to certain mainstream social values, they gradually become a part of social interaction and relaxed entertainment. This confirms that the cultural industry plays a role in absorbing the meaning of subculture. As ironic buzzwords are incorporated into mainstream society, their original meanings are diluted. This reflects the life cycle of subcultural expressions from grassroots warfare to mainstream consumption. In addition, the discomfort and anxiety expressed by the respondents confirm the claim that some subcultural expressions potentially cause moral panic when their norms are challenged. Overall, this study utilizes the ironic buzzwords as a case study, enhancing the understanding of how viral subculture language influences people's interpretation and use of subcultural symbols. It provides important ideas for cultural and communication research in the field of social science studies.

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## Appendices

### Chow Si Xian\_22AAB02113\_Turnitin Report

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## APPENDIX II: FYP MEETINGS WITH SUPERVISOR

Note:

### Incorporation of Blended Learning for UAMJ3073 and UAMJ3083

As per the DJR meeting held on 29<sup>th</sup> May, Wednesday, after FBO in P106, Block P, HOD Ms. Michelle has informed the department staff that DJR has nominated UAMJ3073 FYP 1 and UAMJ3083 FYP 2 to incorporate Blended Learning (OTL - Online Teaching and Learning) with effect June 2024 Trimester and onwards.

To implement OTL for UAMJ3073 FYP 1 and UAMJ3083 FYP 2, the supervisors can now arrange for consultation with the students ONLINE (OTL) for a minimum of 4 weeks and a maximum of 8 weeks.

FYP Student Name		ID: 2202113	HP Number : 011-28769979
1. CHOW SI XIAN			
Date	Attended by	Progress	Signature
1.	Mr Chang Yi Chang Chow Si Xian 19/2/2025	Seek guidance for Chapter 4	鄭
2.	Mr Chang Yi Chang Chow Si Xian 11/3/2025	Chapter 4 feedback Guidance for Chapter 5	鄭
3.	Mr Chang Yi Chang Chow Si Xian 17/4/2025	Chapter 5 feedback	鄭
4.	Mr Chang Yi Chang Chow Si Xian 14/5/2025	Presentation Rehearsal	鄭
5.			

