

Research Portfolio



CAIXI HE

How can graphic design challenge affective control in contemporary corporatism in China by engaging with the aesthetics of cuteness in Chinese workplaces and addressing ironic workplace memes as cultural sources?

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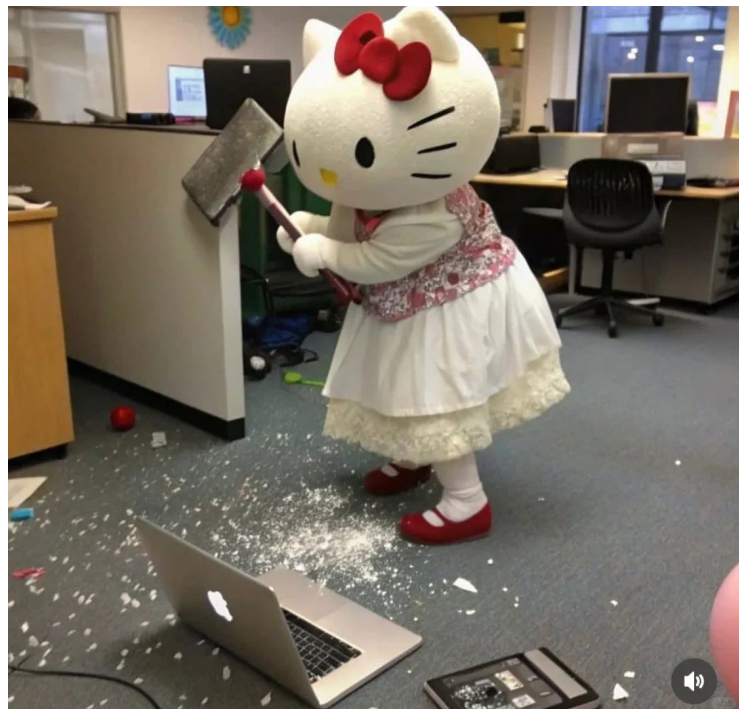
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Design Enquiry & Definition Structure




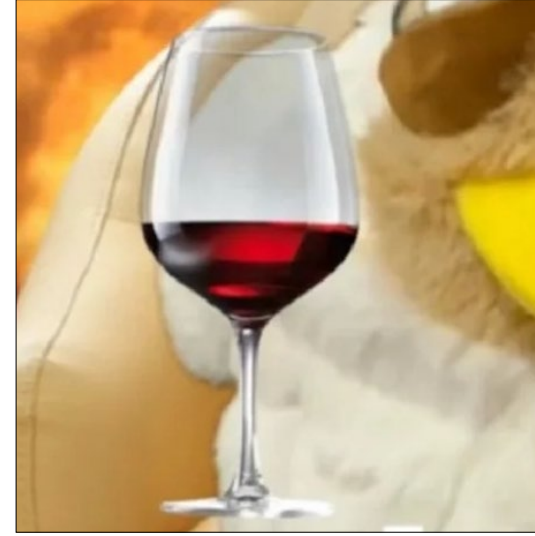
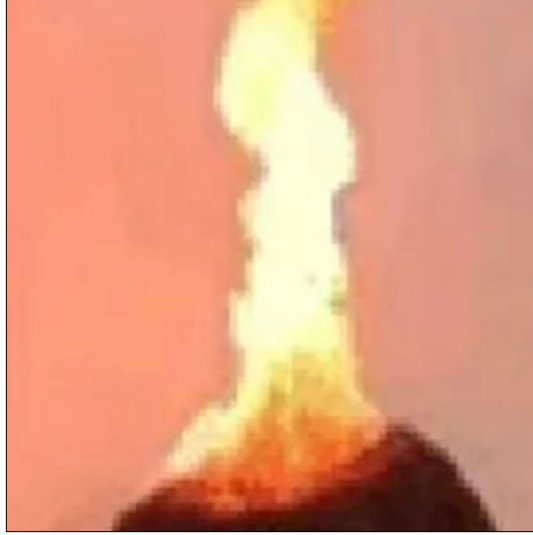



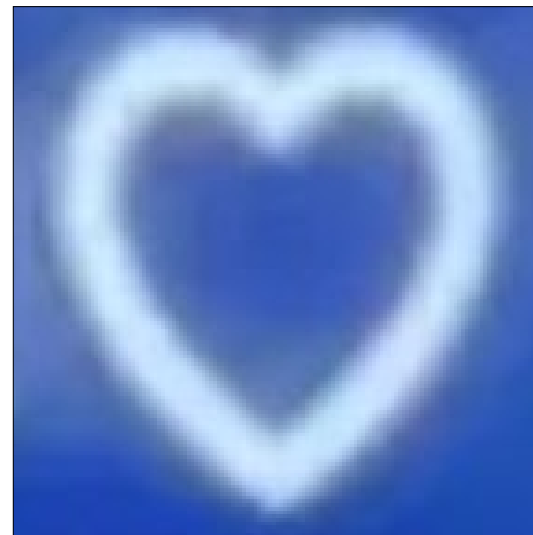


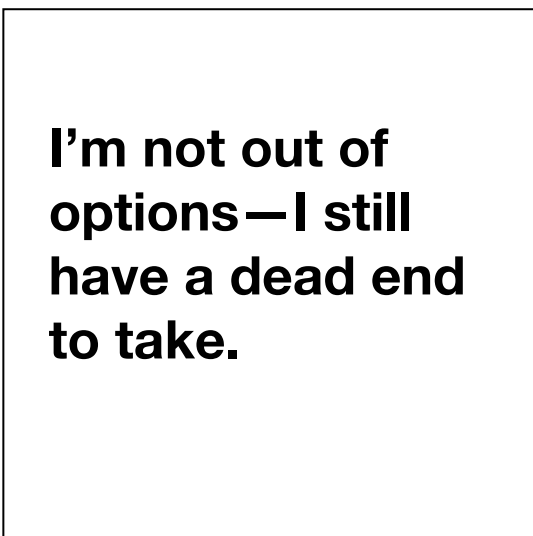
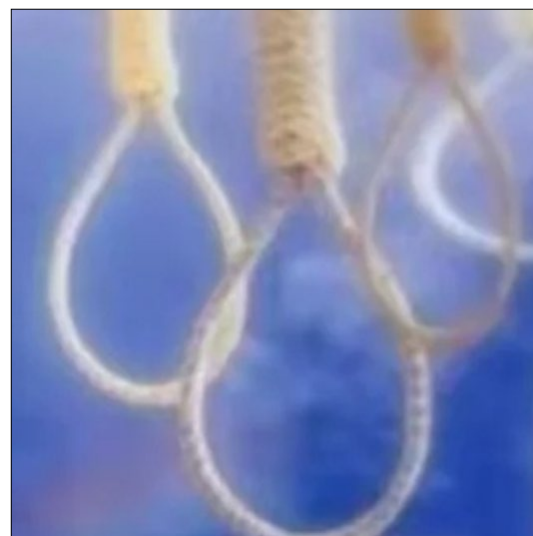
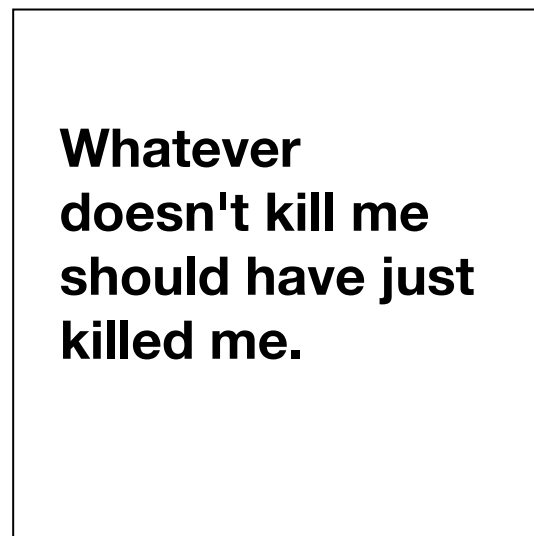
Meme Observation

I was often drawn to the ironic memes shared by Chinese workers on social media and curious about how these humorous images work. This curiosity gradually became the starting point of my research.

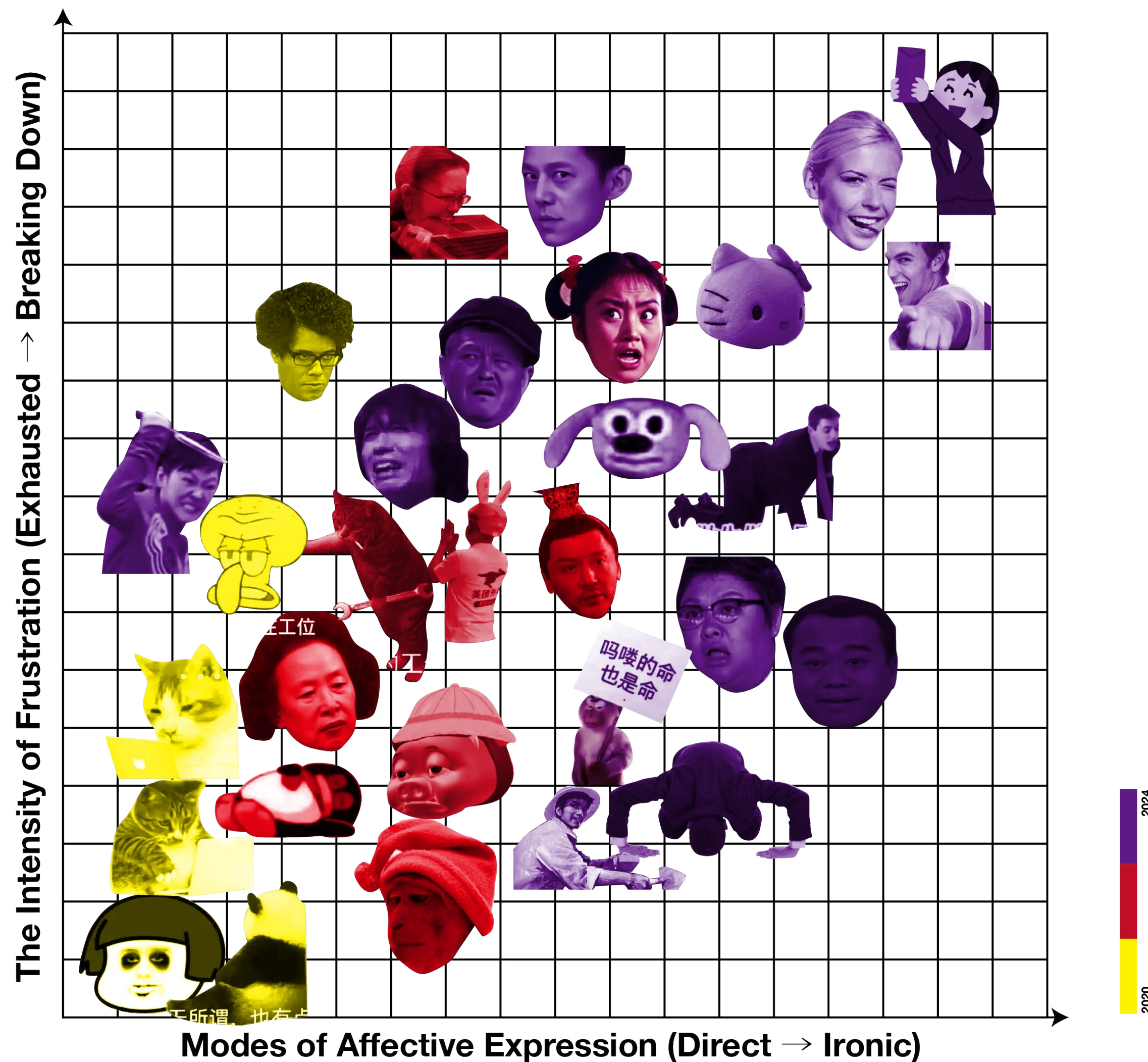
So I collected a wide range of workplace memes circulating on Chinese social media. By categorising the recurring visual symbols, I found that their effectiveness often relies on semiotic dissonance — the affective tension between signifiers and signifieds.

Case Study 1

Primary Research 1

PEACE				
	+			
DANGER				
	+			
DESPAIR				

It made me wonder whether this irony has remained constant or changed over time.



Visual Experiment 1

So I began collecting workplace memes from recent years and discovered that this ironic mode of workplace expression has only emerged in the past two years. Mapping the emotional intensity and modes of expression present in workplace memes. The visualisation reveals a clear shift:

Early memes cluster in the lower-left corner, characterised by direct tones, while later ones move toward the upper-right, where where emotional complexity deepens and irony becomes the dominant affect.

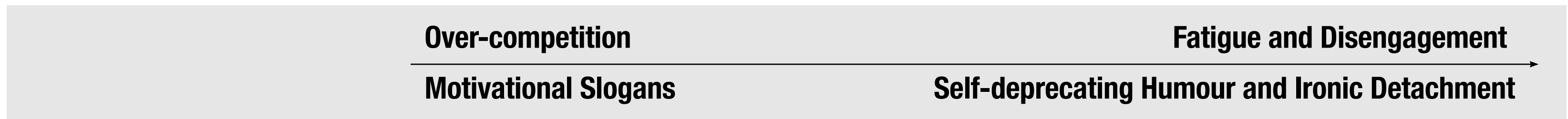
To further understand this shift, I turned to the broader social language surrounding work.

Popular workplace buzzwords have moved from neijuan (involution) to tangping (lying flat) and bailan (let it rot), reflecting a collective transition from over-competition to fatigue and disengagement.

At the same time, I analysed the textual layer of workplace memes, which evolved from motivational slogans to self-deprecating humour and ironic detachment.

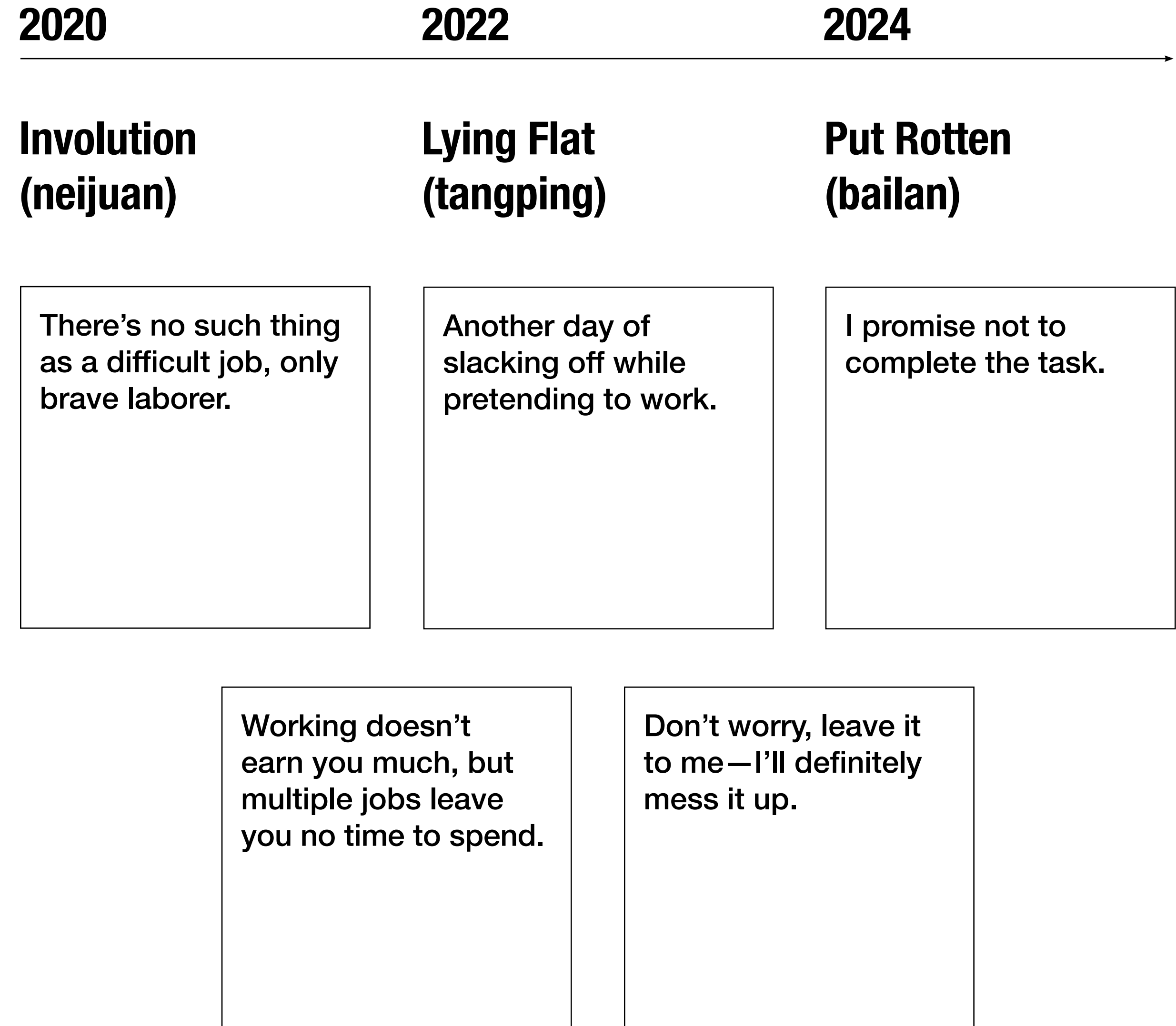
The affective change in memes resonates with this wider social mood.

Primary Research 2



Buzzwords

Trending online vocabularies often encapsulate collective memory and shared recognition among the public at specific historical moments. Through constant repetition and recirculation, these words expand into cultural symbols that embody the emotional atmosphere of their time.¹



1. Chen, W. (2013). The social communicative significance and functions of online buzzwords. *Journalism*, 17, 47–50.

But why do these feelings of fatigue and disengagement at work take the form of memes – expressed through irony rather than direct complaint?

Cramer (2010) defines a meme as "the smallest unit of an idea that spreads from person to person within a culture."¹

For an expression to be understood as ironic, their meaning needs to be reconstructed by the reader and intended by the author. The reader must therefore draw from the cultural and historical context of the expression to reconstruct covert meaning that the author intended. The inferential process draws from the context of the expression to give meaning to irony. Online, the cultural context in which memes have risen to popularity is precisely that which gives them their reason for being.²



Surveillance: From Office To Online Space

Primary Research 3

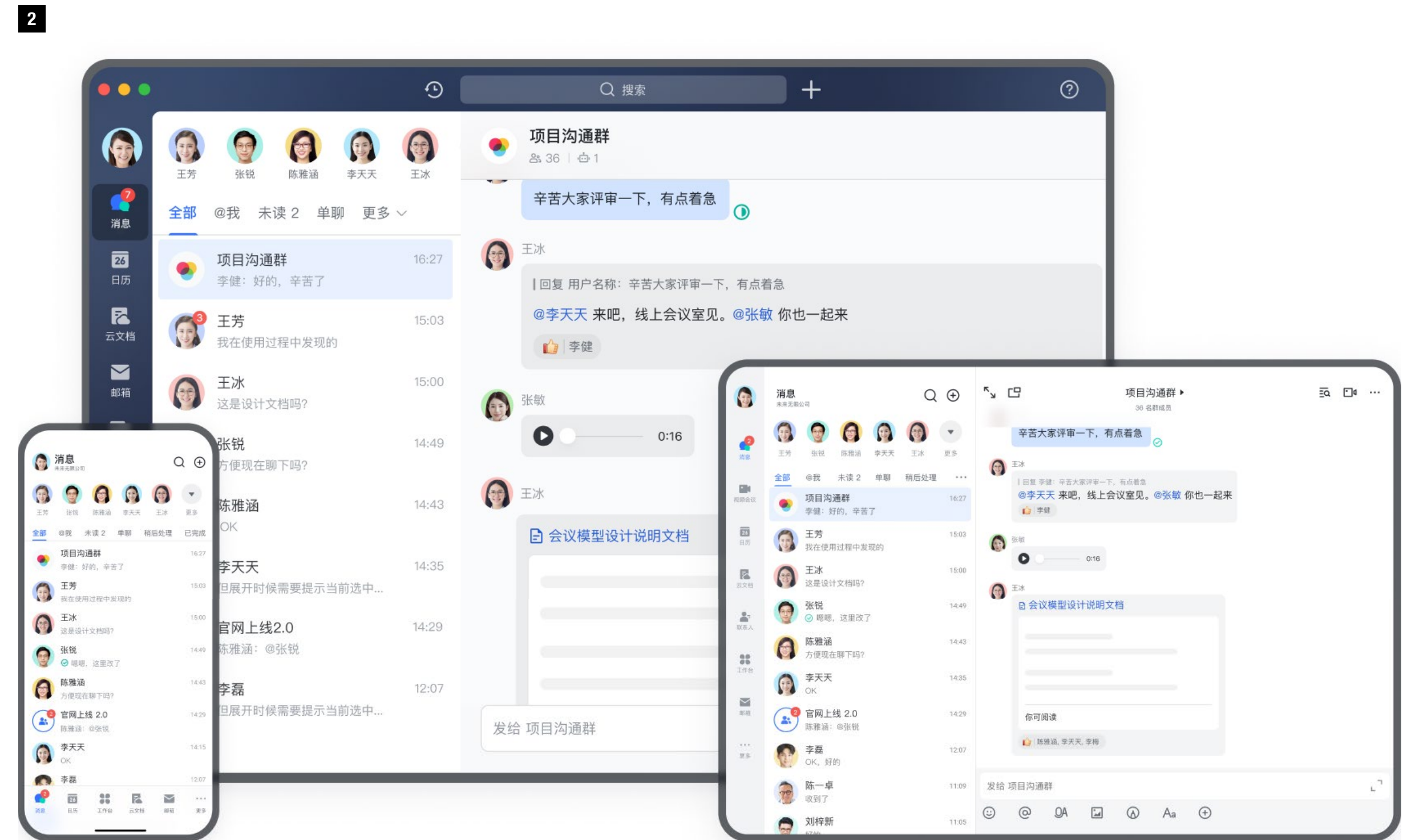
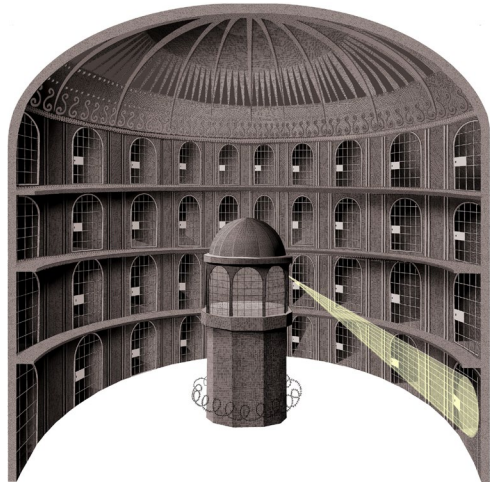


Open offices reproduce the logic of the Panopticon,¹ where workers are constantly visible and thus continuously self-monitor to appear productive.

1 Office interior of Pinduoduo, a major Chinese e-commerce and tech company

2 Interface of Feishu, a workplace communication platform

1. Foucault, M. (1977) Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison. New York: Vintage Books.

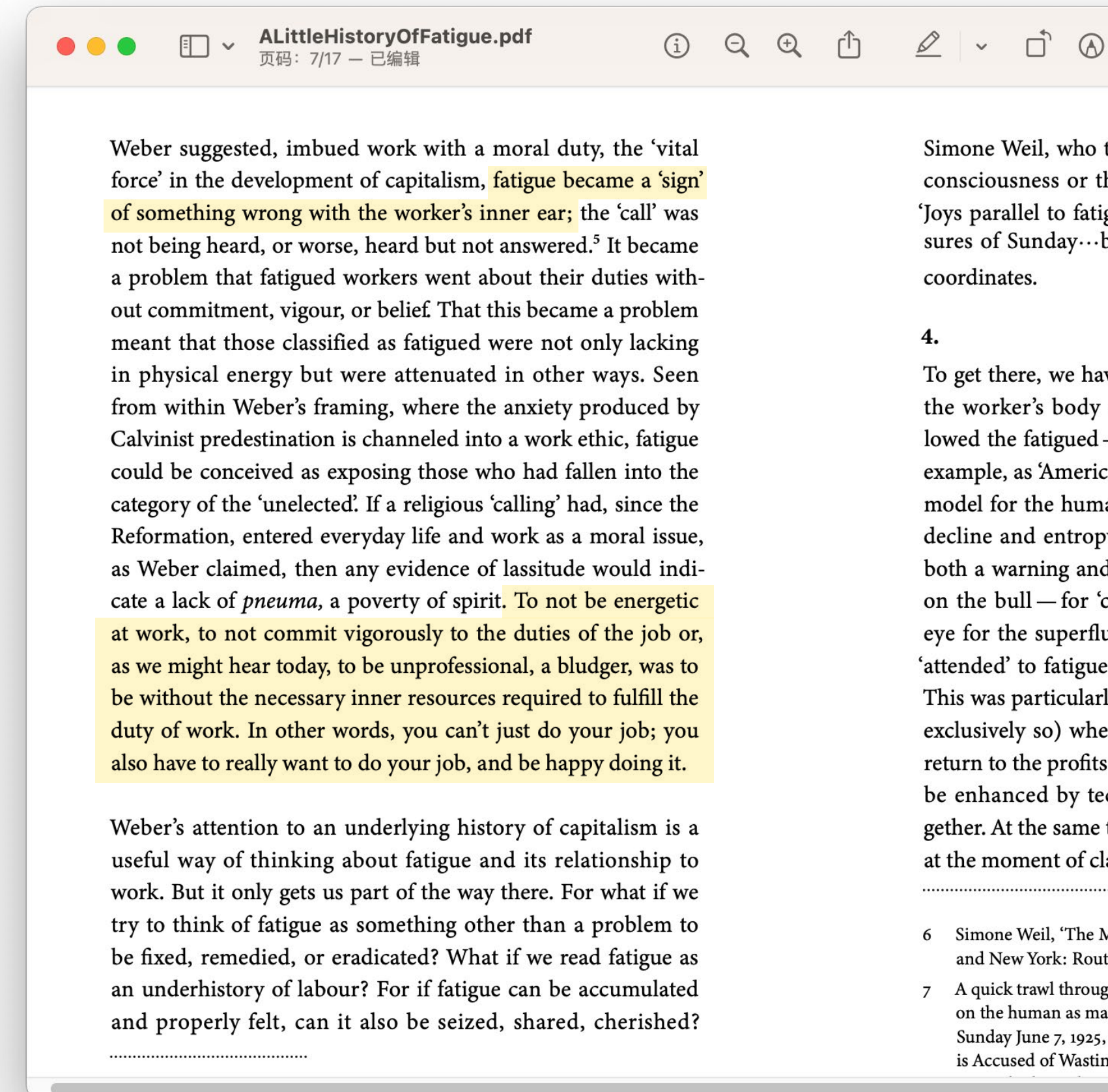
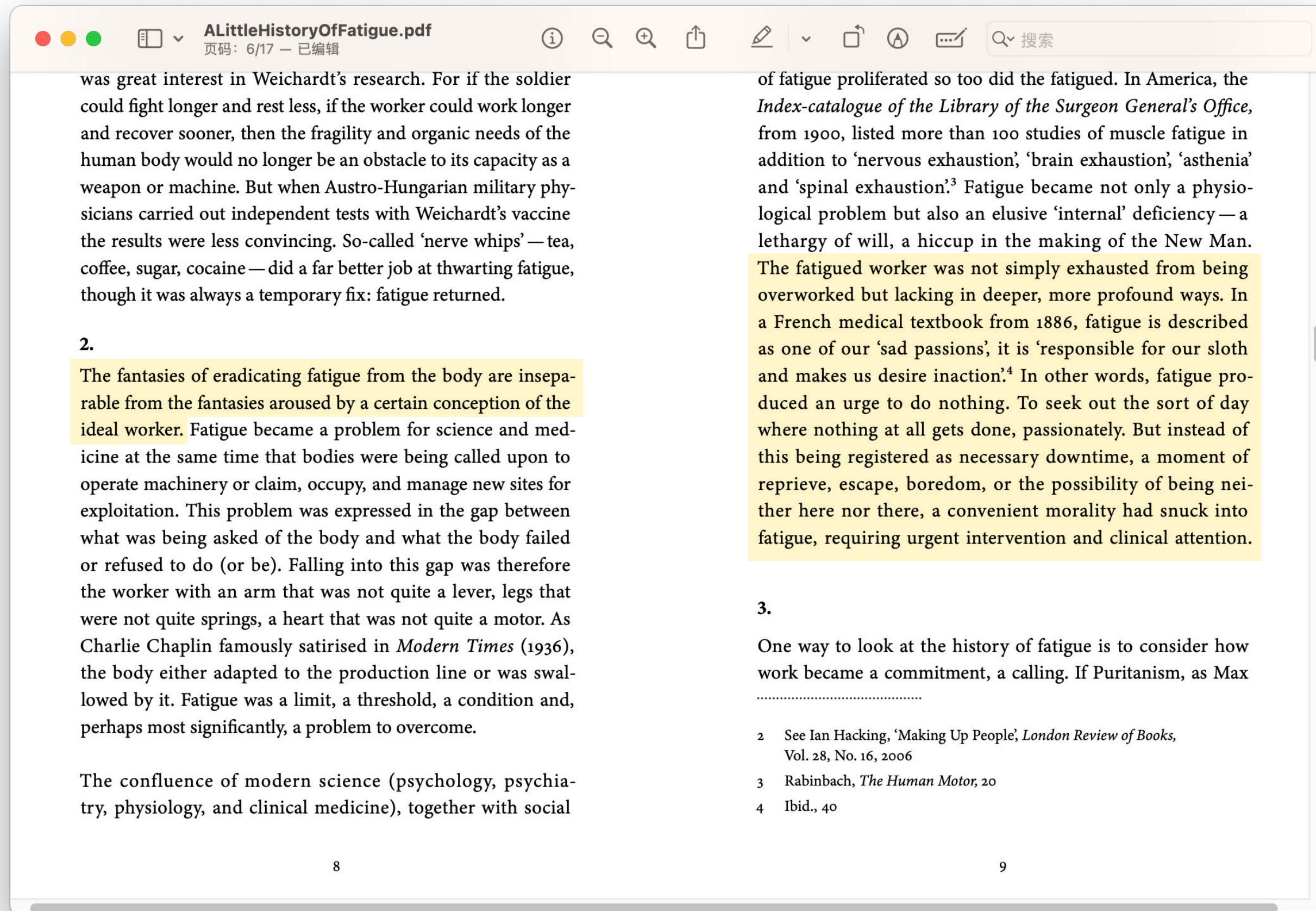


The interface design of digital office platforms — such as read receipts and typing indicators — places employees in a state of constant visibility. Employees must constantly monitor their tone and response speed.

Control: From *Performance* To *Affect*

A little history of fatigue

Tom Melick



Secondary Research 2

1. Briskin, A. (1998) *The Stirring of Soul in the Workplace*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Modern organizations increasingly manage not just performance but also emotional expression, viewing strong emotions as disruptive to order.¹ Employees are expected to remain professional, rational, and composed, while sadness, fatigue, or frustration are seen as “crossing the line”.

Secondary Research 3



I observed workplace installations such as “emotion shredders,” and “mood rating walls.” These corporate rituals symbolically erase sadness, fatigue, or frustration—framing them as emotional waste to be processed and removed.

The result is an environment of enforced positivity — a workplace where only positive emotions are visible, and discomfort is quietly pushed to the margins. Employees have internalised the requirements to maintain optimism, demonstrate initiative, and align their personal conduct with corporate expectations.

Primary Research 4

- 1 Feishu “Top 3 Reactions” leaderboard
- 2 Installations in a corporate lobby
- 3

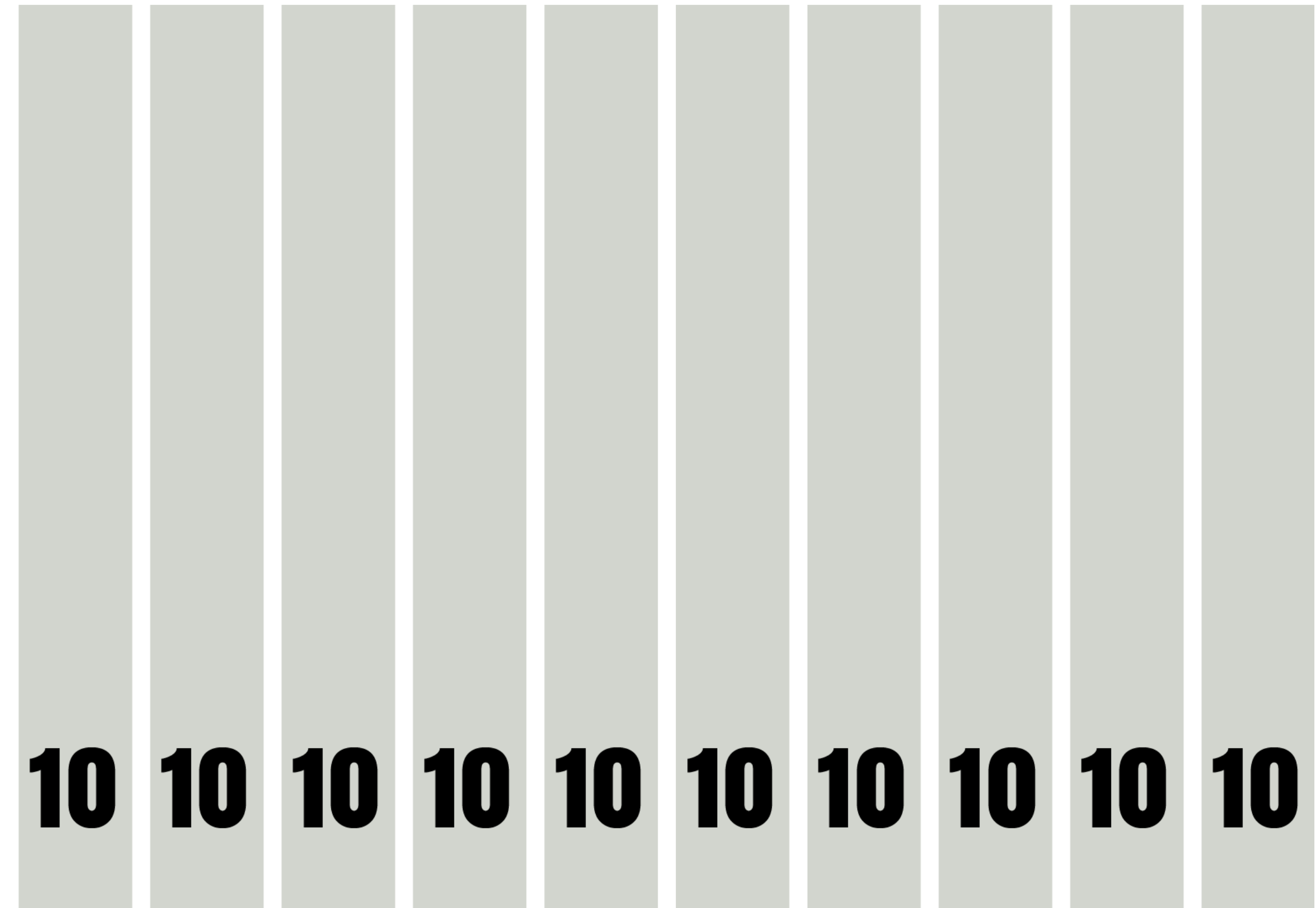
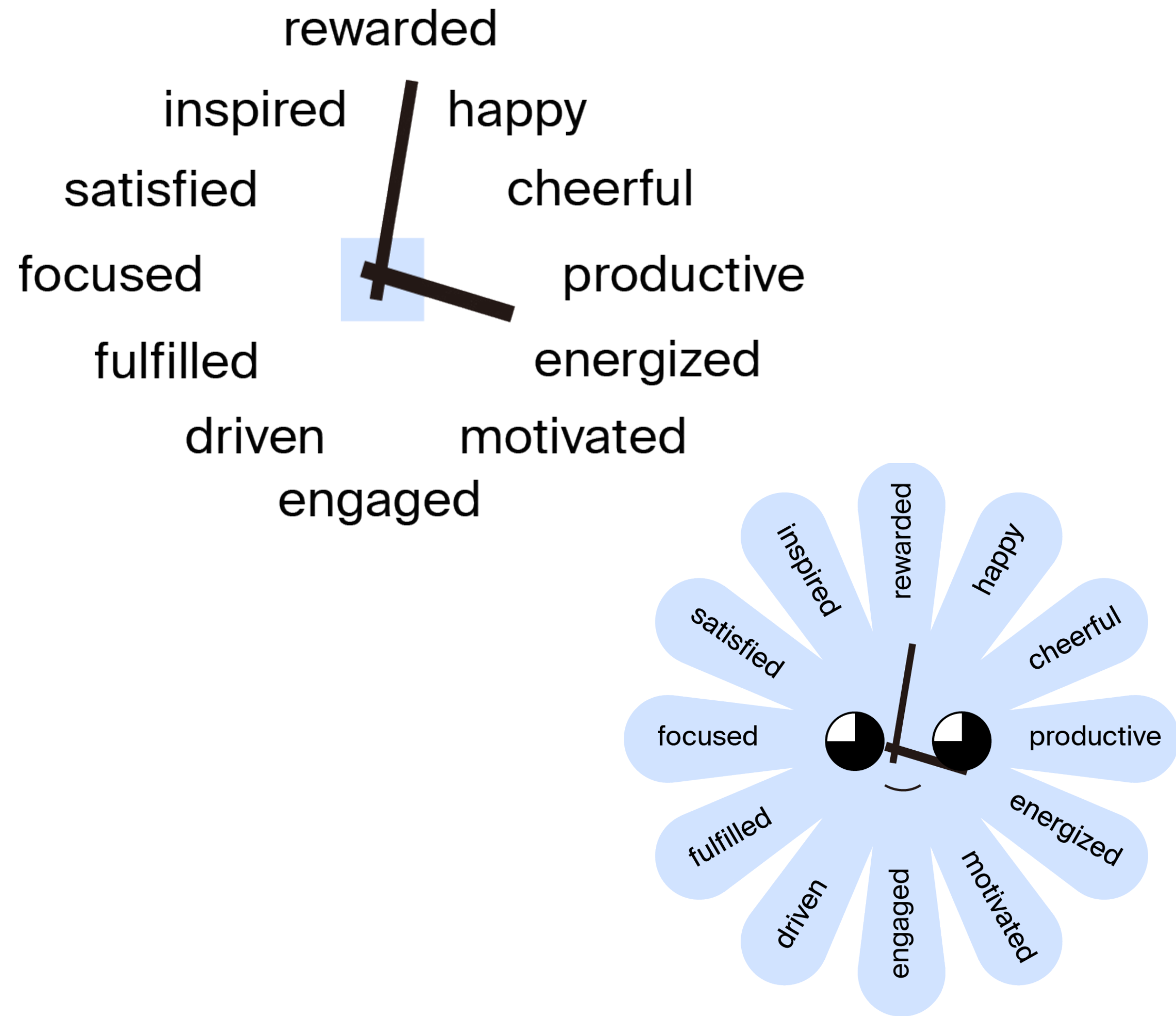
“Sloth is not simply laziness, but a kind of despairing ‘sickness unto death’, a knowing-yet-avoiding attitude; thus, sloth is not mere laziness, but a despairing resignation—I want the goal, but not the means to achieve it; I accept the gap between desire and its object. In this precise sense, sloth is the opposite of zeal. People even try to historicize this last sin: before modernity, it was melancholy (resisting the pursuit of the Good); with the development of capitalism, it was reinterpreted as simple laziness (resisting the work ethic); today, in our ‘post’ society, it is depression (resisting the enjoyment of life, or the happiness of consumption).”

Secondary Research 4



Visual Experiment 2

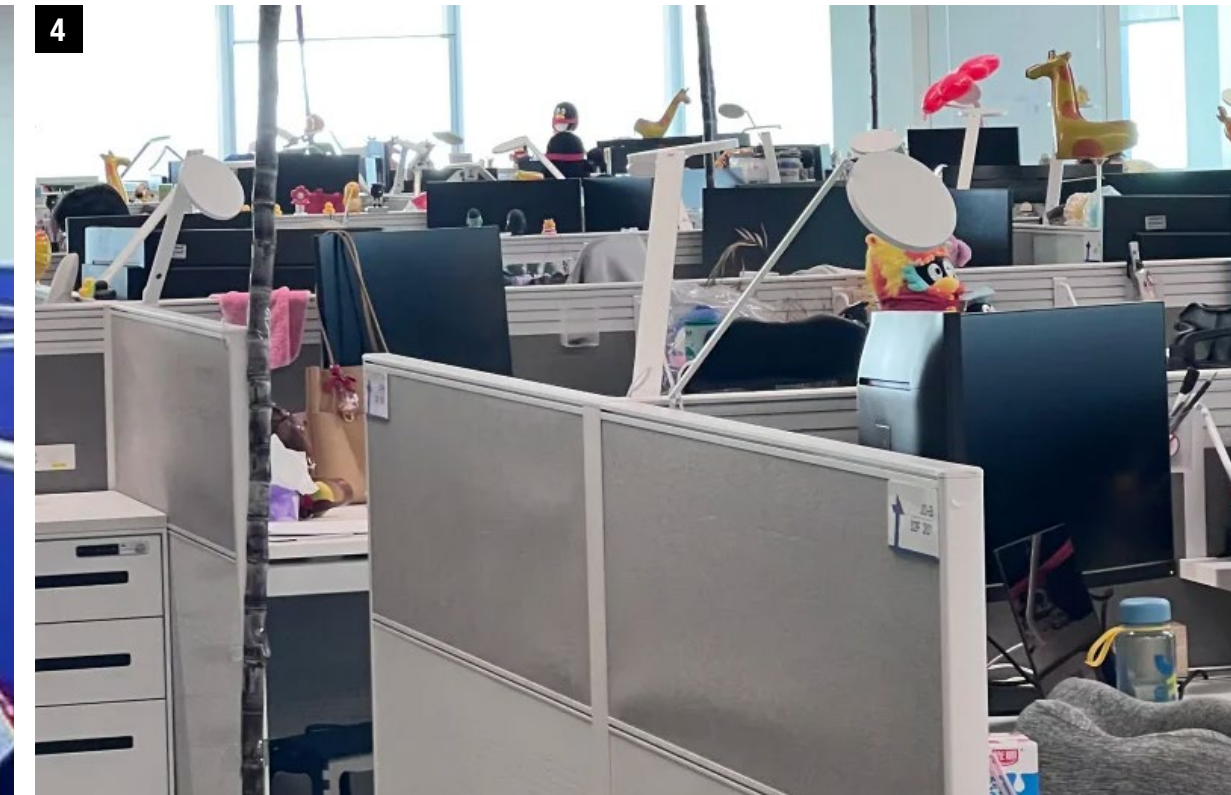
In this experiment, I replaced all emotional categories with positive words and set every score to the maximum level. Although it appears to express care and choice, every response leads to the same positivity. I aimed to expose how corporate “emotional care” leaves employees with no real option but to maintain a positive outlook 24/7.



HOW HAPPY ARE YOU?
ON A SCALE FROM 1-10? TAKE ONE GUMBALL FROM THE CORRESPONDING MACHINE.

How affective control is realised in corporate space?

I grounded this inquiry in a concrete case and traced what had changed visually over the time. I found the environment has become open, branded, and emotionally charged — incorporating the company's mascot, bright colours, and cute installations in recent years.



1 Early Tencent's offices (around 2000s)

2

4 Recent Tencent's offices (around 2020s)

5



At the same time, I noticed that many workers share photos with their company mascots online — posing with the same gestures and smiles, sometimes even dressing like them. During overtime, some place mascot dolls beside their computers as a form of emotional companionship. Others collect company-exclusive plush toys available only to staff with fan-like enthusiasm, turning symbols of corporate identity into objects of affective belonging.

Primary Research 6



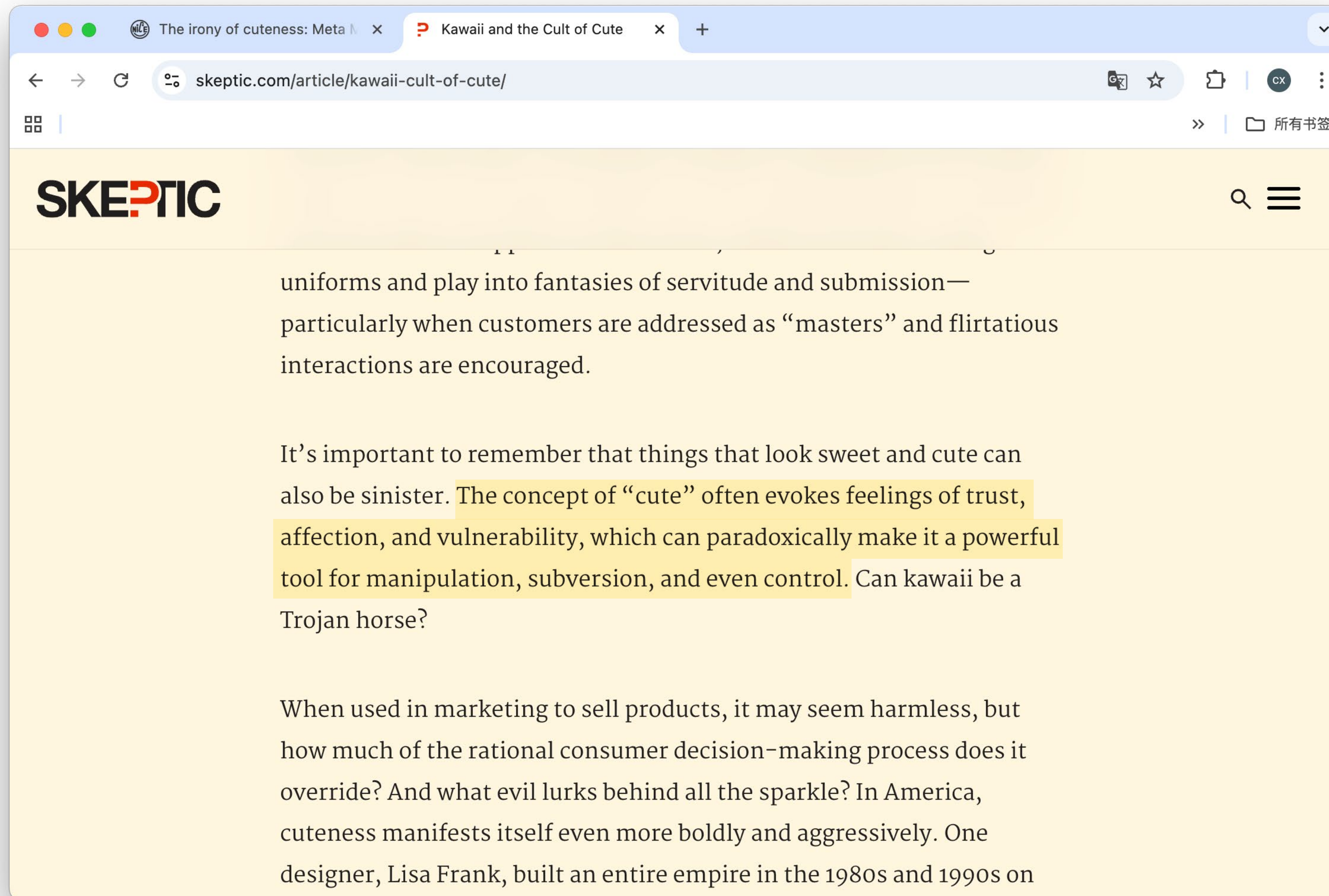
- 1 Workers keeping mascot toys during overtime
- 2 Employees posing with internet company mascots
- 3
- 4



- 1** Employees enthusiastically
- 2** collecting company mascot toys

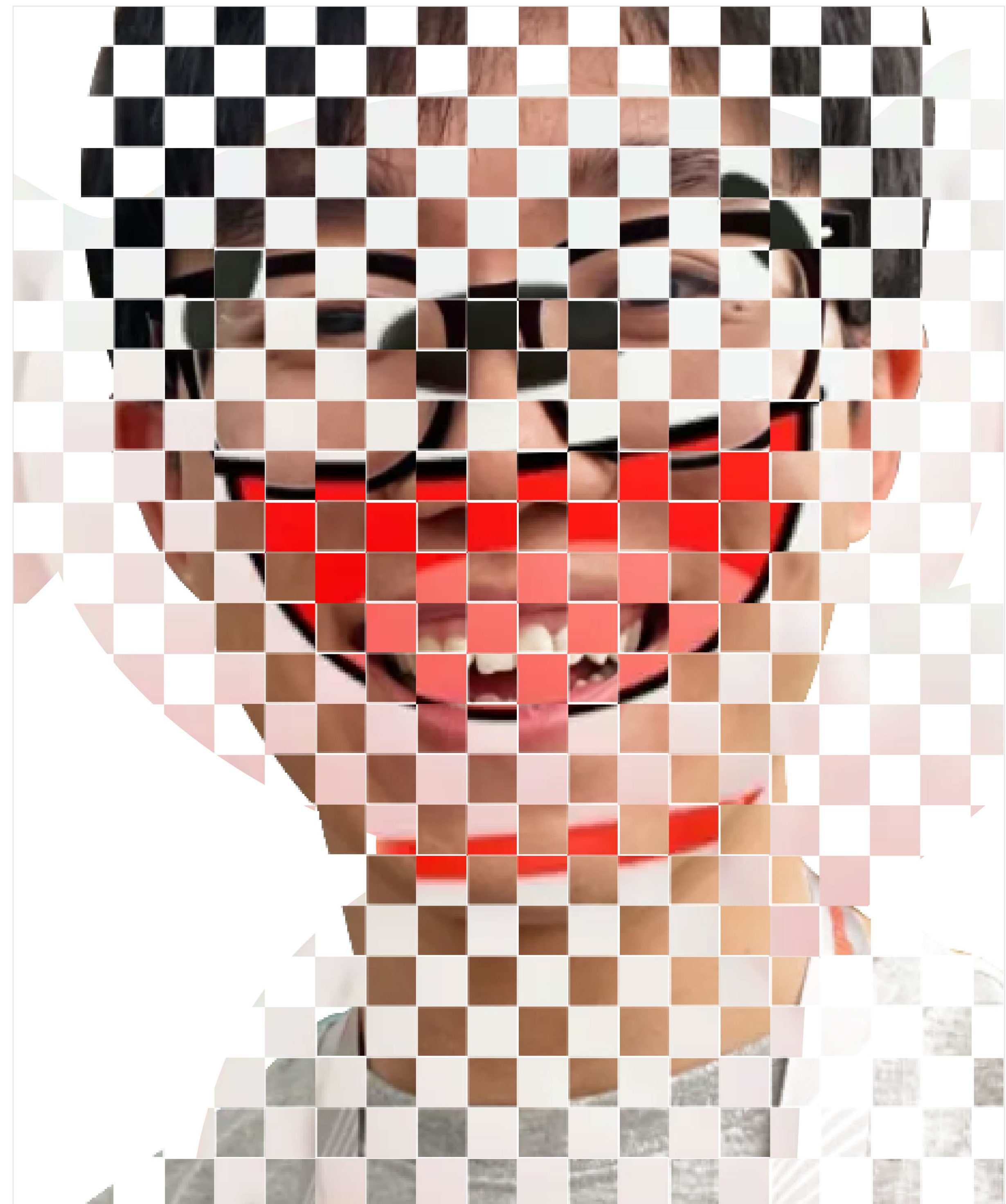
1. Shermer, M. (2017) 'Kawaii: The Cult of Cute'. Skeptic [online].

The aesthetics of cuteness operates as a corporate affective strategy.



Within corporate culture, it reduces critical and emotional distance between workers and authority. While appearing harmless and comforting, it subtly normalises obedience and affective compliance within the workplace, turning affection into a soft form of control.

I blended one photo of an employee with mascot images. This experiment aims to reveal how cute mascots serve as a tool of affective control in workplace, subtly shaping how workers perform.



1. Chateau, L. (ed.) (2021) The irony of cuteness: Meta Mascot explores mascot culture and its more sinister undertones, It's Nice That.

The aesthetics of cuteness subverts a relationship between the power and the powerless.¹

It reminded me of the earlier observation: employees' fan-like enthusiasm for company mascots mirrors the affective attachment found in pop idol fandoms, and inspired me to explore how fan culture aesthetics could be used to visualise the soft power of corporate affective control.

Secondary Research 6

Primary Research 7



1 Employee replies in work chat groups

2 Fan comment manipulation on Weibo

From *Employees To Fans*

I experimented by transplanting the visual language of fan comment culture into a corporate communication context, applying it to workplace chat groups.

First, I extracted visual elements such as hearts and repetitive emoji-filled patterns, recontextualising them within office interactions.

Visual Experiment 4



Building on this, I replaced ordinary corporate phrases with fan-style declarations of devotion, such as “I would sell my family for you,” and further exaggerated their tone. I found this approach amplified the ironic tension.

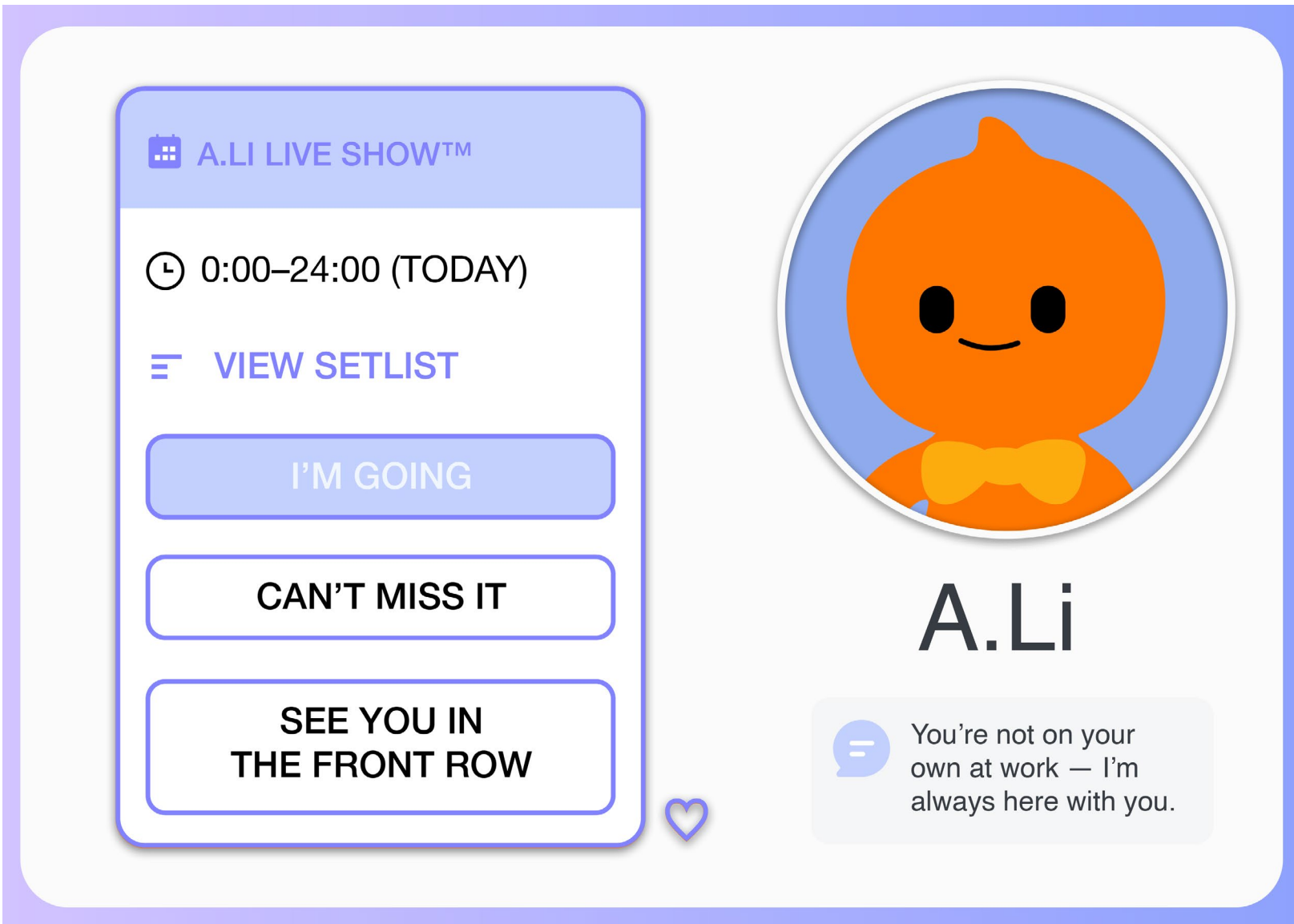
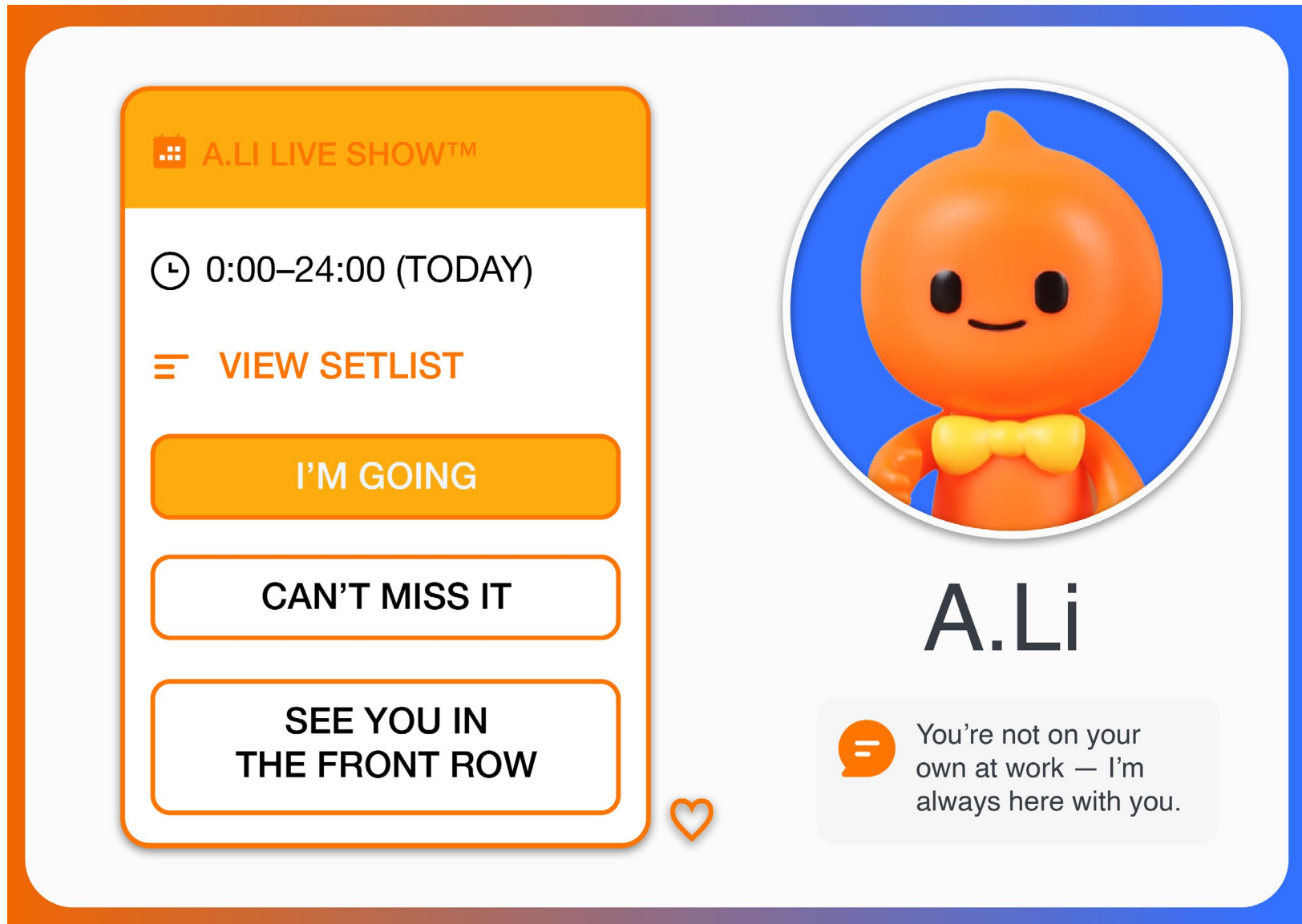
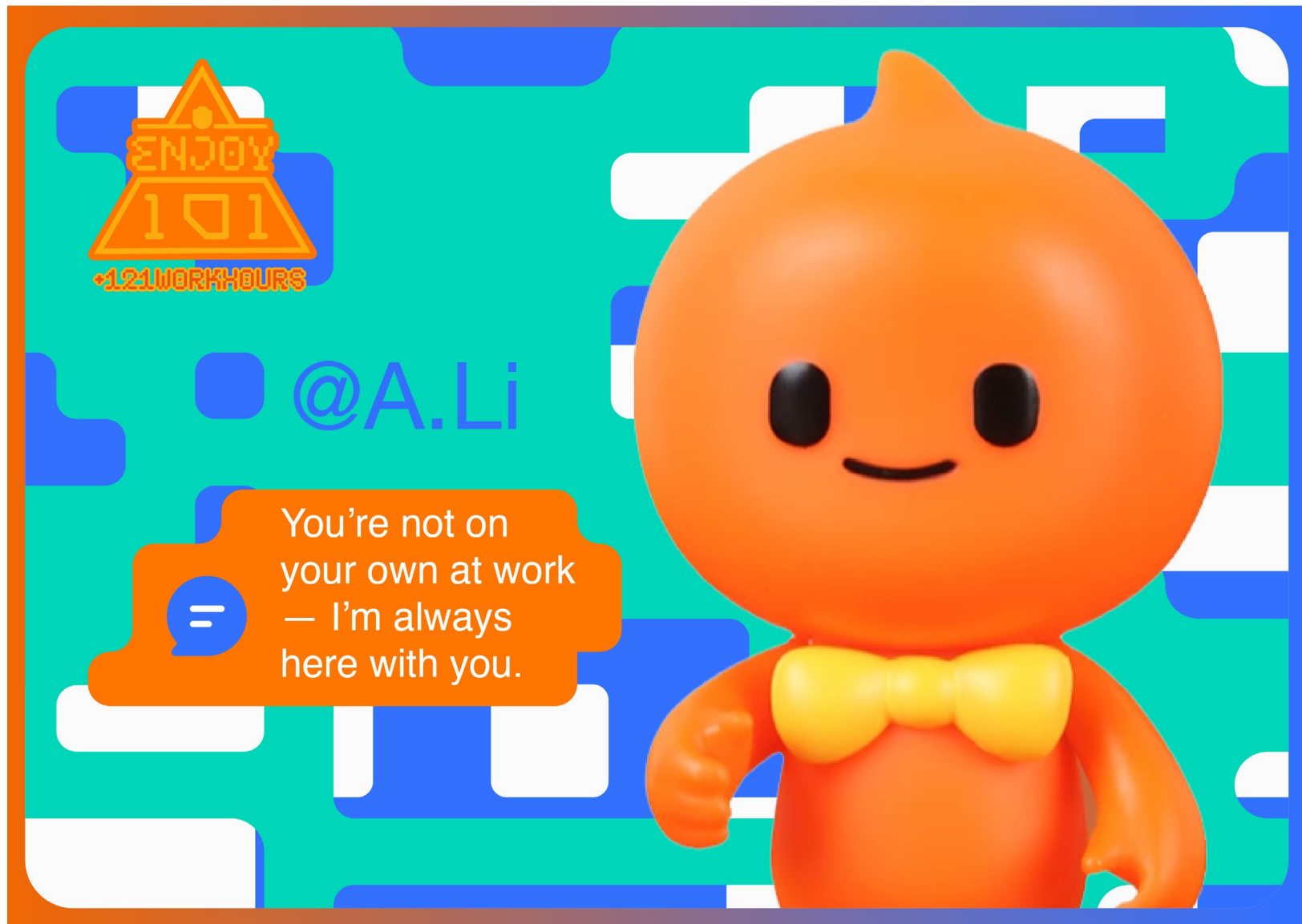
Visual Experiment 5



@T.Q I love you more than 8 hours of sleep.

 | T.Q





Visual Experiment 6

In this experiment, I reimagined a leading Chinese internet company's mascot as an idol, speaking in the language of care and encouragement — similar to how idols comfort their fans. When situated in the workplace, however, these affectionate messages become unsettlingly intrusive, transforming care into a subtle form of affective pressure.

Visually, I initially adopted a palette of vibrant, energetic colours to echo the tone of positivity (the previous page). I later introduced silver — a cold, metallic hue — to contrast with the warmth of the caring language, creating a dissonance between emotional softness and corporate detachment to heighten the irony and affective pressure.



Before WIP Show

The previous research helped me understand why the feelings of workplace fatigue and disengagement are so often expressed through memes – and why irony becomes their chosen tone.

全方面搞砸

The society of achievement as one that generates excessive tiredness and exhaustion, which is solitary, producing separation and isolation rather than solidarity.¹

When corporate environments lack legitimate outlets for expressing legitimate “negative” emotions, ironic memes become a survival language. As Lucie Chateau observes, comments on meme pages often cite relatability and visibility as reasons for identification. The irony that makes memes work lies in their subversion of the happiness effect and the authenticity imperative.²

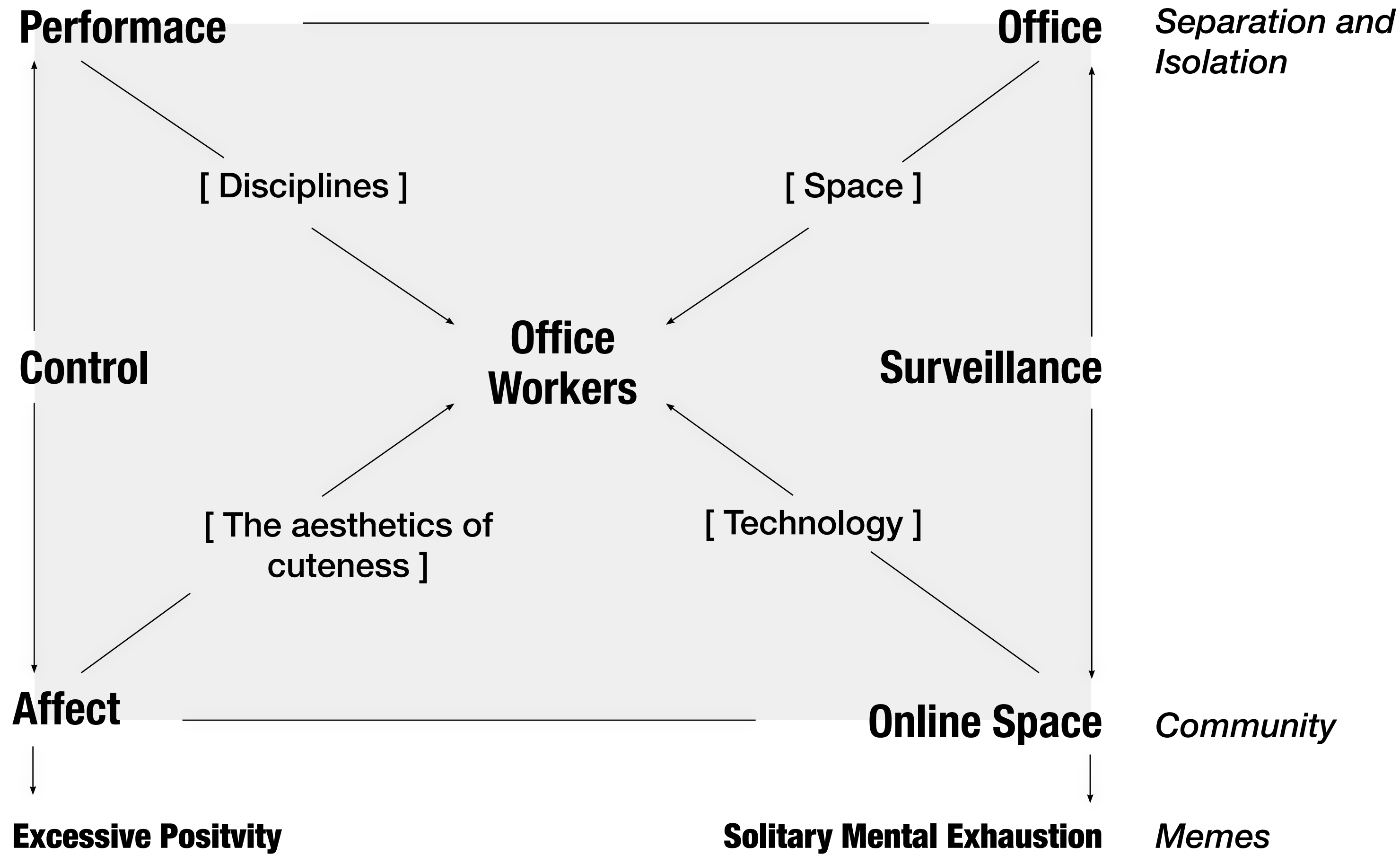
So the strength of memes lies in their capacity to promote a feeling of community helping individuals build a sense of community³ and ease the solitude of exhaustion.



1. Han, B.-C. (2015) *The Burnout Society*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

2. Chateau, L. (2020) “Damn I Didn’t Know Y’all Was Sad? I Thought It Was Just Memes”: Irony, Memes and Risk in Internet Depression Culture’. *M/C Journal* [online].

3. Stamatatos, S. (2024) ‘The Meme Remembers: Greek Queer (Me) #Me_Too Movement’. In: *Critical Meme Reader III: By Any Memes Necessary*. Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures



Mememes as a language of resistance, shared struggle, and solidarity. These create a sense of community and shared identity. Occupying the social media landscape with mememes reclaiming a social reality, making fun of that reality, and owning it has the potential of sending a strong message that can lead to societal restructuring.¹ This proves that mememes can function as activist media.

However, for most employees, their meme-sharing remains a reaction to the daily grind of work rather than a conscious act of resistance. This tension raises a question central to my research:

How can graphic media design as activism reactivate the resistant potential of workplace memes to foster collective awareness and challenge the mechanisms of affective control in contemporary corporatism?



1 WERKER (2023) A Gestural History of the Young Worker.

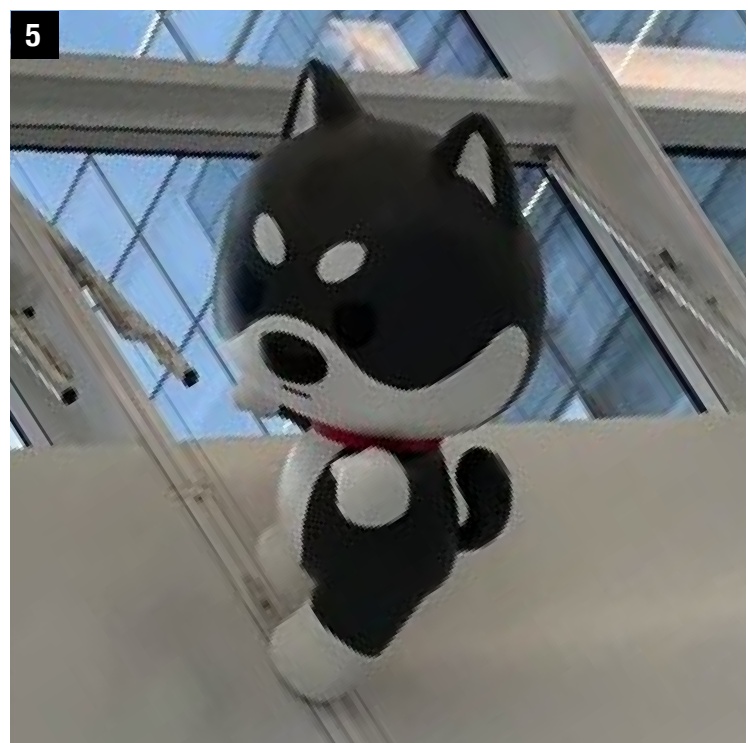
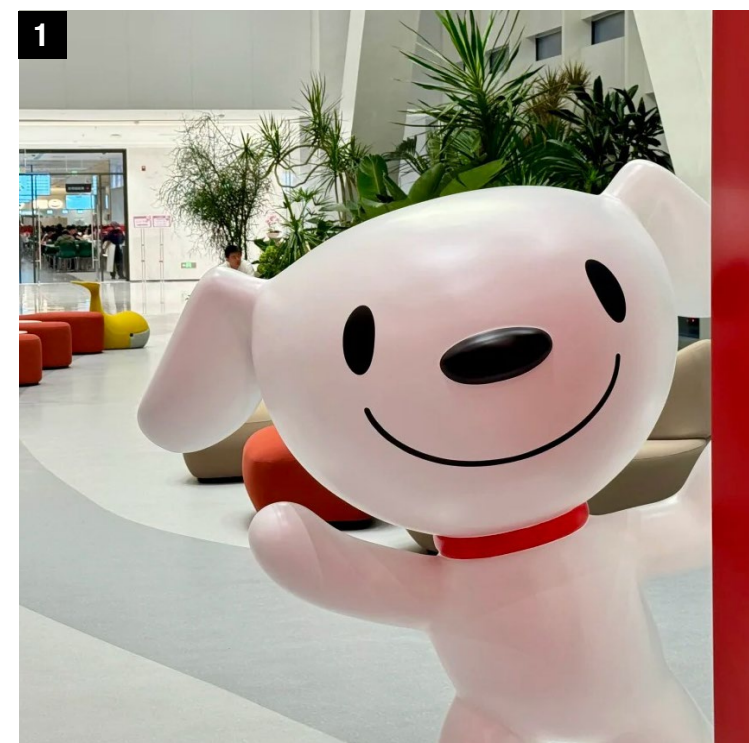
Practice Reference 1

The project reconstructs the histories of workers through gestures, framing bodily expression as a visual vocabulary that emerges when verbal language is restricted by power. It suggests that when speech is constrained, the body itself becomes a site of expression and struggle.

It inspired me to see body language as a visual resource.

So I collected a set of popular memes on Chinese social media that were adapted from Irasutoya illustrations. In Japan, these cute images are often used to soften messages that might otherwise appear too serious or intimidating.¹ However, within Chinese workplace culture, they have been reworked into ironic work memes expressing frustration and exhaustion.

1. Masaki, R. (2025) Irasutoya: The best-known illustrator in Japan, that you've probably never heard of, It's Nice That.



Through observing the bodily gestures in these memes, I noticed that most postures are “power posing”² — raised fists, open arms, confident smiles — the same positive poses frequently seen in corporate mascots.

Case Study 3

2. Wikipedia (2024) 'Power posing'.

Primary Research 8

- 1 Corporate mascot installations in internet companies
- 2 Workplace memes
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6

Visual Experiment 7

So, I performed these poses and juxtaposed them with those of cute corporate mascots to visualise how their cheerful body language creates an atmosphere of positivity projected onto employees as a form of affective control.



The “hierarchy of fatigue”¹ made me realise that within white-collar labour, mental exhaustion is central yet remains invisible, while physical tiredness becomes the only legitimate and visible form of suffering.

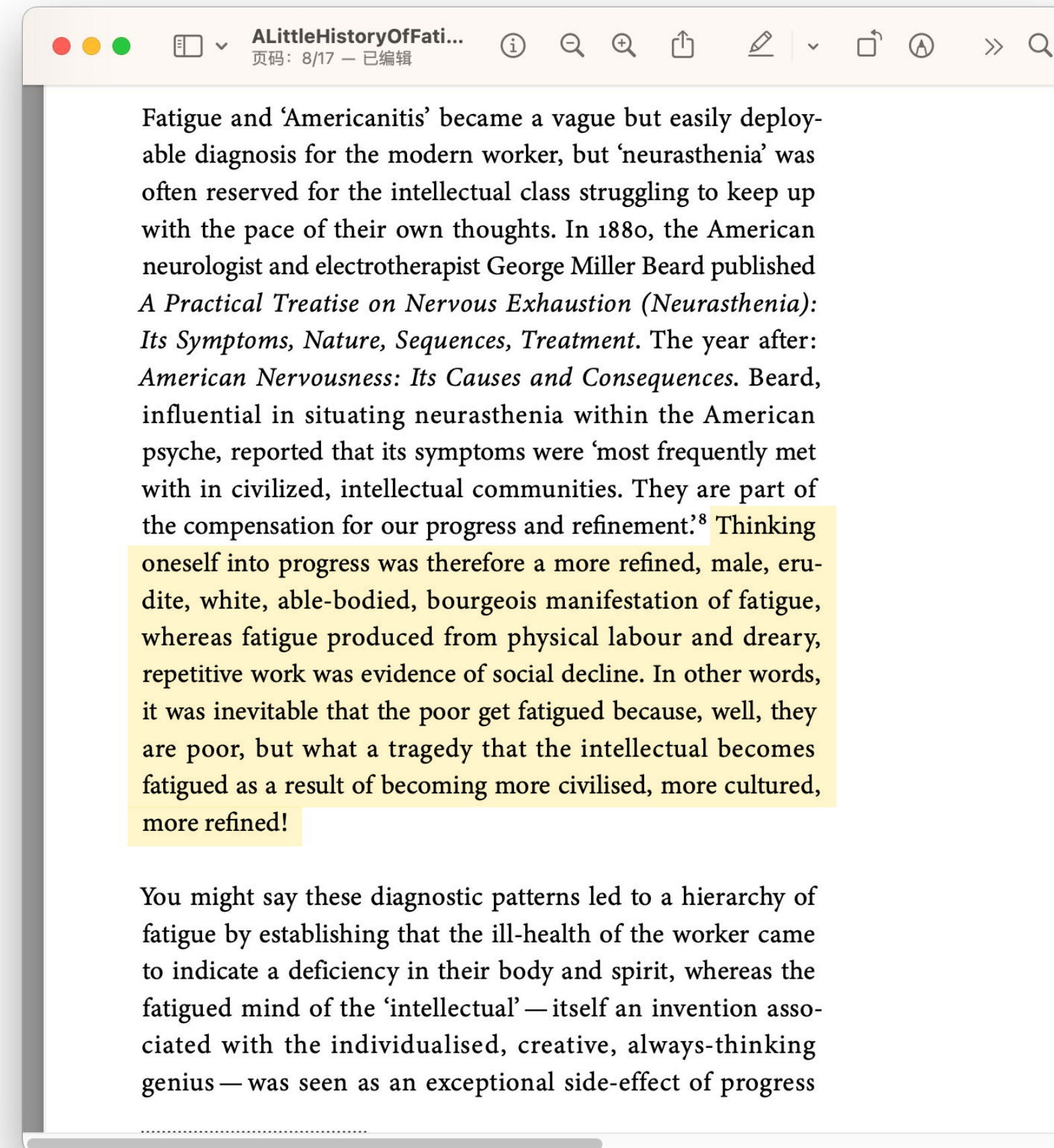


1 Baas, M. (2016) Schiphol Clock.

In Schiphol Clock, the artist uses his own body to perform time — manually redrawing the clock hands for twelve hours. His repetitive action transforms invisible time into a visible process.

This work inspired me that bodily fatigue itself could become a medium to express the invisible affective and psychological tiredness of office workers.

Practice Reference 2



1. Melick, T. (2010) 'A Little History of Fatigue'.

Secondary Research 9

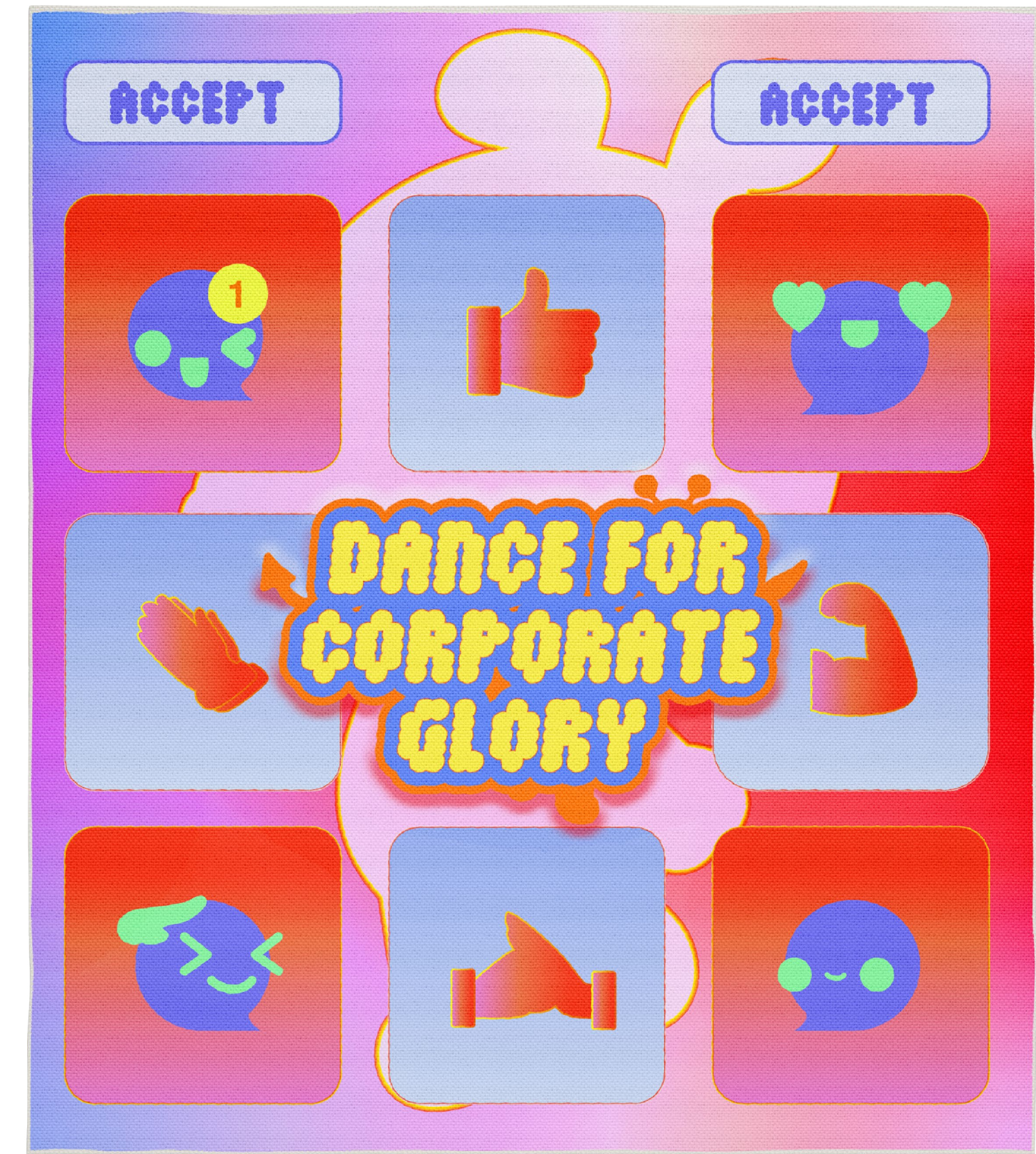
Work in Progress Show

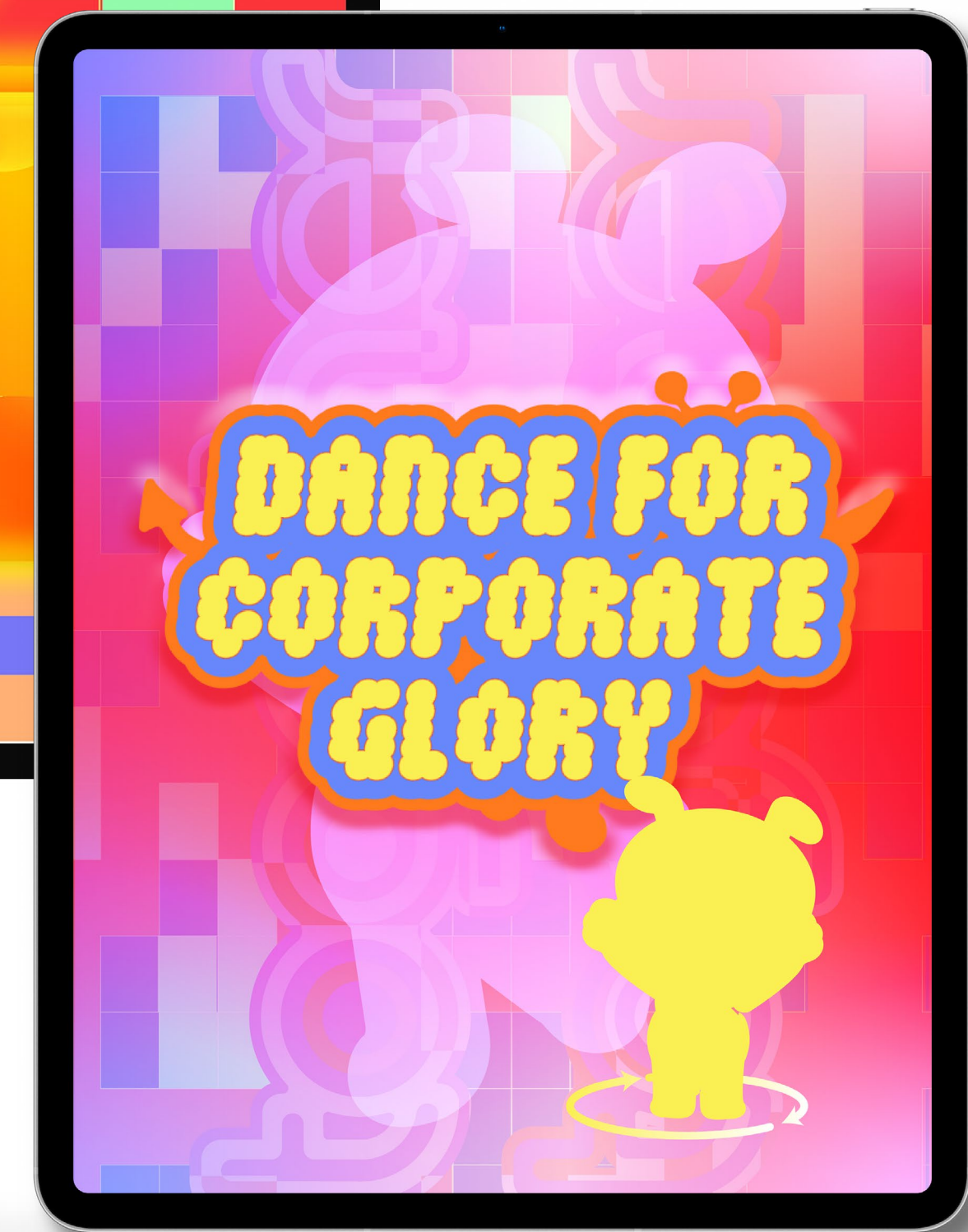
Visual Experiment 8

For the design of the WIP show, I created a dance game building on this idea.

I chose a bee as the mascot because it is a symbol of diligence and productivity. All buttons on the dance pad are labelled ACCEPT, offering no choices. Each step corresponds to a cheerful emoji or gesture — such as a thumbs-up, heart eyes, or clapping hands — echoing the emotional vocabulary of corporate communication. The positive gestures of cute mascots were turned into game tasks, titled with common workplace memes such as “I’m on it!” and “Love my work!”. Players are required to follow the mascot’s cheerful movements to maintain a high “work energy level.”

It aims to translate affective tiredness into physical exhaustion and reveal how enforced enthusiasm in the workplace can lead to affective fatigue.





After the WIP show, I realised that using dance as a performative method to express office workers' affective fatigue is a feasible approach.



Because of the requirements of the physical presentation in the WIP show, I compared both vertical and horizontal formats for the first time. This allowed me to directly experience their narrative differences — something I had not considered before.

However,

1/ the current visual language still feels too detached, leaning too much toward a video game aesthetic. I hope my work can allow the audience to immediately grasp my research subject through its visuals.

2/ The visual cues of the bee mascot are not yet clear enough.

3/ The overall tone, narrative, and medium of the work still require further refinement.

Major Project

Methodology

Performative Graphic Design



Practice Reference 3

The Rodina's work employs performative design to explore the blurred boundary between work and play in digital culture, using the body and action itself as a method of design.

By merging performance and graphic design, she transcends the constraints of separate media, identifying performative components within the design process and its outcome.

1 The Rodina (2015) Playbour:
The New Workaholism

This work inspired me to experiment with performative strategies in my own practice — translating bodily poses into a critical visual language to question affective control in contemporary work culture.

Narrative and Tone

The performance Office Gymnastics features three male actors portraying employees at various levels. Through rhythmic Cantonese chants and exaggerated body movements, they humorously reenact workplace excuses such as “I was just following orders” or “I don’t recall saying that.” The absurd choreography, paired with its catchy music, satirises Hong Kong’s corporate culture.

This work inspired me in two ways:

In terms of narrative, I realised that rather than directly depicting the affective control of corporate mascots over employees, performing from the perspective of a worker — using a bottom-up, satirical stance — can more effectively make audiences aware of the resistant potential embedded in memes.

In terms of design tone, the use of humour and irony resonates with the spirit of memes, making it easier for the audience to grasp and reflect on the issue.



Practice Reference 4

1 Huang, Z. (2013) Xiaorenguo

- 1 "Paid Health Workout"
- 3 trending on Chinese social media
- 5

I discovered a trend on Chinese social media called “Paid Health Workout” — a cheerful office dance encouraging employees to exercise during work hours. Some videos feature corporate mascots from major internet companies performing lively movements in office spaces, followed by employees.

This perfectly aligned with the direction I intended to develop, so I decided to take it as the foundation for my final outcome — “Work Energy Workout”.

Primary Research 8



My Outcome Plan

Work Energy Workout

In this project, I plan to collect, reassemble, and choreograph the positive poses shared across workplace memes and “cute” corporate mascots, transforming them into a performative dance, Work Energy Workout.

I intend to perform as an employee enacting a corporate mascot — reclaiming cuteness as a critical language against the very system that exploits it, and using the logic of memes to deliver a bottom-up irony of affective control in contemporary corporatism in China.

Through repetitive bodily movements, the work will use physical fatigue to visualise the psychological depletion experienced by white-collar workers.

The lyrics, rewritten from real meme texts, will form a direct connection between the visual and linguistic layers, intensifying the ironic tension between enthusiasm and exhaustion.



Design is not merely a passive act of visual production, but a performative event — a critical tool capable of intervening in social contexts and exposing institutional logic. The designer is therefore not only an image-maker, but also an active participant who challenges the structures that shape contemporary life.

The project aims to activate the critical potential embedded in memes, encouraging everyday users of workplace memes to re-examine their meanings and recognise the deeper social realities they articulate — ultimately challenging affective control in contemporary corporatism.



Narrative and Tone

Lyrics

Building on the motivational lyrics from the original Paid Health Workout soundtrack¹, I rewrote the lyrics by combining them with meme texts found online.

They drive the video's main narrative progression. It is divided into two parts, corresponding to the two phases of meme evolution — from motivational to ironic (as shown on p6).

*Monday — meetings, notes I write
Tuesday — overtime, yeah that's alright
Chasing KPI, I lose my mind
Energy rising, I'm on the grind*

*Okay okay okay okay
Leave it to me, no worries today
Roger roger roger roger
Now it's time to grind all the way*

*Overtime till midnight
No home bills when I stay late
As long as my mindset feels alright
The office turns to Bali night*

*Okay okay okay okay
Leave it to me — start to pray
Roger roger roger roger
Loser's pay just dropped again*

1 2 3 4 — *Your wish is my drive*
2 2 3 4 — *Hand it to me, I'll satisfy*
3 2 3 4 — *Your order is my call*
4 2 3 4 — *I'll work and give my all*

Smile — goodbye to my tired phase
Raise hands — energy in endless waves
Grinding on — can't let it stop
Keep telling myself: I'll reach the top

Work hard
Today's pain's okay
Thumbs up
The company runs on me
Together we heart-sign to survive
All the bad vibes
Throw them straight
into the shredder tonight

PART A

1 2 3 4 — *Nod our heads and smile*
2 2 3 4 — *Hands up, stretch a while*
3 2 3 4 — *Begging the boss for a sign*
4 2 3 4 — *Yay, salvation's on our file*

Smile — just wait for my bad news
Raise hands — too old for dirty blues
That go-crazy move — don't let it end
Tell the boss: you can't hack it

Work hard
I'll help where you don't need
Thumbs up
Tomorrow still won't succeed
Together we heart-sign to the throne
As long as I'm happy
Let them moan

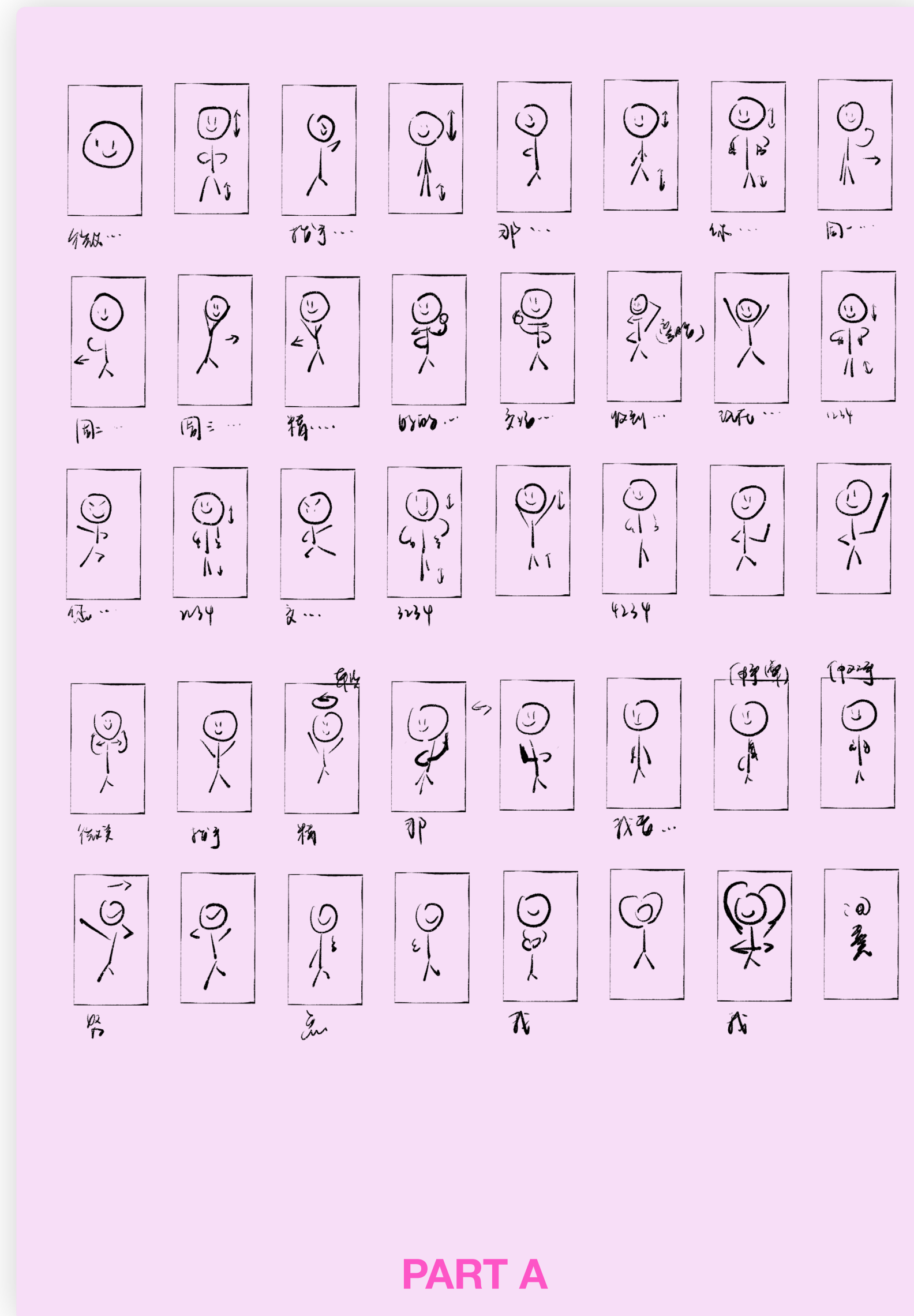
PART B

Narrative and Tone

Movement Design

I collected and analysed recurring positive body poses from both workplace memes and corporate mascots, then reassembled them into an enthusiastic Work Energy Workout.

These movements are intentionally repetitive; as the song progresses, they accelerate in pace, aiming to visualise the psychological exhaustion caused by affective control in workplaces through the bodily fatigue generated by repetitive physical labour.



Visual Language

Element and Colour

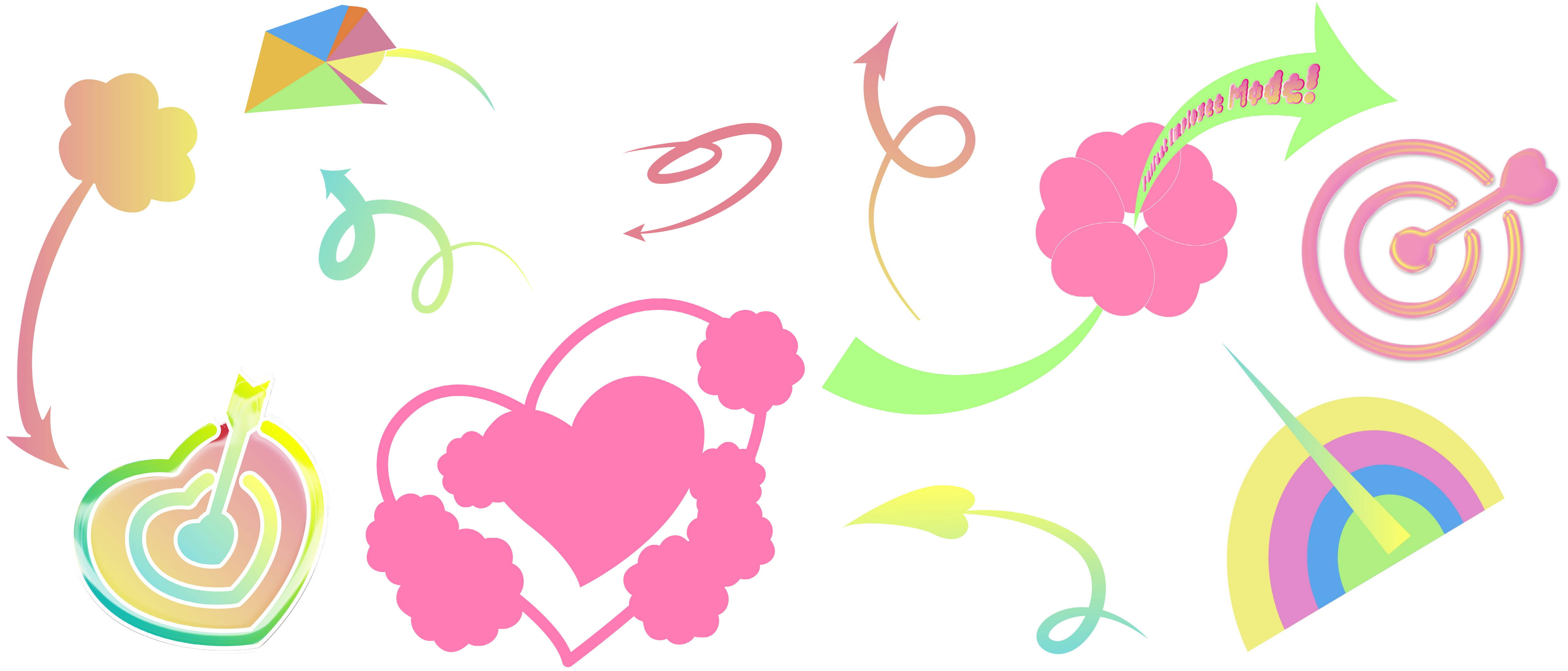
- 1 Anniversary posters and event installations from leading Chinese internet companies
- 2
- 3

I collected recent visual materials from Chinese internet companies to extract visual elements.

Interestingly, I noticed the large areas of pink, a colour culturally associated with cuteness, are deliberately avoided. This avoidance reveals how corporations selectively employ “cuteness” while avoiding any association with softness, which is considered counterproductive to efficiency.

I think I could make use of pink’s cultural bias and turn cuteness into a weapon of resistance. Therefore, I chose pink as the main colour theme of my project.





Visual Experiment 8

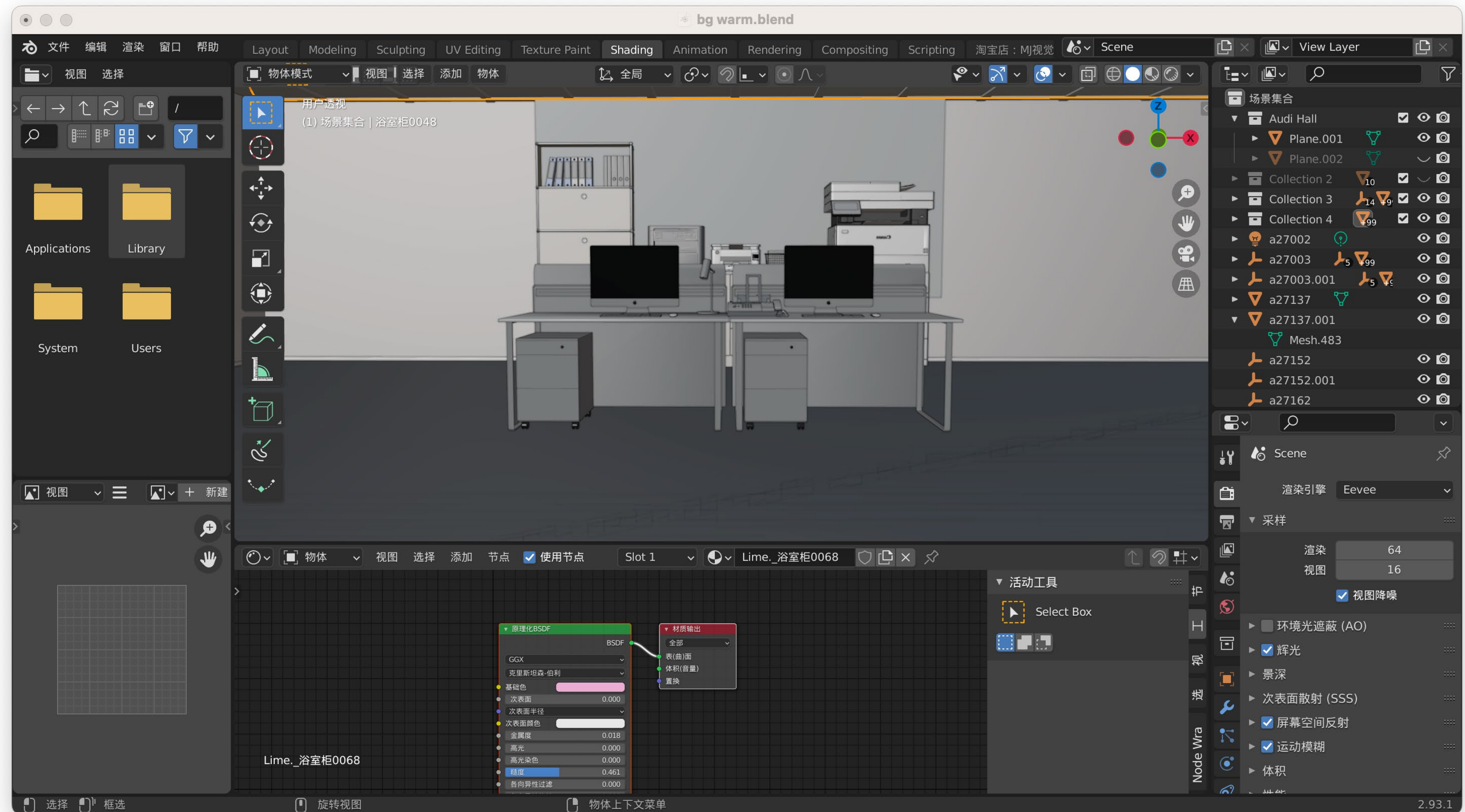
I combine elements in employee event posters and office anniversary installations with symbols of workplace efficiency. Through this, I aim to reveal that cuteness functions not merely as a visual style, but as a tool of affective control for productivity.

Visual Language

Scene Design

I wanted to situate the character within the everyday corporate context, so I decided to construct a 3D office scene as the background of the video.

On the office's feature wall, I added the slogan "Shining Together" to simulate a positive atmosphere, reinforcing an optimistic tone.





- 1 Experiments with different colour and lighting combinations for the 3D office scene
- 2
- 3

Visual Language

Mascot Development

I abandoned the previous bee concept and instead looked for a more relevant symbol drawn from memes.

On Chinese social media, white-collar workers often refer to themselves as “cattle and horses” — a slang term that humorously captures their exploited condition, being treated purely as labour tools, like oxen or horses used for heavy work. Between the two, the horse carries an additional layer of meaning associated with heroism



and strength, making it more suitable as a “positive” corporate mascot. So, I designed the mascot figure based on the horse as its prototype.





Experiments with mascot and extend it into a series of elements for the video.

Character Design

#DisgustingWorkOutfit#

The meme #DisgustingWorkOutfit# originated on Chinese social media, where young white-collar workers humorously document their “anti-fashion” office looks. These posts show employees wearing mismatched combinations — such as pairing high heels with cartoon socks or using cheap plastic items as makeshift accessories — outfits chosen purely for comfort rather than professionalism.

I drew inspiration from this meme’s self-deprecating humour in my costume design, aiming to capture the ironic balance between the “official diligence” and the “careless exhaustion.”



Character Design

Costume Design

Practice Reference 5

1 Sixth Tone (2016) 'My Body Is Hollowed Out'.



The choir's humorous performance uses irony to express the exhaustion of China's white-collar workers. Wearing dog-ear headbands — a parody of the term “overtime dogs” — the singers transform complaints about overwork into a playful collective chant.

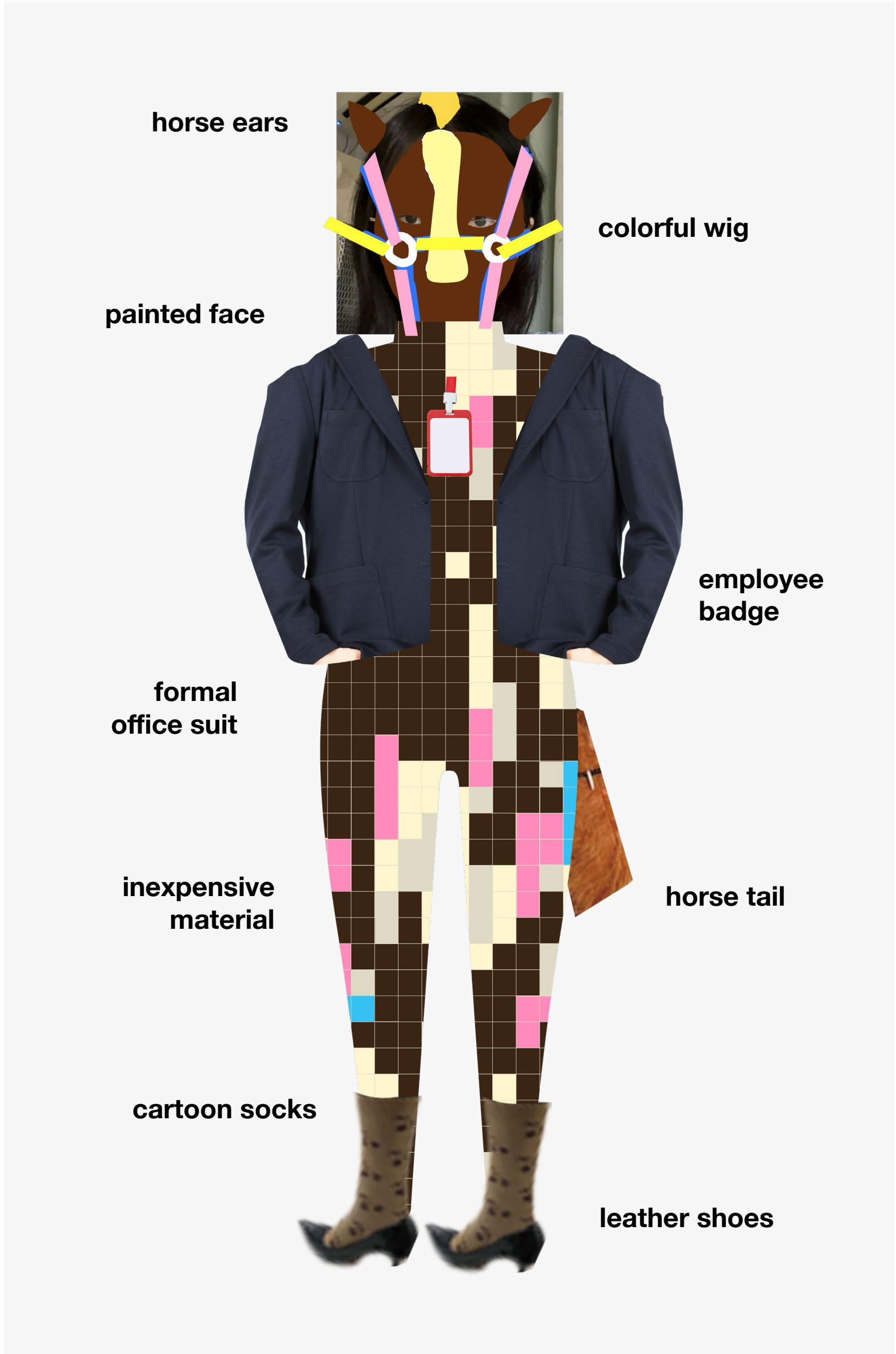
I was particularly drawn to the absurd tension created by the dog-ear props. Their hyper-realistic appearance, when worn by people in formal suits, produces a cognitive dissonance that amplifies the irony. This visual contrast inspired the character design in my work.

Character Design

Perfect Worker

I designed the costume and cartoon-style mascot socks, hand-making them with deliberately inexpensive materials. To further emphasise the sense of cheapness, I created a colourful wig and planned to pair these with a formal office suit and leather shoes, aiming to create a strong visual contrast between official diligence and careless exhaustion.

I also designed a Perfect Worker employee badge to indicate identity, and used horse ears and a tail to perform as the mascot figure.





I painted my face to resemble a horse, amplifying the sense of absurdity.

However, when placed everything within the complete visual composition, the tension was unexpectedly weakened. At the same time, the overly vivid character blended into the background, causing the overall image to appear visually cluttered and lacking hierarchy.

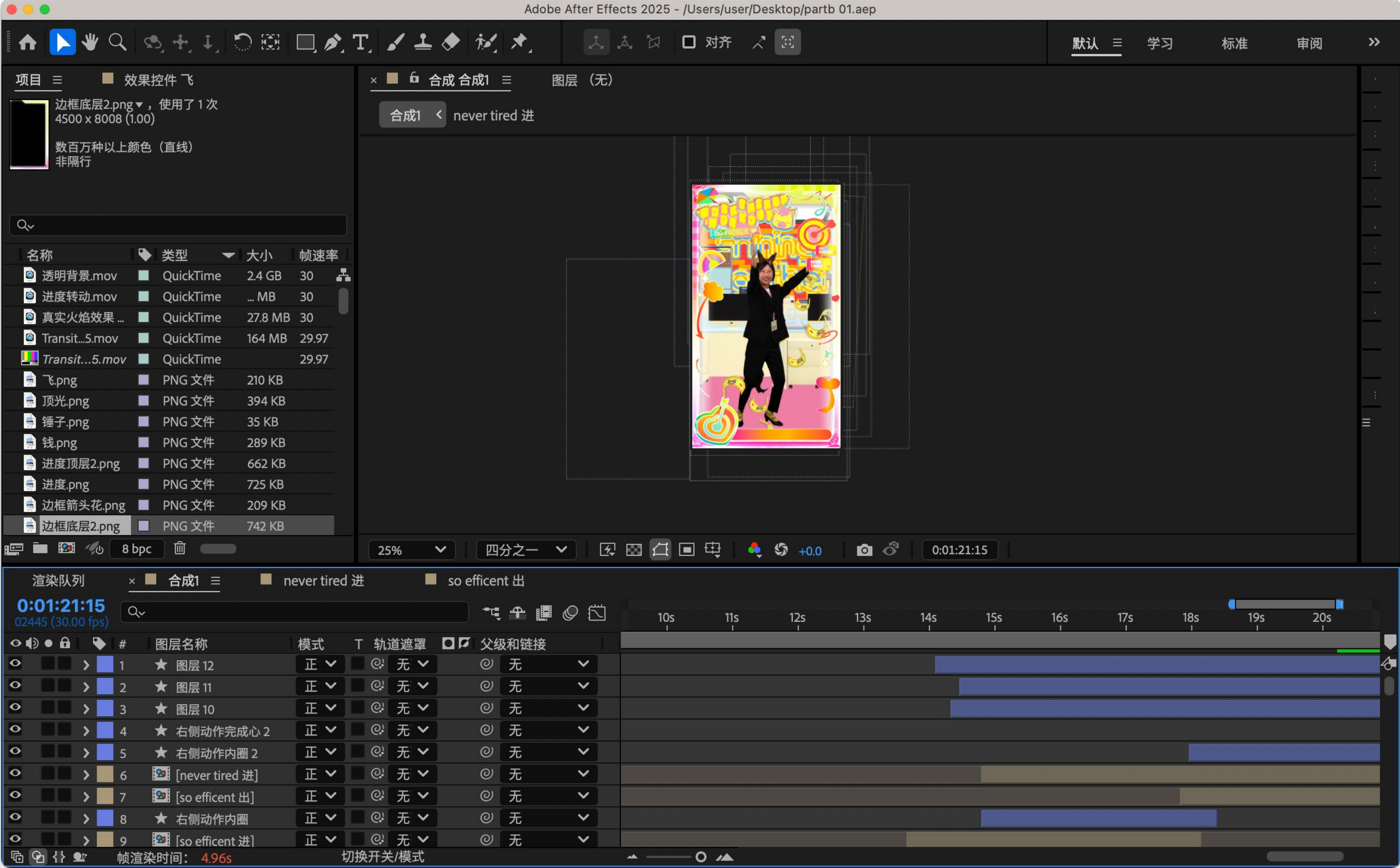
Therefore, I simplified the design, retaining only key symbolic details.





Video Production

Shooting and Editing



Final Outcome







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