

# Psychological Reasons for Homophonic Internet Buzzwords Usage by Modern Chinese People

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## ABSTRACT

As a dissemination mode of mass culture, homophonic Internet buzzword has a wide audience and represents the spirit of the network society to some extent, and its influence often extends to the realistic level of the society. This paper selects Bilibili, SINA Microblog and some other network social platforms as the main source of research corpus, viewing from the perspective of audience psychological analysis, using methods including functional analysis, inductive summary and so on to explore the reason why homophonic Internet buzzwords are accepted and spread, and further summarizes its enlightenment to the Circulation of traditional Chinese Culture, enrich the research material existing in the area of homophonic Internet buzzword, which may provide some reference for the circulation of endangered culture.

**Keywords:** Cultural transmission, Traditional culture, Homophonic words, Internet buzzwords, Audience psychology.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the homophonic buzzwords have been quite popular on mainstream social media platforms, while there has been a dilemma for traditional and niche culture for a long time. Based on the analysis of mass psychology, this paper focuses on key reasons why homophonic words on the Internet can become buzzwords and have a wide range of users, then summarizes common characters of popular culture and its enlightenment and reference value for culture transmission.

## 2. RESEARCH FOUNDATION

### 2.1 Network Language Overview

According to the 47th Statistical Report on China's Internet Development released by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) in February 2021, as of December 2020, the number of Chinese Internet users reached 989 million, a total increase of 85.4 million compared with March 2020, and the Internet penetration rate reached 70.4%. With the rapid development of network

technology and the popularization of electronic products, the number of network applicable people of all ages is increasing. Different from face-to-face communication in daily life, the electronic keyboard used in network communication replaces the output of spoken and written language. This kind of communication mode is convenient and fast, with its combination of letters, symbols and facial expressions on the keyboard, which is not only humorous but also interesting. The rapid innovation of the Internet has driven the development of network language, and gradually made it an indispensable tool in social interpersonal communication. The network language can be divided into nine categories: phrases composed of letters, phrases composed of numbers, phrases with mixed composition, phrases composed of old and new words, phrases composed of oral language, phrases composed of picture, phrases composed of new creation class, phrases composed of imitation idioms, phrases composed of statements [1].

### 2.2 Homonymous Internet Buzzwords

Homophony refers to the words with the same or similar pronunciation, people often take advantage of this feature of Chinese characters to

create homophonic words and use them as substitutes of the original text with the purpose of making their expression more impressive. Homophonic word as an expressing way has appeared as early as in ancient times, Mr. Zhao Jinming believed: "Among all these language types in the world, homophonic words, as a rhetorical device, is used universally, but it is worth noting that the homophonic words used in the ancient Chinese language has seen to be the most." [3]

Talking about the origin of homophonic Internet buzzwords, Shang Laibin (2018) pointed out that ever since the emergence of Internet buzzwords, network homophonic words have always be existing. In every class of the nine classifications of network language- letters class, numbers class, mixed class, old words and new words class, oral language class, picture class, new creation class, imitation idioms class and statements class, several rhetorical devices are applied, so people can just sort out those transformed words according to whether it used rhetorical devices or not, and put these words together to form homophonic network language [4]. In recent years, homophonic words such as "Jimei" (sister), "Duosunna" (夸笋响) (so sarcastic/mean/vicious) and "Haoziweizhi"(耗子尾汁) (keep yourself to yourself) have emerged in an endless stream, participating people's daily life via the transmission of online social platforms such as TikTok, Bilibili and Kuaishou. The popularity of homophonic words in the network language reflects the need of pursuing group belonging and the need of humorous and polite expression, also represents the modern fashionable side of Chinese culture [2]

### **2.3 Research Background**

At present, the research of homophonic words Internet buzzwords is mainly carried out from the following five aspects: (1) Studies of the similarities and differences between homophonic network words rhetoric and traditional homophonic words rhetoric. (2) Studies of the classification of buzzword phenomena in homophonic network words. (3) Studies of the causes of the phenomenon of homophonic buzzwords. (4) Studies of the language function of homophonic Internet buzzwords. (5) Study of the pragmatic norms of homophonic words Internet buzzwords [4]. Lack of inductive analysis of the characteristics of homophonic network words buzzwords from the perspective of public psychology. With the change of the psychological needs of Internet users, the generalization trend: such as the word "treasure

XX" has frequently appeared in various types of network information since its first appearance in 2016, then it ranked in the buzzwords list in 2019[5]. The word changes according to the psychological needs of the public, with the semantic being generalized, the language function is constantly improved, and thus has a strong vitality. At the same time, homophonic Internet buzzwords not only have the characteristics of network language-change fast, widely spread and greatly affect, but also has the unique connotation of traditional homophonic words. From the perspective of public psychology, this paper deeply discusses the essential needs of word classification and the coupling relationship between psychology and homophonic Internet buzzwords, and further summarizes its enlightenment for the communication of traditional Chinese culture, which has some practical value.

### **2.4 Source of Corpus**

As the research object of this paper, homophonic Internet buzzword is featured with great change and rapid update, which add to the difficulty to the collection of representative homophonic words, and a complete homophonic words network corpus of Chinese has not been formed at the moment. Therefore, the corpus sources of this article are mainly homophonic words, phrases and sentences in the popular social media such as Bilibili and SINA Microblog. Throughout the data collection period, this project kept close attention to these influential bloggers and recorded what they had shared for our further analysis. In addition, the latest research results published in CNKI of related fields are also one of the corpus sources of this paper.

## **3. ANALYSIS OF THE AUDIENCE PSYCHOLOGY IN THE INTERNET ERA — VIEWING FROM THE GENERALIZATION PHENOMENON OF HOMOPHONIC INTERNET BUZZWORDS**

### **3.1 Generalization Phenomenon**

"Generalization" is originally as a psychological term, also called "generalization of conditioning", Modern Chinese Dictionary 6, p. 364 explains the word like: "[1] from specific, separated one to general, such "Mr." can be also used for women,

battlefield is also used to call the examination room or the field, this is generalization; [2] when a reaction is related to a certain stimulus, this reaction will form similar connection with other similar stimuli, which can be called generalization". Then the word "generalization" was introduced into the field of linguistics, appearing in language acquisition research, sociolinguistics research and so on. There is no recognized and unified definition of the concept of linguistic generalization. In terms of the branches under the language category alone, there are "special-purpose language generalization", "industry language generalization", "semantic generalization", and "word generalization" etc. [12] Understandings of such concepts are varied, but there is one thing in common: that language generalization is the extension of industry language in the lingua franca field. In fact, language generalization is only describing the transformation from the field of professional language and industry language to the field of generalized lingua franca, but there are also a large number of transformations from lingua franca to industry language [12]. To sum up, the phrase "language generalization" referred to in this paper can be defined as:

A social and cultural phenomenon will occur that a word be widely used in multi-field and get popular via the Internet after its transformation into homophonic one.

### **3.2 Generalization of Homophonic Words Internet Buzzwords**

At present, the frequent use of online buzzwords has become a major language feature of online social networking. The mainstream media's inclusion of "buzzwords of the year" and "the top ten online buzzwords", such as People's Daily and Xinhua News Agency, also reflects the important position of online buzzwords in mass cultural transmission. And homophonic Internet buzzwords with its strange tone, novel homophonic words literal, euphemistic and subtle expression and other characteristics are widely accepted, used and spread by netizens, constituting an important part of the Internet buzzwords. Major network platforms have seen a large number of highly popular Internet celebrities playing homophonic words meme. There are also many accounts such as "homophonic words meme research institute" on SINA Microblog sharing homophonic words meme.

### **3.3 Analysis of the Popular Phenomenon Based on the Network Social Platform**

The society in the network information era is changing with each passing day. The homophonic network buzzword has developed from "886" used for efficient communication to not only a tool to activate communication atmosphere, but also a euphemistic and implicit way of expression. Its popularity has become the embodiment of the public living conditions and spiritual outlook to some certain extent.

Table 1. Homophonic words in the Internet buzzwords lists

List Name	List of hot words	homophonic words buzzword in the list
National Monitoring and Research Center for Language Resources Top Ten Network Language in 2020	hero in harm's way; the first cup of milk tea in autumn; live-streaming sales; cloud supervisor; empty plates movement; aoligei(fighting); haojiahuo(good lord); championship-winning; happen to coincide; Jimei(sisters)	Jimei
China Internet Ha hahaha list Top Ten Internet Buzzwords	The most beautiful hero in harm's way;aoligei(fighting); yellowish dress; to ride the waves; "Houlang"; xiaohuo(guy); Yeqinghui(My youth is back); corporate slave/wage earner; the first cup of milk tea in autumn; haoziweizhi(mind your own business; hamonyms for "rat tail juice")	Consumatic tail juice
Top ten hot words of SINA Microblog entertainment in 2020	to ride the waves; wow; Jimei(sisters); corporate slave/wage earner; type it on the public screen;running away;haiwang(playboy); Yeqinghui(My youth is back); Versailles; has one's house collapsed	Jimei
The 2020 Baidu Boiling Point annual list is the "the top 10 buzzwords"	Jimei(sisters);Fancy going hiking together?; u1s1(to tell the whole truth; to be frank); Jiulouyu((an adult idol)who missed 9-year compulsory education); Yeqinghui(My youth is back);(fake)socialites of Shanghai; corporate slave/wage earner;to do one's filial duty on a	Deep in the blue

List Name	List of hot words	homophonic words buzzword in the list
	rush (only during festivals); the annoying and croaking toad of Qixi Festival (China's Valentine's Day); blue Still waters run deep(keep one's own counsel).	
Bilibili 2020	Yeqinghui(My youth is back); Come on,Wuhan;ou finally get it right;The ecstasy of seeing two idols performing in the same work;No more of your old tricks.	It tastes inside

This article briefly summarizes some lists of buzzwords published by several major online social media platforms. It is obvious that, in "Table 1", there are Jimei (sisters) and Shencangblue (be modest about one's skill) in the statistics of buzzwords released in these lists. And words, like Duosunna (tart and mean), haoziweizhi (mind your own business; homophonic Words for "rat tail juice"), pen core (love you gesture) and so on, have been delightedly talked about by netizens. "Jimei" (homophonic words of "sisters") is firstly used by an Internet celebrity and then quickly took off because of its funny pronunciation with strong dialect flavor, and has become one of the buzzwords of the year on major network platforms such as Bilibili and SINA Microblog. Simply a call for "Jimei" would not only shorten each other's distance in cyberspace, but also appears playful and interesting. The English word "blue" in "Shencangblue", which has similar pronunciation of

the original Chinese characters, is also a common technique of homophonic-creating. Similarly, "duck不必"(大可不必),"无可 phone 告"(无可奉告),"tony 带水"(拖泥带水),"半 tour 废"(半途而废) and phrases like these, are all introducing new images after their transformation, have not only become an interesting way to express the original meaning, but also produced new meanings with strange correlation. Most of the English words introduced are words with representational meanings, and stickers made with assembled images are more interesting and intuitive, which is further promoting the spread of homophonic Internet buzzwords.

In addition, a number of uploaders on Bilibili are actively talking about hot topics, daily life, fashion and entertainment using homophonic words jokes, among which, many of the videos have reached millions of views. Here's a "Table 2" of different topics of such videos below.

Table 2. Homophonic MEME videos with different themes

Topic type	Example	View (by 2021/8/6)	Clip
learning	"Qimo" ("期墨")	1371,000	"期墨(期末)具有神秘的芳香,能吸引许多的动物,比如英鱼(英语)、高鼠(高数)、考狮(考试),其中最多的还是论蚊(论文)"
social	"Neijuan" ("内卷")	1190,000	"内卷这种卷饼制作难度很高,一般只有在图书馆这种餐馆才有的买"
living	"Shimian" ("失棉")	2065,000	"经常性地睡不着后,失棉(失眠)上就长出了熬叶(熬夜)"
entertainment	Once upon a time there's a kind of whale called"Gangjing" (从前有一种鲸叫"杠鲸")	481,000	"杠鲸(杠精)身上长满了刺,叫挑刺……它们和键盘虾(键盘侠)是十分要好的朋友"

It's easy to see from "Table 2" that although most of these videos just telling stories of some events and phenomena with a series of homophonic words, but these story series of clever and witty irony indeed attracted a large number of netizens come to watch and play with it. Countless comments of "妙" all over the video screen are the

intuitive portrayal of audience's psychological satisfaction.

### 3.4 Audience Psychological Analysis of the Generalization Phenomenon

There are many reasons for which homophonic Internet buzzwords are widely accepted, spread and

get popular, including social environment, cultural background, group characteristics, etc., "group characteristics" here refers specifically to the psychological characteristics of the audience group, which can be attributed to the theoretical category of mass psychology. The Crowd mentioned: "Among the psychological characteristics of crowds there are some that they may present in common with isolated individuals, and others, on the contrary, which are absolutely peculiar to them and are only to be met with in collections." [13], pointing out that the characteristics of the crowd are not a simple collection of individual characteristics of every group member, and even, in most cases, the two are not directly related. Therefore, when studying psychological characteristics of the crowd, researchers should also remember to distinguish individual characteristics from group characteristics, instead of simply migrating individual characteristics to the concept of the group.

According to analysis of the popular phenomenon above, this research summarizes the dominant audience psychology behind homophonic Internet buzzwords into four aspects: herd mentality, curiosity, reserved psychology and origin psychology. Next is one-by-one analysis of these four aspects of audience psychology.

- Herd mentality: as a general kind of psychology behind most crowd behavior, is also one of the audience psychology behind the popular phenomenon of homophonic Internet buzzwords. People are social so animals who naturally tend to keep consistent with the community. People will consciously remain consistent with the group's behavior under the pressure, actual or imagined, from the crowd. The behaviors which performed under this kind of pressure is called herd behavior. [6] When a girl finds other girls around are all calling each by word "Jimei", she would also easily integrate herself into the collective and gain a sense of belonging with a simple "Jimei", so why not just do this? Moreover, if a partner throws a homophonic words meme and everyone happens to understand, then people would all get a sense of "they are on their own side ", that is, the individuals in the group get their sense of belonging and identity as a social animals satisfied. This is a major psychological feature for which homophonic Internet buzzwords can be actively accepted, used and spread by the public in and off the network. The generalization of online English homophonic words reflects the herd mentality of the audience in nowadays.
- Curiosity: Gustave Le Bon once proposed: "In a crowd every sentiment and act is contagious, and contagious to such a degree that an individual readily sacrifices his personal interest to the collective interest." [13] Curiosity is one of the major human natures, and this nature can also be found in group characteristics. The rise of the " Internet celebrity era" is a typical reflection of Internet groups' curiosity psychology. Especially for teenagers who are usually constrained by norms in family, school and society, when attractive new things appear, the crowd will unconsciously get close to these new things [7], they show a common acceptance and use of the funny homophonic memes, which have contributed to its rapid popularity. In terms of homophonic memes, it can be basically explained as: to transform the vocabulary intentionally, so that it can presents a mode of nonstandard pronunciation, unclear meaning and loose form to reach a novel, obscure and unexpected use experience. Incongruity theory, one of the Three Humor Theories, points out that humor is "disappointment of reasonable expectations", the audience have the expected result during the joke, but end up with the one inconsistent with actual information, and the unexpected result is extremely harmonious, thus humor is created. Take talk show actor Wang Jianguo's homophonic memes "二十四孝第一孝仰天长啸(孝)", for example, "二十四孝" guide the audience to relate to filial piety in traditional Chinese culture, and the following " 仰 天 长 啸 " disappointes audience's subconscious expectations, getting an unexpected experience — merely the so-called "curious", and receive what the actor had been trying to convey, receive pleasure.
- Reserved psychology: Many people actually learn homophonic Internet buzzwords, which get popular rapidly and spread widely via the Internet, through the daily dialogue with others. People in this type of groups are initiatively accepting homophonic buzzwords in two main aspects: one is out of being polite, one choose this homophonic way of expression to convey the respect and recognition for others; on the other hand, it is closely related to the implicit and subtle characteristics in Chinese culture, and ancient Chinese poetry and songs often use

homophonic words to create implicit and meaningful artistic work [8]. Traditional Chinese advocates "free translation" (意会), that is, to propose, comment or express your feelings indirectly instead of putting it straightforwardly. Changing the literal meaning by replacing original word with homophonic one has seen to perfectly cater to the reserved psychology of Chinese. So it can be concluded that except for the sake of herd mentality, there are other reasons for homophonic Internet buzzwords being widely accepted and spread — avoiding awkward, search for novelty, breaking with the criteria and so on.

- **Origin psychology:** Carried with a long history, the extensive and profound Chinese culture, has deeply influenced the produce and transmission of homophonic words. Without the cultural foundation, active thinking is just an empty talk. It is not accidental for us to instinctively create some seemingly novel words, it actually has a close relationship with our environment and learning accumulation. According to the study of homophonic words in traditional Chinese culture, "Folk custom in homophonic words" mainly includes the homophonic words music in folk customs. The original word is called homophonic words subject, and the homophonic words is homophonic object. For example, in China, people traditionally celebrate one's birthday by eating noodles, because in ancient Chinese words, "noodles" and "life" are homophonic words. The homophonic words, which have got popular in modern networks, is exactly the continuation of the ancient rhetoric and entertainment principles of homophonic words. Its core essence is to express with the differences and variation of homophonic words before and after its transformation. However, the rapid development of modern network has made a great difference to the creation and transmission of traditional social homophonic words, which contributes to the formation of new contemporary homophonic words. Such as taking "人参公鸡" (Panax ginseng and cock) as the homophonic words of "人身攻击" (most network environment explain it as: irrational and criticized); "非死不可" (be going to die) as the homophonic words of Facebook (the network social application); "5131421" as the homophonic words of "I love you". So it's not difficult for us to notice that, no matter how novel the form

of homophonic words is, the core content and rules are always the same, thanks to the origin psychology (our cherish of those original and traditional things).

#### **4. THE ENLIGHTENMENT OF HOMOPHONIC INTERNET BUZZWORDS ON THE SPREAD OF CHINESE CULTURE**

Both the media and methods are very important for cultural learning and dissemination. Nowadays, network media is highly developed. For some tedious cultures, to spread by taking advantage of some popular ways could be a good idea. But while using this way, keeping the culture on to its core is fundamental. Based on the research of homophonic buzzwords from ancient times all the way to the present, applying analogy analysis and inductive summary methods, this paper first matches the "popular characteristics" of homophonic words, one by one, to culture, then analyses the "popular characteristics" suitable for the transmission of cultural to provide reference methods for the transmission of related culture.

##### ***4.1 The Role of Herd Conformity on the Spread of Chinese Culture***

The culture couldn't widely spread just overnight, this takes time. However, there are some cultures in danger desperately need to be inherited and developed, but they find it difficult to expand due to the small scope of their transmission for the moment. [10] The benign herd mentality explored in this paper can be also used for the transmission of foreign culture. First, people need to make it clear that the conformity mentality in culture determines the needs of mass culture, that is, the common needs of the social audience is the primary duty and foundation of cultural transmission. No matter how the transmission work develops and changes, its content and form has to cater for the general needs of the modern public in the first place. If people ignore the cultural needs of the mass, putting the cart before the horse, the gain would outweigh the loss. Therefore, the minority culture may try to cater the common needs of the social audience while maintaining its own characteristics. During this process, people can't do it in a rush in order to maintain the natural dissemination and imperceptible of culture, it needs to be done step by step. Although the operation of new media in modern society could make a culture take off rapidly, it would also make it hard to last for long.

Therefore, the scientificity and perdurability should be considered in the process of cultural transmission. The benign herd mentality explored in this paper may provide certain reference for cultural transmission. Therefore, based on the benign herd mentality explored in this paper, the benign conformity psychology explored in this paper can also provide some reference for culture which needs to be transmitted in smaller scope. For example, taking a small group of people as a point, first one need to transmit a culture among these small groups, that is to connect one point to another, to make certain radiant points and correlated lines in different areas, then these radiant points and lines act to influence areas. This is the transmission process from points to areas, and "radiant point" in this process is largely provided by the conformity psychology of the crowd. Therefore, people can carry out some small propaganda for the transmission of small-scope culture, using mass media and network.

#### **4.2 The Role of Curiosity Psychology on Transmitting Traditional Chinese Culture**

The excellent traditional culture of five thousand years in China has cast countless popular poems. Many poems and essays have been passed down through the ages, accompanying the healthy development of generations of people. Learning excellent ancient poems and essays has seen to improve the literary literacy of Chinese people and cultivate their spiritual sentiment [9]. Traditional culture is an exclusive concept, consists of many branches and subbranches. Here in this article mainly takes the ancient poetry in traditional culture as the starting point, putting forward our transmission strategy based on the inspiration gained from above.

With the rapid development of modern society, the spread of traditional culture is difficult to find and always tedious. At present, although there are articles such as "reciting Ancient Poems with Internet Popular Language" on the Internet, on the one hand shows the possibility of pop language to boost the spread of traditional culture, and on the other hand, it also shows the necessity of relevant in-depth research. Based on the curiosity in the homophonic words pop analysis, traditional culture can be displayed in an interesting way by making some changes to obscure parts or by introducing some novel concepts while keeping its essence unchanged. For example, the very popular word for

a period of time "主要看气质", can be translated into "羡慕聪慧可人的美人, 胸中有学问气质自然光彩夺目", which refers to the poetry 《和董传留别》 of the Song Dynasty poet Su Shi: "粗缯大布裹生涯, 腹有诗书气自华". In this way, to explore traditional culture following the curiosity psychology, the culture gets more interesting and popular buzzwords are not superficial as it seemed. Properly used, it could also be a good way for cultural transmission.

#### **4.3 The Role of the Origin Psychology on Integrating Modern Society and Traditional Chinese Culture**

The Chinese word "文化(culture)" has already existed in ancient times. According to Shuo Wen Jie Zi (characters explaining): "文, 错画也, 象交文" meaning "文 (Chinese character)" is a kind of criss-crossing textures. And "化" with its original meaning of transform, can extend to the meaning of cultivate, reform, etc. Taking the essence and discarding the dregs has gradually formed the characteristics and concept of the Chinese nation.

In today's society, all kinds of cultural colliding, our excellent traditional culture must find itself in the flood of cultural collision of belonging and origin, people's emotional perception of traditional culture must awaken —people might do this by stimulating themselves' origin psychology, also people must strengthen the confidence in their own's national culture so as to take the initiative to conduct traditional culture learning, inheritance, spread. A culture is not superficial, but can be traced back to the past. It should understand and spread from the root, so that the people can have a sense of pride and belonging in traditional culture. Of course, the tracing of origin need a certain publicity and carrier, at least to make people feel and understand, taking Li Ziqi, an Internet celebrity in recent years, as an example, she transmitting the traditional Chinese culture by making videos, not only harvest domestic love and praise, but also let many foreign netizens yearn for Chinese civilization, which can be regarded as an excellent way of inheritance. Furthermore, for modern society, it is also very important for us to apply traditional culture with flexibility, which can not only bring benefits to the users, but also make the influence of origin psychology more universal. For example, the unique personality and connotation of the traditional cultural elements themselves can bring more inspiration and creativity to the modern advertising design, so that these advertisements can highlight the sense of the times while returning to

the tradition at the same time, and then can integrate into the world trend with the excellent advertising design products which have Chinese characteristics [11].

## 5. CONCLUSION

According to analysis above, the dominant audience psychology behind homophonic Internet buzzwords can be summarized into four aspects: herd mentality, curiosity, reserved psychology and origin psychology. Among the four, herd mentality is the most common, curiosity as the activator, and the last two are explaining in the prospective of traditional Chinese culture.

"What Chinese people are concerned about most is the continuation and unity of Chinese culture and civilization," Feng Youlan once said. For the Chinese nation, traditional Chinese culture is a name card of the Chinese nation and an important symbol which distinguishes the Chinese nation from other ethnic groups. One perspective provided in this article is to get hold of the popular characteristics of various popular culture and analyse them in depth, explore the nature of their popularity, and migrate this nature flexibly, so that it can be applied to the dissemination of culture. Eternal as it is, the inheritance and development of traditional culture will absolutely become an important part in the process of realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Enhui Chen and Xiaolan Wen analysed data, Xiangxue Li and Xiaolan Wen wrote the manuscript, and Xiaolan Wen contributed to revising and editing.

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