



Study on the Spread and Impact of Internet Meme Culture

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Abstract. With the rapid development of the internet, an increasing number of people tend to communicate and share views online. Among contemporary netizens, young people are the most active; they are well-educated, progressive, and creative, which has led to the creation of the interesting and trendy "meme culture." This paper will explore the transmission process of memes within this culture and discuss the impacts that meme culture may have.

Keywords: Internet, Meme, Culture, Impact

1 Introduction

On August 29, 2024, the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) released the 54th Statistical Report on the Development of China's Internet. The report indicates that as of June 2024, the number of internet users in China reached nearly 1.1 billion (1,099.67 million), with an internet penetration rate of 78.0%^[1]. The widespread adoption of the internet has made online communication possible and has become a trend for everyone. Events that occur in reality are shared online, and similarly, content from the internet also finds its way into real life. With the increase of netizens, the expansion of public knowledge, the broadening of perspectives, and the rising social acceptance, the dissemination of online information has become increasingly creative and youthful. This has given rise to meme culture. The term meme was coined by Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* (1976) to describe small units of culture that spread from person to person by copying or imitation^[2]. Recently, the term has been adopted to mark the more specific phenomenon of Internetmemes: groups of digital items sharing common characteristics, created with awareness of each other^[3].

The term "meme" is actually a misapplication of the word "stalk" (in Chinese we call it "geng"), and it has now become a fundamental component of comedy on the internet, commonly appearing in variety shows and online content. The term "meme" refers to a punchline, where the setup serves to create anticipation for the joke, originating from the Chinese comedic culture of the late 20th century. Memes can convey messages not

only through natural language but also through emojis, audio, and images. They signify not just humor but also the underlying event, attitudes, and even certain ideologies.

Memes are usually dynamic, evolving through the participation of online communities, leading to expressions connected with everyday life. The phenomenon of rapidly changing memes in the online world often reflects social realities and the emotional sentiments of the times in a concise and humorous manner. As a contemporary cultural phenomenon, the journey from the creation of memes to their widespread recognition involves several stages, influenced by various factors. The subsequent sections will discuss these stages, explore the effects of meme culture, and examine the potential benefits or harms it may bring.

2 The Spread Process of Memes

Netizens have a stronger acceptance of new phenomena and are eager to create their own cultural circles to express their corresponding demands and emotions. The creation and use of meme culture do not require a high level of cultural literacy, and due to its entertaining nature, it is more easily accepted by netizens. Users can construct their cultural circles based on meme culture, creating or disseminating memes, and finding enjoyment, a sense of belonging, and identity recognition in the process.

Nowadays, due to the demands of work and study, people are adapting to a fast-paced lifestyle. The traditional practice of reading lengthy texts suffers from a lack of sufficient time, leading to more fragmented reading and information browsing. Memes, being concise yet rich in "meaning" do not require extensive thinking or interpretation, making them convenient for daily communication and expressing personal attitudes and feelings. Consequently, they are widely used in online chats and for sharing opinions.

The following sections will specifically elaborate on the basic types of memes, the stages a meme goes through from its creation to widespread dissemination, and the challenges that may arise during the spread process.

2.1 Basic Types of Memes

Currently, meme culture is primarily disseminated in four forms: homophonic memes, image memes, abstract memes, and character memes. Homophonic Memes refer to the reinterpretation of the original meanings of words through homophones, using hints and double entendres to express humor. Image macros were chosen due to their simple, accessible, and concrete templates, which consist of a repeating image overlaid with text and usually deal with a specific topic or situation^[4]. Image Memes involve directly quoting or remixing existing images that contain humorous elements to create new jokes. Abstract Memes use abbreviations, emojis, and other forms to express meaning in an implicit way. Character Memes highlight the appearance, personality, or behavior of specific individuals, uncovering and deriving humor from these aspects. For example, During the pandemic, the "leisure" in a balanced work-rest dynamic transformed into the "epidemic.", which is a homophonic meme. The widely circulated animated

GIF of a man carrying a coffin is an example of an image meme. Referring to someone as "Iron Hanhans"(a playful term indicating a naïve yet endearing personality) is an abstract meme. As the internet continues to develop, memes emerge in abundance, with their forms and content constantly evolving.

2.2 The Development Process of Memes

A meme typically goes through four stages from its creation to being skillfully utilized: origin, spread, crossover, and normalization. A mature meme usually first appears in the public eye through a specific show, movie, or television program. After some netizens discover it, they assign different meanings to a phrase or image within particular contexts. An Internet meme is thus comprised of multiple related instances; its creators take an item (text, image, or video) and change parts of it to input their own ideas, while keeping a consistent resemblance to the memetic group^[5]. Subsequently, traditional cultural circles begin to accept, recognize, and widely disseminate the term or image. This stage represents the peak of its spread. Finally, the meme becomes synonymous with a specific meaning, is utilized by official media in public settings, and may even be recognized as a new word in dictionaries, though its usage often declines afterward. The first three stages are primarily driven by young people, who are creative, have a certain understanding of both Eastern and Western cultures, and are frequently engaged with the internet. They know what types of information will attract viewership and sharing. After a meme goes viral, middle-aged and older individuals usually have limited awareness of it, and ultimately, it is the youth who disseminate these memes throughout society.

2.3 Potential Obstacles in the Spread of Memes

The normalization of a meme is not an easy process. In each of the four stages mentioned, any inadequacies in communication can lead to the meme being stifled in its infancy. A limitation in the dissemination of the work, program, or post containing the meme can hinder its initial spread. The various venues in which memes are made and distributed tend to follow the logic of "the networked self"^[6]. If the overarching meaning of this meme is weak and does not highlight the individuality of internet users or lacks strong virality, it will not be widely used by netizens. If other fields already possess terms or phrases that carry the same meaning and have a wider reach, then the new meme may not be understood or utilized by those within its intended audience. During this phase, the meme faces greater scrutiny. If the meme is seen as vulgar or potentially harmful, it will likely be rejected by official media and may even face criticism or boycotts. These obstacles can significantly impede the journey of a meme from creation to normalization.

The popularity of memes originates from youth subcultures seeking alternative forms of expression that differ from traditional cultural circles. This new form of expression ultimately influences traditional culture, which then absorbs it. For a meme to achieve widespread dissemination, it must have a strong capability for summariza-

tion and expression, being both concise and capable of accurately conveying a certain meaning. This quality is essential for establishing a solid foundation for its popularity.

3 Positive Impacts of Internet Meme Culture

Meme culture is a fascinating cultural phenomenon that positively influences our society and the lives of the general public.

3.1 Promoting the Prosperity of Social Culture

Communication scholar Wilbur Schramm noted in his classic work "Introduction to Communication" that "media are tools inserted into the communication process to expand and extend the transmission of information." We live in an information society where the proliferation of culture is also nurtured within this information. Memes are primarily a form of information that gradually evolves into culture as they are enriched, developed, and accepted. The 12th edition of the "Xinhua Dictionary" has added over 100 new words, such as "fans," "QR code," and "like," while supplementing 50 new meanings and usages for existing words, such as "acting cute" and "carpooling." As memes circulate and spread throughout different Web communities, their meanings are continually changing^[7]. Some of the newly added content existed before but has been imbued with new meanings in the modern era, while other terms have been newly created and are widely used today. These developments reflect the rapidity with which we transmit information and the universal nature of information dissemination, showcasing how these innovative words enrich social culture and provide impetus for its flourishing development.

3.2 Promoting the Expressing of Individual and Collective Values

Memes often spread through the internet, typically initiated by individuals before resonating with entire groups and then being circulated widely. Adolescents are the largest group engaging with and creating memes, making the impact of memes particularly profound among them. For adolescents, using memes allows them to showcase their personal identity, as staying updated with trending topics is essential to understanding new memes. This engagement also serves as a fashionable and unique expression of their individuality. Young people are enthusiastic about creating new memes, such as the currently popular initialism memes like "YYDS" (meaning "forever god") and "aws1" (meaning "I'm dying"). These demonstrate the youth's desire for self-expression, as they seek recognition and validation. Certain phrases quickly gain admiration from large groups, such as "Buddha-like" (implying a laid-back attitude) and "working-class person" (implying a person's profession and mental and physical state). participative culture is widespread on social media platforms. Online communities often alter and share digital content in the form of internet memes to communicate with each other on a daily basis^[8]. When individuals recognize the same meme, it rapidly narrows the distance between them, creating a sense of resonance and connec-

tion, leading to their integration into a group. When a group consists of individuals with shared characteristics, members feel they have found their place, naturally cultivating a sense of belonging and integration within that community. They become eager to promote their group to others, increasing its visibility and inviting more people to join.

3.3 Facilitating Personal Emotional Expression

Civic participation in digital culture often revolves around "affective publics" who engage in societal affairs through emotional involvement^[9]. Focusing on the expression of emotions, it was found that individualistic cultures were more emotionally expressive and more positive in their emotions^[10]. The emergence of popular memes such as "I'm so southern." (meaning "I'm too difficult"), "I don't want your opinion, I want my own", and "Rain girl has nothing to do with it." (meaning "It has nothing to do with you") showcases another way to express emotions: using humorous memes to convey one's inner thoughts. In daily life, there are often moments when it's hard to articulate one's true feelings. Meme cultures allow for the expression of anger and other disruptive emotions, in contrast to the norms of support and positivity found in many social media platforms. Moreover, in today's society, with increasing work pressure, economic anxiety, and the overwhelming presence of peers making significant incomes, many young people find themselves grappling with stress, anxiety, and even depression. Engaging with memes becomes a way to find humor amid hardships. Moderately using memes can provide a sense of staying trendy and help individuals discover joy in their lives, serving as a window for alleviating the burdens they face.

4 Negative Impacts of Internet Meme Culture

Internet memes are multitextual and multipurpose and coupled with their ubiquity, they have variable and significant top-down and bottom-up effects on culture, politics, and sociality^[11]. Every phenomenon has its duality, and we cannot deny that the culture of memes shared on the internet also brings some negative impacts.

4.1 Undermining Traditional Culture

There are studies accentuated the "whimsical" gist of internet memes and their strong association to pop culture^[12], which reflects, from the opposite perspective, the impact of popular culture on traditional culture. The culture of memes and certain internet slang can distort traditional Chinese characters and affect users' normal usage. For example, homophonic memes like "Rat tail juice" (meaning a humorous or mocking take on "Take care of yourself.") may overshadow the original phrases, making it difficult for people to recall their true meanings. The rise of meme culture presents a challenge to traditional culture. As homophonic memes gain popularity and are used extensively over time, we may forget the original vocabulary and diminish our memory of these terms. Phrases like "lothes are clear at a glance"(meaning "Clear at a

glance") and "Harboring thoughts of shoes"(meaning "Harboring sinister thoughts") impact traditional culture significantly. While memes make language entertaining, their overuse means that young people increasingly struggle with verbal expression. For joyful moments, they might just reply with "hahahahaha", and for sorrowful moments, they may simply say "wuwuwuwu" (crying sound). The use of poetry and classical literature among the youth has become exceedingly rare. This shift in expression illustrates the potential erosion of linguistic richness and cultural depth due to the dominance of meme culture.

4.2 Causing Group Polarization

In the current era of strong social interaction and rapid dissemination, internet memes often express specific opinions or emotions in a concise and vivid manner, making information transmission more rapid and intuitive. The ways people consume and produce memes often reflect how they relate to categories such as race, gender and class^[13], and have been found to take part in the construction of such identities^[14]. The way information is conveyed and disseminated can easily lead people within the same community to form a shared understanding and emotion, thereby strengthening internal unity and cohesion, gradually evolving into an "us" versus "them" opposition. In online social interactions, users maintain an anonymous status. There is a significant link between antagonism and anonymity in meme cultures^[15]. The misuse of "meme culture" can even lead to irrational group emotions: the content of internet memes often contains exaggerated or biased elements, and these elements may be amplified during the dissemination process. Some users may begin to associate these memes with specific social, political, or cultural groups, resulting in negative perceptions of those groups. This phenomenon not only deepens the divide between groups but may also make discussions in cyberspace more extreme and confrontational. Le Bon described in "The Crowd" that when individuals enter a group, rationality disappears, and the "unconscious" takes over reason. For example, the irrational collective frenzy seen during online shopping events like Singles' Day (Double Eleven) and Double Twelve can lead to excessive consumption.

4.3 Distorting Personal Values

George Gerbner proposed the "cultivation theory," which suggests that television viewing has a subtle yet profound effect on people's beliefs, attitudes, and values. Similarly, meme culture is shaping us in a similar way. A toxic cultural environment can significantly influence the formation and development of personal values. For instance, the once-popular "Internet Depression Soundcloud" (NetEase CloudMusic) has had a serious impact on contemporary young people's values and life habits. Prolonged exposure to memes with negative connotations can adversely affect our mental well-being and influence our attitudes and behaviors towards various situations. The relentless pursuit of ever-changing meme formats reflects contemporary youths' casual approach to issues related to their online identities. Furthermore, the anonymity offered by the internet can lead to a lack of accountability among the younger generation. This

distortion of values may result in a disconnection from real-life responsibilities and deeper societal issues, emphasizing the need for critical engagement with the content they consume.

Emerging in the media space and reproduced through reposting, memes have become a sociocultural phenomenon and can manage information flows^[16]. In this context, we must recognize the importance of moderation in meme usage. When we become aware that a particular meme may harm our physical or mental well-being, we should decisively abandon it. Furthermore, if certain memes involve legal or national issues, we should clearly resist and report them. Promoting responsible engagement with meme culture is essential to ensure that it remains a positive aspect of our online interactions, fostering creativity and connection without compromising our values or well-being.

5 Conclusion

The meme culture created by online subcultural groups utilizes multimedia means such as text, images, and videos to forge a unique cultural style and symbols, reflecting the distinct aesthetics and life attitudes of Generation Z youth. Meme culture reconstructs the rules of encoding existing symbols and language, endowing vocabulary with new connotations. Its diverse forms cater to the varied psychological needs of young people and maintain emotional expression, encompassing the diverse emotional values pursued by youth. However, at the same time, the negative impacts derived from meme culture, such as distorting individual values, causing group polarization, and hindering the dissemination of mainstream values, require the collective efforts of individuals, relevant enterprises, and the government to address.

Acknowledgement

Funded by the general project of Humanities and Social Sciences Research of the Ministry of Education for the Year 2023 "Research on the Dissemination and Diffusion of AIGC, Public Cognition, and Its Social Risks" (Project No: 23YJA860003)

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