

The Evolutionary Stages, Thematic Spectrum, and Paradigm Shift in Chinese Meme Propagation Research (2008–2024): Visualised Review Based on CNKI

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Abstract. As mobile internet, short videos, and AIGC technologies continue to reshape the information ecosystem, memes have become a key unit for understanding the fragmentation of digital culture, emotional mobilisation, and traffic translation. However, domestic research in this area has long been fragmented and characterised by blurred boundaries between stages. To systematically trace the research trajectory, this paper uses 183 journal articles (2008–2024) indexed in CNKI as a sample, employing CiteSpace for time segmentation, keyword co-occurrence, and cluster visualization analysis, supplemented by text comparison and case studies. The results show: (1) Chinese meme studies can be divided into three major phases: the 'initial exploration phase' (2008–2013), the 'steady expansion phase' (2014–2019), and the 'rapid development phase' (2020–2024), with each transition point closely aligned with waves of technological innovation; (2) Five highly consistent thematic clusters—"Theoretical Foundations," "Social Media Diffusion," "Short Videos/Participatory Culture," "Social Identity and Political Communication," and "Value Empowerment and Future Trends"—constitute the domain knowledge spectrum; (3) Research paradigms have evolved along two main lines: "Communication Mechanisms—Technological Evolution" and "Social Emotions—Cultural Value Reconstruction," and in the latest phase, they have shown signs of cross-fertilisation; (4) Methodology has shifted from conceptual analysis to quantitative analysis, with a focus on visualisation and in-depth case studies, but cross-platform, multi-modal experiments remain insufficient. This paper not only provides a stage-by-stage overview and thematic map of domestic meme research but also offers theoretical references and data support for algorithm governance, emotional risk intervention, and cultural industry empowerment.

Keywords: meme propagation, CiteSpace, stage evolution, thematic analysis, digital culture

1. Introduction

Since the advent of the internet, the evolution of the digital media environment has significantly reshaped the ways in which information is generated, circulated, and consumed. One of the core driving forces behind this transformation is the 'meme'—a cultural unit that proliferates rapidly in cyberspace through the logic of replication, mutation, and selection. From early emojis and 'memes'

to today's explosive spread in short videos and multi-modal intelligent scenarios, memes have become a key window for understanding digital societal emotions, public opinion structures, and commercial traffic. However, while the international academic community has already achieved interdisciplinary resonance, systematic research on memes in the Chinese academic sphere began after 2008 and remains fragmented to this day: On one hand, case studies scattered across fields such as journalism, linguistics, and cultural industries have accumulated rapidly, with research topics evolving from conceptual introductions to algorithmic governance and the emotional economy. On the other hand, the lack of vertical integration and stage sorting makes it difficult for researchers to gain insight into the overall trajectory of the evolution of knowledge systems and paradigm updates.

This structural gap, characterised by 'local prosperity and overall silence,' is hindering theoretical deepening and policy implementation in the field of communication. Memes have become a core resource in the platform economy and the competition for attention, as well as an important tool for algorithmic precision targeting and public opinion manipulation. Without systematic, phased reviews and the construction of thematic frameworks, the academic community will find it difficult to propose explanatory frameworks and regulatory solutions for the future. The public opinion ecosystem, cultural consumption, and urban brand building in Digital China increasingly rely on meme logic, whose social impacts have transcended mere communication phenomenology, calling for comprehensive interpretations across levels and disciplines. Current Chinese-language reviews of meme research mostly remain at the level of conceptual clarification or brief quantitative analysis, lacking an integrated academic historical perspective supported by temporal segmentation, thematic evolution, and knowledge networks. They also fail to address the critical question of 'why this field of study has rapidly gained momentum at a specific techno-social inflection point.'

This paper uses journal literature from China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) from 2008 to 2024 as a sample. Through systematic thematic analysis and visualisation methods, it constructs a phase division, core themes, and evolutionary path for meme research to address the lack of longitudinal integration in domestic research and provide the academic community with a 'navigation map.' re-examining the functional shift and knowledge demands of memes in the digital society, and establishing a theoretical and data-driven reference framework for algorithmic governance, public opinion risk intervention, and cultural industry empowerment.

2. Research design

2.1. Research questions

Search results from China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) indicate that research on memetics in China began in 2008 and has continued to grow over the past decade. Based on this general phenomenon, this paper aims to answer three progressively layered questions. First, based on the annual changes in the number of publications from 2008 to 2024, how can we define the stage-specific turning points in academic attention and use this to outline the temporal phases of meme research? Second, among the accumulated literature in different stages, what theoretical or applied themes have Chinese scholars focused on, and what representative achievements and knowledge outputs have been attained? Third, as these themes rise and fall, intersect, and fuse over time, what knowledge trajectories and paradigm evolution patterns emerge within meme theory research? By addressing these questions sequentially, this paper aims to depict the overall landscape of domestic meme research across three dimensions: time, theme, and trajectory.

2.2. Data collection

The research sample was drawn from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) journal database. The search was centred on the keywords 'meme' or 'meme' and cross-referenced with subject categories such as journalism and communication studies, linguistics, cultural industries, and sociology, covering the time period from 2008 to 2024. After initially obtaining 220 records, we excluded conference abstracts, newspaper articles, and duplicate entries, and manually corrected the sources and years. Ultimately, 183 valid journal articles were retained. All literature had their titles, authors, years, journals, keywords, and abstracts extracted as metadata and converted into plain text format readable by CiteSpace, ensuring smooth visualization and thematic analysis in subsequent steps.

2.3. Data analysis

The analysis process was conducted using CiteSpace, following a three-step framework of 'time segmentation—theme identification—context tracing.' First, temporal breakpoints were identified through a comprehensive analysis of annual publication curves, keyword emergence intensity, and collaboration network density, thereby validating and refining the three-stage developmental framework. Second, a keyword co-occurrence network was constructed and visualised through clustering, with the LLR algorithm and average contour values used to assess the internal consistency and external distinctiveness of thematic clusters, thereby determining the core issues and representative achievements of each stage. Finally, the clustering results are projected onto a timeline, combining centrality and emerging word trends to track the inheritance, transformation, and recombination relationships of different themes during their emergence, decline, and fusion processes. This outlines the research trajectory of domestic memetics theory, which has progressed from 'spread mechanisms and technological evolution' to 'social emotions and cultural value reconstruction,' and reveals the underlying technological changes and social demand drivers.

3. Research findings

3.1. Analysis of research context

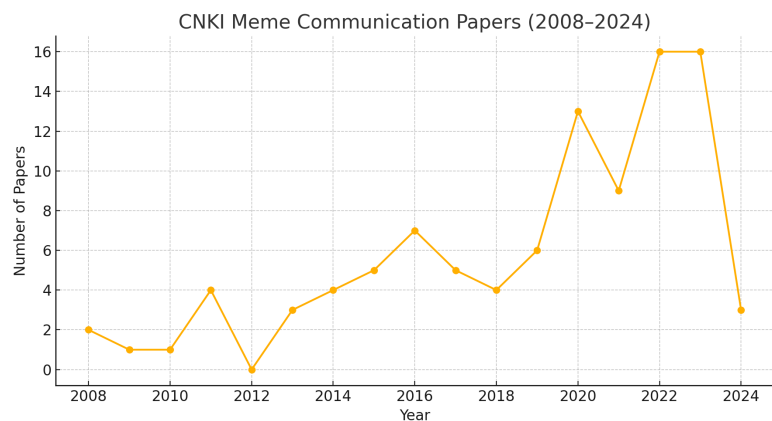


Figure 1. Number of publications over the years

Based on Figures 1, research on meme propagation can be divided into three distinct developmental stages. The first stage, from 2008 to 2013, was an exploratory phase characterised by

a low annual publication volume, typically not exceeding four papers. The focus of this period was on introducing the concept of memes, clarifying basic definitions, and establishing an initial theoretical framework. Early research primarily utilised theoretical exposition and conceptual analysis to introduce memes as a new perspective for explaining the patterns of cultural transmission within the academic community. For example, some studies focused on online language as an entry point, employing meme theory to analyse the transmission mechanisms and characteristics of online language, highlighting that the replication, mutation, and selection patterns of memes are key to the diffusion of online culture [1]. Research subjects primarily centred on language, symbols, and preliminary phenomena of online culture. For example, some scholars have analysed the dissemination of news headlines and their meme effect, emphasising that the conciseness, humour and memorability of headlines are precisely the reasons why they can become memes [2]. Additionally, some research focused on the generation and diffusion of online slang, exploring its lifecycle and dissemination patterns in social media platforms and popular culture [3]. Although these studies are limited in number, they have laid the theoretical foundation for the application of meme propagation in news, linguistics, and online cultural studies. This phase of research primarily focused on conceptual exploration and theoretical introduction, with a lack of empirical studies. However, through analyses of online language, news headlines, and slang, it has preliminarily established a framework for meme propagation research, providing a solid foundation for further development in subsequent phases.

The second phase, from 2014 to 2019, was a period of steady expansion in meme dissemination research, with the annual number of publications increasing to between 5 and 9. Research during this phase benefited from the rapid spread of mobile internet and the rise of short video platforms and social media, with the field gradually expanding to include the specific mechanisms and application scenarios of meme dissemination.

Short videos became a key area of research during this phase. Scholars began to focus on the cross-cultural dissemination characteristics of short video memes. Through content analysis of online video memes and their derivative videos, they identified patterns of variation and retention in meme elements such as characters, actions, scenes, soundtracks, and dialogue during dissemination, and explored issues related to the cross-cultural adaptability of memes [4]. Research further focused on the application of linguistic memes in advertising communication, proposing that linguistic memes are replicated and disseminated in advertising slogans through direct appropriation, homophonic homonymy, and homophonic homonymy, thereby enriching the specific applications of memes in the field of commercial communication [5]. Additionally, researchers have noted online language phenomena such as the 'XX style,' which emerge from online communities, film clips, and social events through netizens' replication, deconstruction, and re-creation, and rapidly spread, driving the publicisation and diversification of online discourse [5]. Furthermore, research during this phase exhibits distinct interdisciplinary characteristics. Some studies analyse the production and dissemination mechanisms of online popular discourse from a socio-cultural transformation perspective, examining the role and influence of meme dissemination in the construction of social discourse. Such research highlights that memes are not only the basic units of online culture but also serve as important symbolic tools reflecting socio-cultural transformations [6].

During this phase, research on meme propagation has seen steady growth in scale while effectively expanding from theory to practice and from single disciplines to interdisciplinary fields. This has gradually led to the formation of a relatively mature research framework and application model, laying a solid foundation for more in-depth research in the next phase.

The third phase, from 2020 to 2024, marks a period of rapid development in meme propagation research. During this period, the annual number of published papers has significantly increased, with substantial expansion in both the scope and depth of research, exhibiting a distinct integration of theory and practice.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about profound changes in the social communication environment, prompting further research into the mechanisms of meme diffusion on the internet and their interplay with social emotions. For example, some studies have pointed out that systemic risks in modern society, combined with the pressure of 'forced individualisation,' have led to the internet, as a dual medium of technology and commerce, reinforcing the symbolic expression of social anxiety and meme-style dissemination, thereby creating an emotional amplification effect and giving rise to new patterns of emotional interaction and risks [7]. The rapid development of AIGC technology and multimodal intelligence has provided rich technical scenarios and methodological support for meme dissemination. Researchers have proposed that virtual digital humans, as a new medium for memes, leverage their interactivity and human-like characteristics to bring about profound transformations in information processing and social production and living domains, propelling memes into a multimodal intelligent phase [8]. Research during this period has more broadly focused on the complex relationship between meme dissemination, platform capital, algorithmic governance, and the emotional economy. For example, studies on short video memes have emphasised the value-enhancing role of 'traffic password' memes in the cultural and tourism industry, revealing how platform capital can convert users into emotional labourers and achieve capital reproduction through meme dissemination [9]. Additionally, some studies have explored computational propaganda as a new form of public opinion manipulation, using algorithmic dissemination of political memes to create social conflict and division, highlighting the critical role of memes in public opinion risk governance [10].

Meme dissemination research in this phase exhibits distinct interdisciplinary and multi-method characteristics. The convergence of technological advancements and social realities has infused new vitality and depth into meme dissemination research, enabling it to engage more deeply in practical explorations of social emotion management, industrial empowerment, and public opinion governance.

3.2. Distribution of topics in meme research

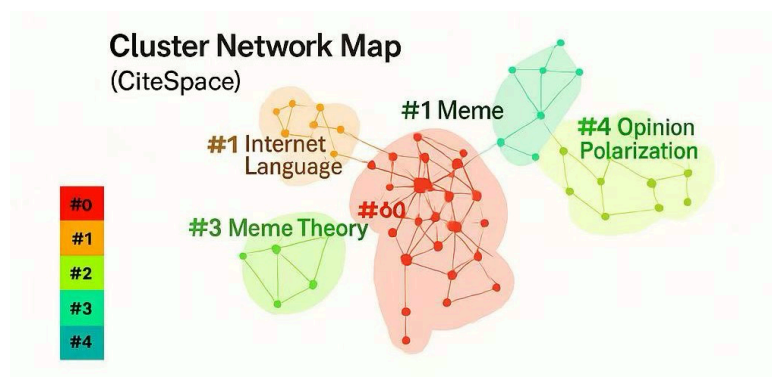


Figure 2. Keyword cluster diagram

Table 1. Keyword frequency table

Frequency ranking	Frequency	First appearance year	keyword	Keyword Centrality Ranking	centrality	First appearance year	Keywords
1	21	2008	meme	1	0.34	2008	Memes
2	6	2010	meme theory	2	0.1	2019	Short videos
3	6	2010	Internet slang	3	0.09	2010	Internet slang
4	6	2019	Short videos	4	0.07	2010	Meme theory
5	3	2013	Cultural memes	5	0.03	2018	Social media
6	3	2008	Powerful memes	6	0.02	2009	Meme dissemination
7	3	2016	Imitation	7	0.02	2020	Circles
8	3	2009	Meme propagation	8	0.02	2014	Language memes
9	3	2018	Social media	9	0.02	2021	External communication
10	2	2019	Fake news	10	0.02	2016	Participatory culture
11	2	2021	National identity	11	0.02	2013	New media
12	2	2019	Subculture	12	0.01	2008	Powerful memes
13	2	2020	Political communication	13	0.01	2016	Imitation
14	2	2008	News headlines	14	0.01	2020	Going viral
15	2	2016	Emojis	15	0	2013	Cultural memes
16	2	2018	Propagation mechanisms	16	0	2019	Fake news
17	2	2023	Value empowerment	17	0	2021	National identity
18	2	2020	Going viral	18	0	2019	Subculture
19	2	2020	Circles	19	0	2020	Political communication
20	2	2014	Language memes	20	0	2008	News headlines

Based on the co-occurrence results of keywords in CiteSpace, the thematic distribution of meme research has been identified. Based on keyword frequency, centrality rankings, and keyword clustering diagrams, meme research can be divided into five core themes: 1) The theoretical foundations of memes, including keywords: meme (2008), memetics (2010), cultural meme (2013), linguistic meme (2014); 2) Memes and social media dissemination, including keywords: online language (2010), social media (2018), dissemination mechanisms (2018); 3) The evolution of memes in short videos and participatory culture, including keywords: short videos (2019), emojis (2016), imitation (2016), participatory culture (2016); 4) The role of memes in social identity and political communication, including keywords: national identity (2021), external communication (2021), social circles (2020), breaking out of circles (2020), political communication (2020); 5) The value empowerment and future trends of memes, including keywords: value empowerment (2023).

3.2.1. The theoretical foundation of memes: from biological concepts to the core framework of communication studies

The theoretical foundation of memes has established their central role in communication studies. The concept of memes was first introduced by Richard Dawkins [11] in **The Selfish Gene**, describing the replication, variation, and dissemination of cultural information. Subsequently, cultural evolution theory [12] further expanded the application of memes, emphasising their role in cultural transmission. In recent years, meme theory has been gradually introduced into the field of new media communication, particularly playing a significant role in short videos and virtual digital humans [8]. Additionally, researchers have explored the dissemination patterns of information memes, discovering their integration trends with the metaverse and digital network worlds, propelling meme dissemination into a more intelligent and immersive phase [13].

3.2.2. Meme dissemination patterns: how social media shapes meme diffusion

Meme dissemination patterns are greatly influenced by the development of social media. After 2010, the rise of social platforms such as Weibo and Tieba made memes an important part of internet language, driving viral information dissemination. With the maturation of algorithmic recommendation technology, the dissemination pathways of memes have become increasingly decentralised, forming a user-driven dissemination mechanism [14]. The emotional resonance effect of social media has further enhanced the influence of memes, enabling them to transcend different cultural circles and be widely accepted and re-created [7]. Researchers have analysed the differences between strong memes (memes with long lifespans and significant influence) and weak memes (memes that experience short-term surges but quickly fade) to explore the dissemination lifecycle and survival mechanisms of memes [15].

3.2.3. The evolution of memes: how short videos and participatory culture are transforming meme transmission

The mechanisms governing the evolution of memes have undergone significant transformation with the rise of short videos and participatory culture. Since 2016, short video platforms (such as Douyin, Kuaishou, and Bilibili) have become key vehicles for meme dissemination, expanding the ways information is shared from text and images to dynamic video formats [16]. Imitation is the core mechanism driving the spread of memes on short video platforms, as users promote meme diffusion through imitating dance moves, online challenges, and parody edits. In addition, the rise of participatory culture has transformed users from information recipients to content creators, accelerating the evolution of memes [17]. This trend has not only improved the efficiency of meme dissemination but also strengthened their global influence.

3.2.4. The social function of memes: how they influence social identity and political communication

The social function of memes is becoming increasingly prominent, making them an important tool for shaping national identity, political communication, and community culture. In recent years, the role of memes in political communication has attracted academic attention, such as how political memes influence election discourse and the dissemination patterns of memes in protest activities [18]. Additionally, the 'circular dissemination' characteristic of memes has become increasingly evident, leading to the phenomenon of 'breaking out of the circle' in fan culture and subcultural

groups [19]. National identity research focuses on the role of memes in the construction of cultural soft power, such as how 'Hanfu memes' promote the global dissemination of Chinese traditional culture [20]. Meanwhile, the negative impacts of memes have also become a research topic, such as how fake news memes mislead the public, manipulate public opinion, and how to conduct information governance and regulation.

3.2.5. The application value and future trends of memes: from commercial marketing to AIGC

The application value and future trends of memes have become a research hotspot, encompassing emerging fields such as commercial marketing, AI-generated content (AIGC), NFTs, and immersive media (VR/AR). Brand marketing has widely adopted meme dissemination strategies, such as companies using viral internet memes for brand building and product promotion [9]. The development of artificial intelligence has enabled AIGC to play an increasingly important role in meme generation and dissemination, such as ChatGPT generating humorous content and automating the creation of viral memes [21]. Additionally, the rise of NFT memes has endowed memes with economic value, making them part of the blockchain ecosystem, while VR/AR meme dissemination may shape future immersive communication environments [22]. These trends indicate that memes are transitioning from mere information dissemination tools to significant factors influencing business models, technological innovation, and social interaction.

The development directions of meme research encompass multiple dimensions, including theoretical construction, dissemination mechanisms, evolutionary patterns, social functions, and future applications. With the continuous advancement of technologies such as social media, short videos, and artificial intelligence, the dissemination methods and influence scope of memes are also continuously expanding.

3.3. The evolutionary path of meme research

Domestic meme theory research revolves around two main lines that complement each other. The first main thread is 'Communication Mechanisms and Technological Evolution': Scholars use the evolutionary logic of 'replication, variation, and selection' as a framework, breaking down the process into four stages—information assimilation, memory, expression, and transmission—to explain the lifecycle of memes in digital media. They further analyse how technological elements such as algorithmic recommendations and platform rules amplify replication speeds, trigger frequent variations, and ultimately shape today's information fragmentation in communication patterns. The second main thread is 'Social Emotions and Cultural Value Reconstruction': Researchers focus on the interplay between memes, the emotion economy, platform capital, and identity politics, revealing how memes can both symbolise and exacerbate social anxiety while also enabling value empowerment and cultural identity reconstruction in scenarios such as short video traffic and urban tourism marketing. These two major themes provide theoretical tools to explain the dynamics of digital information diffusion, while the latter highlights the practical effects of memes in emotional mobilisation and cultural production, together forming the core research landscape of meme theory in the Chinese academic community.

In the Chinese context, the reason why 'dissemination mechanisms and technological evolution' has become the most enduring theme in meme research is not only because it answers the theoretical question of 'how memes rapidly replicate and penetrate populations,' but also because it provides an operational framework for explaining and governing information imbalances and emotional fluctuations in digital society. Early scholars expanded upon the 'replication-variation-selection'

evolutionary model by adding a four-stage chain of 'information assimilation-memory-expression-transmission' [23], further establishing 'contextual adaptation' as the leading variable in the chain. This improvement allows research to move beyond abstract analogies and instead precisely depict the entry thresholds and survival conditions for memes entering public discourse in a networked context, thereby laying the groundwork for a segmentable and quantifiable metric system for subsequent big data measurement. After incorporating platform algorithms into the dissemination model, scholars revealed the coupling mechanism between "technologystructure-replication logic" coupling mechanism [22]: PDEC circulation model shows that platforms continuously rearrange traffic weights across the four loops of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption. Algorithms not only increase replication rates but also induce high-frequency mutations through differentiated recommendations. This finding directly explains why memes spread exponentially in the short video era and provides decision-making basis for the industry to optimise content distribution and copyright derivative management. Regarding the 'public opinion surge-collapse' phenomenon under intelligent media [13], point out that the selective amplification of emotional memes by algorithmic bubbles is the core driving force behind the rapid aggregation of negative public opinion. Only by throttling key nodes in the replication chain (especially the 'expression-transmission' segment) and injecting heterogeneous information can emotional polarisation be effectively mitigated. This governance approach has driven the technical upgrade of public opinion monitoring systems from 'keywords/topics' to 'meme units/variation spectra.' The significance of this approach lies in its integration of cultural evolution theory with algorithmic mechanisms, enabling meme research to not only describe diffusion patterns but also inform platform operational strategies, risk intervention, and public policy design, thereby fostering theoretical convergence and tool sharing across academia, industry, and governance [24].

The second main line of research, 'Social Emotions and the Reconstruction of Cultural Values,' no longer content with merely describing the phenomenon of meme propagation, seeks to further reveal how memes are transformed into tradable emotional assets and cultural values within platform capital mechanisms, and to explore their implications for public governance. The pandemic context has highlighted the market logic of negative emotions. Research indicates that platforms use algorithmic filtering and tagging technologies to process diffuse social anxiety into infinitely replicable emotional memes, then profit through mechanisms such as likes, tips, and product promotions [25]. Memes have become the central unit in the 'emotion-capital' chain, suggesting that if governance authorities only focus on content removal, they will struggle to eliminate the commercial motives behind the proliferation of emotions. Memes are seen as the 'traffic password' that can translate online attention into offline economic and cultural benefits. Taking Harbin's cultural tourism short videos as an example, research found that creators capture high-recognition elements such as snow and ice scenes and Northeast accents, extracting value memes that can be quickly replicated, successfully driving tourist growth and city brand rejuvenation [26]. This finding shifts meme research from 'explaining patterns' to 'designing tools,' providing governments and businesses with actionable brand planning strategies.

Scholars caution about the double-edged nature of memes: within algorithmic echo chambers, emotional memes are prioritised and amplified, easily leading to polarised public opinion and identity conflicts [13]. Memes inject heterogeneous information and diverse narratives into the critical stage of information dissemination, actively correcting its diffusion direction to guide it along a more constructive value trajectory. By incorporating diverse thresholds into algorithmic distribution layers or embedding positive emotional and public value orientations into content moderation and recommendation strategies, the 'boom-and-bust' effect of negative emotional memes

can be mitigated to some extent [13]. This governance perspective not only deepens the academic understanding of meme propagation mechanisms but also provides an operational strategic framework for platform content governance and public opinion guidance.

The significance of this main thread lies in viewing memes as 'operational units' for emotional production and value translation: it reminds the academic community to pay attention to how platform capital shapes the emotional ecosystem, and provides intervention schemes for public governance based on the logic of meme replication; at the same time, it proves that memes have the potential to empower local economies and cultural soft power, opening up new design spaces for industrial and policy practices.

4. Summary and outlook

Looking back at Chinese meme research from 2008 to 2024, a clear evolutionary trajectory emerges, progressing through the stages of 'concept introduction—technological integration—social practice.' Initially, scholars focused on the replication and mutation of memeselection logic, providing a suitable dissemination framework for local cultural contexts; subsequently, with the gradual penetration of mobile internet, short videos, and AIGC technology, research shifted to the amplifying effects of algorithmic distribution and platform mechanisms on meme replication rates and mutation probabilities; recently, memes have entered the public eye as 'operational units' for emotional mobilisation and value empowerment, becoming important tools for explaining the digital emotional economy, urban brand building, and public opinion risk governance. Overall, Chinese meme research has undergone a paradigm shift from mere theoretical transplantation to technological integration, establishing a systematic knowledge foundation for understanding digital cultural fragmentation and governance.

Future research should further expand its scope and methodologies. First, conduct cross-cultural and cross-platform comparisons to test the universality of the 'context adaptation-algorithm amplification' model across different languages and media ecosystems; Second, combine deep learning and causal experiment methods to visually track the generation, diffusion, and transformation processes of multimodal memes, revealing the mechanisms by which algorithmic 'black boxes' amplify emotions; Third, explore economic valuation models for emotional memes to support platform revenue distribution, copyright governance, and digital asset management; Fourth, construct a 'meme risk grading—dynamic throttling' governance framework to achieve dual-track coordination between algorithms and the rule of law; Fifth, monitor the evolutionary lineage of the same meme through longitudinal data to reveal the dynamic balance between cultural encoding, commercial value, and policy risks. By deepening research along these directions, we can further unlock the value of meme studies across academic innovation, industrial practice, and public governance.

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