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Linguistic Practice in the Post-Alphabet Era: A Study on the Media Cognitive Logic of Internet Buzzwords

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Abstract. Existing studies on internet buzzwords mostly focus on their linguistic features and communication mechanisms, while paying insufficient attention to the transformation of media cognition behind them. Drawing on Robert Logan's "Alphabet Effect" theory, this paper takes typical internet buzzwords from 2015 to 2025 as research objects, and adopts methods including literature research and case analysis. It proposes that internet buzzwords are essentially "post-alphabet compensatory practices" in the digital media environment. From four dimensions — deconstructing linearity, reconstructing senses, rebuilding connections, and reshaping time — this paper systematically explains the compensation mechanism of internet buzzwords for the cognitive structure of alphabetic civilization. The study shows that internet buzzwords serve as an important perspective to observe the changes of human perception, social connections and temporal experience in the post-alphabet era, and provide a new angle for digital culture research.

Keywords: Internet Buzzwords, Alphabet Effect, Post-Alphabet Practice, Digital Cognition, Digital Tribe

1. Introduction

In recent years, the extensive use of internet buzzwords in the Spring Festival Gala of China Media Group and on mainstream media platforms indicates that such language has gone beyond the traditional cyberspace and become an influential social and cultural phenomenon. The new discourse forms they represent reflect people's emotions, attitudes and values in a certain period, and at the same time gradually penetrate into our mother tongue, participating in its meaning production and interpretation.

At present, scholars' research on internet buzzwords mostly focuses on three levels: linguistics, communication studies and socio-cultural studies, discussing the linguistic characteristics, communication modes and social significance of internet buzzwords. Although such studies have recognized the external manifestations, they rarely involve how digital media changes people's way of thinking and the underlying mechanism. Chu Yanfang [1] argues that most existing relevant studies are single-dimensional or short-term effect analyses, lacking holistic theoretical support integrating multidisciplinary perspectives.

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As an important theoretical tool to study the communication mechanism of internet buzzwords, meme theory has been proved to have high application value [2, 3]. It explores the root of the popularity of buzzwords through the study of information replication and dissemination. However, it is overly biologized in explaining cultural transmission, reducing cultural communication to a simple and mechanical process of information transmission, and ignoring the influence of media on human thinking and its role [4].

Based on the "Alphabet Effect" proposed by Logan, this paper examines the causes of internet buzzwords in the internet era and their social and cultural significance. On the whole, the main research questions are as follows: First, what expression characteristics do internet buzzwords present in the digital media environment that are different from traditional written language? Second, how do they compensate for the linear logic, visual centralism and atomized individualism shaped by alphabetic civilization? Third, what enlightenment does the long-term popularity phenomenon bring to the understanding of cognitive transformation in the digital age?

This paper adopts a combination of literature review, case study and netnography, supplemented by first-hand data such as Baidu Index and social media communication for comparative analysis. Taking popular internet terms from 2015 to 2025 as research content, it carries out specific analysis on four major social media platforms: Weibo, Douyin, Bilibili and Xiaohongshu. It summarizes various forms and changes of these popular internet terms in the discourse practice of internet users, and explains the changing trend of their whole generation process and the development mechanism of meaning field by statistical methods.

2. Theoretical construction of the Alphabet Effect and post-alphabet compensatory practice

The Media Ecology School studies how media technology affects human cognitive structure. McLuhan [5] put forward "the medium is the message", arguing that media itself and its characteristics play a decisive role in social culture, and different media reshape cognitive patterns by changing people's senses and thus their way of thinking. On this basis, Robert K. Logan [6] proposed the "Alphabet Effect": the alphabet, as a writing symbol system, is not only a way to preserve information, but also shapes a linear way of thinking, a visual-dominated feature and individual-centered values, which are fixed and developed through media technologies such as printing, and then become an important factor shaping modern social civilization.

The "Alphabet Effect" in this paper has a broader meaning. It goes beyond the traditional research on alphabetic writing and turns to the issue of how modern printing civilization changes human thinking. With the popularization of vernacular Chinese, Chinese character writing has also turned to horizontal writing and can be linearly encoded through pinyin input methods. This shows that the application scope of the "Alphabet Effect" is not limited to a certain language, but can also be extended to non-alphabetic writing such as Chinese characters, with broad significance and good cross-cultural explanatory power.

In subsequent studies, Logan [7] further pointed out that the development of media technology is not a one-way process; the multiple reversals of the Alphabet Effect brought by digital media are highly isomorphic with the emergence mechanism of complex systems. The internet, mobile terminals and multimedia communication have broken the dependence of traditional writing on linear text. Images, sounds, videos and real-time interaction jointly participate in meaning production, making communication present holistic, contextual and networked characteristics again. This process does not end alphabetic civilization, but rebalances the long-dominant linear cognitive structure on its basis, thus entering the "post-alphabet era". The so-called "post-alphabet era" does

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not mean the disappearance of writing, but the coexistence of multiple cognitive modes, with emotion, relationship and holistic perception re-entering the meaning production process.

3. Deconstructing linearity: the non-linear expression practice of internet buzzwords

As a product of human social development, alphabet-based writing has pursued accuracy, standardization and strict logic in meaning expression since its emergence. In traditional print media, language appears as a fixed and stable symbol system, which realizes information transmission mainly through linear text. However, with the development of information technology and the emergence of new media — especially the wide application of social media, video websites and instant messaging software — the way of language communication has shifted from focusing on text itself to emphasizing changes caused by the environment. This makes the concise, contextual and non-linear characteristics of buzzwords more prominent.

3.1. Semantic compression: from complete expression to symbolic abbreviation

As an important factor that enables internet buzzwords to break through traditional linear expression, semantic compression strives to express the most important content with the least language to achieve rapid communication. In the internet era, to meet the demand for millisecond-level feedback, such language forms often abandon complex syntactic structures and use intuitive symbols to convey meaning, which means they no longer follow traditional writing methods. "XSWL" is the first-letter abbreviation of the Chinese pinyin of *xiao si wo le* (I'm dying of laughter). Users do not need to go through letter transcription, word splicing and semantic derivation; its meaning recognition mainly depends on shared context rather than complete text decoding.

3.2. Homophonic derivation: from fixed semantics to dynamic drift

Homophonic meaning shift is a non-linear manifestation of meaning change. Such buzzwords are no longer limited to their original specific meanings, but are constantly generated, changed and endowed with new content in people's communication, with strong fluidity. While "Shuan Q" (a homophonic variant of "thank you") is widely used online, it has gradually gone beyond its original context and been integrated into various emotions such as banter, joking and even self-mockery.

3.3. Open semantics and multimodal synergy: further dissolution of linear logic

Open semantics presents non-linear characteristics in a new way. Under the traditional alphabet system, the classical logic of "one word, one definition" is impacted. This shows that internet buzzwords have semantic flexibility and richness. "Emo" is no longer a single emotion, but a general label covering sadness, anxiety, weariness and other feelings.

In this sense, the multimodal symbol system represented by internet memes has impacted traditional linear logic. According to Zhu Yongsheng's [8] multimodal discourse identification criteria, internet memes integrate three meaning systems: image, text and emotion. Their meaning generation does not rely on linear decoding of a single symbol, but is completed through the synergy of different systems.

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4. Reconstructing senses: the emotional expression of internet buzzwords

By breaking the continuous language flow into discrete visual symbols, alphabetic writing has shaped a vision-centered cognitive structure, leaving emotions, senses and bodily experience on the margins of public expression for a long time [9]. With the development of information technology, especially the rise of short video platforms and social media, the traditional one-way linear text communication mode has turned into a communication space integrating multiple media. Images, sounds, videos, real-time interaction and other elements all participate in the meaning production process, and people's attention has shifted from static words to immersive feelings.

McLuhan once called the electronic media age the return of "acoustic space". Levinson [10] also pointed out that the development of digital media is constantly compensating for the sensory experience suppressed by printing civilization. The emotional trend of internet buzzwords is a concentrated embodiment of this transformation. Instead of pursuing conceptual accuracy, they quickly complete meaning transmission through emotional infection.

4.1. Embodied metaphor: linguistic activation of bodily experience

Embodied metaphor takes specific bodily feelings as the carrier, and concretizes and substantializes elusive emotions, so as to realize the unity of accuracy and universality of emotional transmission. The term *po fang* (breaking one's defense) originally came from the defense function in online games. Under the influence of internet media, it has developed into an expression to describe people's psychological defense being broken or shaken. According to Lakoff and Johnson's [11] Conceptual Metaphor Theory, *po fang* precisely maps the target domain of abstract emotion — "one's psychological defense being touched" — through the source domain of bodily experience of "defense line being breached".

Baidu Index shows that from 2021 to 2025, the average annual search volume of *po fang* was about 783 times, of which semantic extension accounted for 51.39%. It has expanded from a game term to a national emotional expression, achieving significant semantic transfer.

4.2. Emotional sound field: the digital return of acoustic space

In oral-dominated cultural environments, people convey emotions through phonological features, intonation changes and non-verbal actions. In the digital media environment, these sensory elements suppressed by writing re-enter the communication process in the form of symbols, enabling online communication to regain the emotional warmth and sensory participation similar to face-to-face communication.

A large number of internet buzzwords do not undertake clear semantic functions, but undertake emotional transmission functions. For example, expressions such as *bengbuzhu le* (can't hold it back anymore) and its homophonic pun *bengbuzhu le* (literally "can't live in Bengbu") do not describe objective facts, but present immediate emotional states. In the digital communication environment, they are used with extremely high frequency, creating a shared emotional atmosphere in the process of communication, and users can quickly complete emotional recognition and resonance.

4.3. Multimodal resonance: the cross-media amplification mechanism of emotions

In the digital age, emotional communication is no longer a simple one-dimensional and one-way information flow process, but an emotional expression process based on multimodal interaction.

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Take "emo" as an example: its spread is often accompanied by music, pictures and short videos, and its emotional meaning comes more from multimodal synergy than from the language itself. In addition, emotion is one of the external driving forces for the replication and spread of internet buzzwords. Internet buzzwords often have both explicit emotions of superficial entertainment carnival and implicit emotions of deep-seated social mentality expression. The progressive spread of dual emotions enables them to accurately capture and carry the collective emotions of the times, and they are often the "barometer" of social mentality.

5. Rebuilding connections: the digital tribe practice of internet buzzwords

Alphabetic civilization has shaped linear thinking and vision-centered thinking, which led to the emergence and development of self-centered values and laid the theoretical foundation for atomized individuals in modern society. Internet media have gradually dissolved the atomized individuals in modern society, reconstructed social connections between people relying on social platforms, and generated new online communities [12]. McLuhan called this phenomenon "retribalization", and internet buzzwords are an important medium in this connection process.

5.1. Shared predicament: identity construction through emotional aggregation

As Papacharissi [13] pointed out, the public in the digital age is no longer a political public based on rational debate, but an "affective public" formed through emotional connection. When users use buzzwords, they are not just describing a certain behavioral state, but expressing their recognition of a specific lifestyle and value orientation. In the process of communication, *tang ping* (lying flat) has gradually separated from its original meaning of body posture, and become a cultural response of young people to high-pressure competition and excessive labor. It has been spread for more than 5 years and completed three semantic expansions — deriving multiple interpretations such as "active lying flat", "strategic lying flat" and "lying-flat style work", forming a complete semantic field corresponding to *neijuan* (involution).

5.2. Algorithm empowerment: technologically constructed cross-circle power

In the digital media era, platforms are no longer simple information channels, but deeply intervene in the spread of buzzwords through visibility governance and algorithm logic, becoming the main body of digital tribe construction. The essence of visibility control is the distribution of social attention [14]. Through user interest portraits, algorithms continuously push homogeneous content, making groups with the same concerns gather together, redividing community boundaries in virtual space, and weaving atomized individuals into digital tribes with shared language and emotional connections. Interactive data such as hot search lists, hashtags, likes, comments and reposts, as well as recommendation systems, form an algorithm-driven visibility mechanism. Discourse originally generated in specific circles can break through existing community boundaries and enter a broader public discussion space. In this process, originally scattered individuals gradually form a stable identity relationship due to shared discourse symbols and social experience.

6. Reshaping time: the digital memory practice of internet buzzwords

Alphabetic civilization has shaped a one-way, continuous and irreversible linear view of time. Traditional popular culture is usually understood as a process developing in a fixed order, and its communication cycle often has obvious stage characteristics. The storage capacity, retrieval ability

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and recommendation mechanism of digital media enable information not to disappear with the passage of time, but to be retrieved, reactivated and re-spread at any time, shaping a cyclical, traceable and renewable digital time structure.

6.1. From linear time to cyclical time: the repeated activation mechanism of meaning

The storage and recommendation mechanism of digital platforms endows buzzwords with the ability of repeated activation and sustained dissemination. Research by Wang Yanlong et al. [15] shows that internet buzzwords with fill-in-the-blank structures can achieve batch derivation and cross-scenario communication through unchanging core structures and variable semantic vacancies. This is also the key mechanism for buzzwords to break through short-term communication bottlenecks and achieve cyclic flashbacks.

According to the communication data of Baidu Index, the weekly search volume of *da gong ren* (working people) was only 2805 in December 2021, when it was still a scattered expression of workplace groups. With the continuous advancement of user co-creation, content such as "working people quotations" created by netizens, derived "XX people" series of expression frameworks, and self-deprecating memes have been continuously enriched, and quickly expanded into a diverse structure including "identity recognition", "emotional catharsis" and "scene adaptation". At the same time, from the demand map, there are 56 effective related words of *neijuan* (involution), covering education, workplace, marriage and love, childbirth and other social scenarios. Every time a new social issue emerges, it will activate discussions related to "involution", making its communication life cycle far exceed that of traditional buzzwords.

6.2. Institutional anchoring: the official path to cultural perpetuation

The highest form of long-term popularity of internet buzzwords is institutional anchoring, that is, deeply integrating from marginal subcultural symbols into the mainstream cultural system. A study by Fang Yuru [16] found that official media are more inclined to adopt internet buzzwords with high fidelity, concise expression and positive value orientation, and endow them with new communication functions through discourse reshaping. With the advancement of this process, popular expressions originally belonging to cyberspace have gradually gained institutional recognition and become stable discourse resources in the public communication system.

"Dian zan" (like) and "gei li" (awesome) are typical representatives of mainstreaming and institutional anchoring. As of June 1, 2026, there are 811 reports with "dian zan" in the title and 212 reports with "gei li" in the title in *People's Daily*. The measured data of Baidu Index from 2021 to 2025 shows that the average annual search volume of "dian zan" reaches 939 times, with semantic derivation accounting for 52.70%; the average annual search volume of "gei li" reaches 289 times, with semantic derivation accounting for 50.72%. Both have been included in authoritative dictionaries successively: "gei li" was included in the 7th edition of *Contemporary Chinese Dictionary*, and "dian zan" was included in *Dictionary of New Chinese Words*, completing the leap from internet terms to standard Chinese.

7. Conclusion

Based on Logan's "Alphabet Effect" theory, this paper examines internet buzzwords against the background of media environment changes and cognitive transformation, and proposes that internet buzzwords are essentially a kind of "post-alphabet compensatory practice" in the digital media

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environment. The study finds that internet buzzwords are not simply linguistic entertainment phenomena, but an important embodiment of digital media reconstructing linguistic practice and cognitive modes. Through non-linear expression, emotional communication, identity construction and cyclical dissemination, they compensate for the linear cognitive mode long shaped by printing civilization, making meaning production more dependent on contextual association, sensory participation and social interaction.

Furthermore, internet buzzwords not only change the way of language expression, but also reshape emotional connections, identity recognition and collective memory in digital society to a certain extent. As a cultural symbol with continuous evolutionary ability, it not only reflects the changes of public cognitive modes in the digital media era, but also reflects the interactive relationship between platform technology, user practice and social culture.

Theoretically, this paper combines internet buzzword research with Media Ecology, explains the generation logic and cultural significance of internet buzzwords under the framework of the "Alphabet Effect", provides a new media cognitive perspective for understanding linguistic practice in the digital age, and also expands the application space of this theory in digital communication research.

Limited by research conditions, this paper still has deficiencies in the quantitative analysis of the communication law of internet buzzwords, which needs to be further verified with large-scale corpora and cross-platform data in the future. Nevertheless, examining internet buzzwords in the historical context of media cognitive transformation helps to break through the existing explanatory framework centered on communication phenomena, and also provides a new analytical path for understanding linguistic practice, social connection and cultural evolution in the digital age.

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