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Psychological Representation and Motivations Behind Adolescents' Internet Meme Usage on Social Media Platforms

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Abstract. With the development of social media, internet memes have gradually become a common part of teenagers' daily online communication. This paper focuses on the use of internet memes among teenagers and explores their psychological characteristics and motivations from the perspectives of group belonging, self-presentation, social recognition, emotion regulation, and secondary creation. The study finds that internet memes are not only used for entertainment, but also play an important role in teenagers' social interactions. By sharing, creating, and responding to memes, teenagers can become more involved in peer groups, express their personalities and emotions, and receive social feedback through likes, comments, and other forms of interaction. At the same time, frequent use of internet memes may also cause some problems, such as the spread of inappropriate content and simplified forms of language expression. Therefore, while recognizing the social and expressive value of internet memes, it is also important to improve teenagers' media literacy and encourage them to participate in online culture in a more rational and responsible way.

Keywords: Internet Memes, Social Media, Adolescents, Psychological Motivations

1. Introduction

Nowadays when smartphones and the internet are widely available, making use of internet memes has become a really common part of daily communication among teenagers. From "yyds" (which means "eternal god" in Chinese internet slang) to all kinds of meme GIFs and viral online jokes, young people not only love talking about and picking up on popular memes, but also enjoy creating brand new memes of their own. So why do teenagers love using internet memes so much? What kind of psychological motivation do these memes reflect behind them? These are the core questions that this study aims to answer.

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2. Case study

2.1. Group belonging and social identity in meme culture

On social media platforms, sharing memes is first and foremost an interactive form of communication. Internet memes usually have distinct timeliness and are often popular within specific niche groups. Once a meme goes viral among a particular group, a shared way of expression will gradually take shape. Teenagers participate in meme culture by posting, responding to and sharing memes, and in the process, they constantly confirm whether they share similar internet cultural experiences with their peers. For example, when someone uses a recently popular internet meme in a class group chat or a comment section, if other people can quickly understand and respond to it, it will cut down on the need for extra explanations and make the conversation flow much more naturally. Conversely, individuals who are unfamiliar with the relevant memes may find it difficult to participate in ongoing discussions. Therefore, using internet memes is not just about getting a laugh which can also play a role in maintaining connections within a group. "Internet memes have become an important part of social media culture, and their spread is closely related to user interactions" [1]. Studies have also shown that "young people's understanding of memes is influenced by their cultural backgrounds and psychological factors" [2]. From a psychological perspective, adolescents who use shared online language gain a sense of "I understand the same things as everyone else." This article explains this phenomenon through the lens of belongingness needs, suggesting that consistently following and using popular internet slang can help individuals enter peer communication environments and foster a sense of group participation.

2.2. Self-presentation and social recognition in internet meme usage

Social media is not only a communication platform but also a space for individuals to present themselves. Adolescents can shape their online identities through text, images, emojis, and internet memes. Compared to directly introducing oneself, using an appropriate meme often feels more natural and better aligns with the characteristics of online interaction. "One of the key reasons young people use social media is for expressing themselves, and memes can also help them with self-presentation and emotional management" [3]. From this perspective, playing with internet memes can be an indirect way of expressing oneself. For instance, when facing exam pressure, some people use exaggerated meme stickers, some quote lines from movies and TV shows, and others rewrite internet memes on their own. These different choices can all reflect an individual's interests, personality and expression habits. At the same time, likes, comments and engaging with meme references on social media can generate instant feedback. A study has found that "Users' perceptions of a meme's personal relevance to themselves, their level of understanding of the meme, and their rating of its humor all affect their willingness to share it" [4]. This shows that whether a user is willing to keep spreading a meme is connected to whether they personally find it "interesting", can understand it, and feel it "relates to themselves".

The study finds that among young users in the meme marketing environment, "The attitudinal similarity and social attraction between influencers and audiences are related to individuals' self-expansion" [5]. Although this research mainly focuses on consumer behavior rather than the practice of young people using memes itself, it indicates that the social context where memes are located may affect how individuals understand the relationship between themselves and others. Therefore, when young people use memes, they are likely not only expressing themselves, but also looking for groups that share similarities with themselves.

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2.3. Derivative creation and self-fulfillment

Memes are far more than just repetitions of existing ready-made content. As participants get more involved, teenagers may even start to create derivative works like editing images, modifying captions, revised and adapting the content for new contexts, combining existing materials with their own life experiences. For example, a screenshot from a film or drama can be paired with new text to express emotions related to exams, school assignments or campus life. In this process, the original material is given brand new meaning.

"Users' understanding of memes is influenced by factors such as personal relevance, metaphorical appropriateness, comprehensibility, and sense of humor" [4]. This indicates that understanding and adapting a meme is not merely replication, but requires connecting images, text, and specific contexts.

"Memes can express ideas in a concise and interesting way, and can be used to boost student engagement and learning [6]." "Science-themed meme activities are highly interesting and fun, and public sharing may also positively influence how students feel about learning [7]." Although most of these studies are conducted in educational settings, and cannot be directly equated with adolescents' daily meme engagement in everyday life, they can still provide useful references for the viewpoint that "meme creation features participation and creativity". Therefore, this paper holds that the shift from following existing memes to creating original memes among teenagers can be regarded as a sign of their deeper engagement in online culture, and it may also bring them a strong sense of accomplishment after completing their creative work.

2.4. Emotional expression and psychological regulation in meme usage

Another distinct feature of internet memes is that they can convey emotions very quickly. When teenagers are dealing with academic stress, interpersonal conflicts or daily troubles, they sometimes do not state their feelings directly. Instead, they tend to express themselves through emojis, exaggerated images or playful internet memes. This approach not only helps them get their true feelings across, but also makes the whole conversation feel much less heavy and awkward.

"Linking memes to young people's self-expression and emotion management" [3]. "Memes can participate in emotional contagion, and the repetition, sharing and popularity of memes can convey specific emotions and feelings" [8]. Therefore, when one person's expression of stress spreads through group chats or comment sections, it may turn into a shared emotion among a whole group of people. For example, when a student uses a funny picture to express "I'm totally going to crumble from these exams", and others respond with similar memes, it creates an atmosphere where everyone faces the stress together.

While this approach cannot truly solve practical problems, it lowers the barrier for people to express their emotions, and helps individuals realize that they are not the only one who has such feelings. Therefore, apart from being a source of entertainment, making memes can also facilitate emotional communication and play a positive role in psychological regulation.

3. Discussion

3.1. Multiple psychological motivations

Based on the comprehensive analysis above, teenagers' participation in meme culture is not caused by a single factor. Needs including a sense of belonging, self-expression, social recognition, emotion

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regulation and creativity often coexist. "Starting from meme interaction behaviors, integrating factors such as perceived pleasure, self-concept, social satisfaction, escapism and user engagement into the analysis indicates that the relationship between users and memes is driven by a variety of psychological motivations" [9]. For teenagers, one meme can meet multiple different needs at the same time, such as "hanging out with friends", "expressing one's own mood" and "getting interactive feedback".

Therefore, participating in online memes cannot be simply understood as an aimless chasing trend activity. It is not only a form of online entertainment, but also a common way for people to build social connections with one another. Different people engage with meme culture to varying degrees, and the personal needs behind their participation may also differ from person to person.

3.2. Instant feedback mechanism

The interactive features of social media can further encourage people to keep creating and spreading internet memes. Right after a meme is posted, likes, comments, shares and follow-up meme creations can all pop up within a very short time. When users see their shared content receives such quick responses, they will be more willing to keep joining similar interactions. "Existing discussions on social gratification, perceived pleasure and user engagement could help explain this continuous participation phenomenon" [9]; and studies on content relevance, "humor and people's sharing tendency also prove that the psychological appeal of the meme content itself will influence how widely it gets spread" [4].

3.3. Emotional function

From an emotional perspective, sharing memes offers a lightweight way of expressing feelings. Compared with saying "I feel so anxious" directly, an exaggerated meme image can often resonate more easily among peers, and is much more likely to get a warm response.

Studies on emotional contagion have shown that "memes can serve as an effective medium for emotional transmission" [8]. Therefore, sharing and using memes can bring personal emotions into group communication, allowing emotional expression and social interaction to take place at the same time.

3.4. Negative impacts

Making and sharing internet memes does come with some notable downsides. First, Internet trends and memes evolve rapidly, and excessive engagement with trending topics may consume time that could otherwise be devoted to academic activities or face-to-face social interactions. Second, quite a few internet expressions tend to be heavily formulaic. Prolonged reliance on this mode of expression may adversely affect language proficiency in formal communication contexts. Third, some offensive, discriminatory and even hateful content can spread under the guise of "being a meme". Research on hateful memes has shown that such content can readily encourage user engagement, highlighting the potential harm that may be overlooked when harmful messages are presented in humorous forms [10].

In addition, internet memes have distinct cultural and contextual differences. Research shows that "Young people from different cultural backgrounds may have different understandings of the same type of meme" [2]. Therefore, when teenagers use internet memes, it would be good to also take the audience, communication scenario and the content of the meme itself into consideration.

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4. Media literacy education

When it comes to internet meme culture, simply banning related content is not the most effective solution. Internet memes have already become an integral part of young people's online life, so cultivating teenagers' ability to distinguish and reflect on such content is a far more important approach. Educators can help students learn to recognize different types of online content, guide them to judge whether a meme contains insults, discrimination or misleading information, and encourage them to create healthy derivative works based on proper memes.

Studies have shown that "Memes can be used to express knowledge and viewpoints, and effectively boost students' engagement" [6]. Therefore, schools can transform online expressions familiar to students into learning resources. For example, students can be encouraged to summarize key knowledge points, express observations about campus life, or explain social phenomena through memes. This approach not only preserves the creativity of internet culture, but also helps cultivate students' media literacy.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, for teenagers, creating and using internet memes is far more than just simple online entertainment. Behind this behavior, there are a variety of psychological needs, including group belonging, self-expression, social recognition, emotional regulation, creative exploration and so on. Teenagers integrate into peer conversations by using and sharing popular internet memes that everyone knows, express their personal emotions and thoughts through memes, and also gain warm responses from others in interactions like liking, commenting and responding to others' memes. At the same time, derivative creation also offers them a wonderful platform and space to showcase their unique personalities and give full play to their creativity. Therefore, teenagers' meme-based content creation should not be simply characterized as trend-following or Internet addiction. Instead, greater attention should be paid to the psychological needs underlying this behavior, while adolescents should be guided to develop a critical understanding of online content and the potential effects of its dissemination.

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