

How Do Internet Slang and Memes Affect Chinese Teenagers?

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Abstract: An increasing number of young people in this era of new media have access to the web, which is both simpler and more convenient to use. Internet users have contributed to the emergence of a new language and cultural phenomenon known as “Internet slang” and “memes”. Previous studies have addressed and evaluated the many spread phenomena of Internet slang and memes in the last decade, but there has been little focus given to teenagers, despite the fact that this demographic makes up an increasingly large proportion of Internet users. The influence that Internet slang and memes have on Chinese teenagers is the focus of this research. The research question is to analyze how the characteristics of online slang and memes affect Chinese teenagers. A review of the relevant literature and analysis of case studies form the basis of the research method. The research concludes that Internet slang and memes, with their simplicity, diversity, and sustainability, have a greater negative impact on teenagers’ language expression, perception of thinking ways, and mental health. The most feasible strategy to address the issue is the implementation of proactive steps by regulatory bodies to regulate and improve the digital environment. Parents and educators should take a balanced and patient approach to guiding teenagers to develop competence in utilizing language in a standardized manner.

Keywords: Internet slang, meme, communication, linguistics, teenagers

1. Introduction

In the new media era, with the advancement of technology and the development of the Internet, more and more young people have easier access to the Internet. According to the recent report, the number of underage Internet users in China has now reached 191 million, and the Internet penetration rate has now reached 96.8% [1]. With the development of online communication, Internet users have created Internet slang and memes. Internet slang is composed of acronyms, keyboard symbols, numbers, and abbreviations. A meme is a culture that is constantly imitated and spread; it can be a phrase, an image or a GIF. Previous studies have covered and analyzed the various spreading phenomena of Internet slang and memes in the last decade in China. For example, a recent analysis of quasi-affixed cyberlanguage by Liu has shown that the utilization of Internet slang derived from traditional Chinese language contributes to the sustainable development of the language. Furthermore, its ability to evoke emotional expression, historical references, and contemporary trends is likely to appeal to a larger audience of foreign Internet users. Consequently, it could promote the expansion

and reinforcement of cross-cultural communication and transmission through various media platforms [2]. Szablewicz's research on the meme diaosi demonstrated the self-deprecation and disabusal of young Chinese netizens [3]. This research builds on previous research on Internet slang and memes and further analyzes them for Chinese teenagers, an increasingly large group of Internet users. China was chosen for research and analysis because pinyin and Chinese characters provide the foundation of rich Internet slang and memes. The vast Chinese population has embraced the Internet. Internet slang and memes have a distinctive communication history and are a phenomenon in the Chinese Internet environment. The research method is the literature review and case study. The results of this research are conducive to finding appropriate directions and ways to guide and educate teenagers from the point of view of the impact of internet slang and memes on their way of thinking, perception and mental health, which are important factors in their developmental stages.

2. The Generation and Characteristics of Internet Slang

2.1. Definition and Causes of Internet Slang

The definition of Internet slang is informal language or words that originate on or are popular on the Internet. Internet slang encompasses a variety of linguistic elements, including acronyms, keyboard symbols, numerical representations, and abbreviated forms. In the beginning, Internet users created Internet slang for the purpose of brevity and conciseness to improve the efficiency of text messaging or to solve the character limitation [4]. Later, with the popularization of the Internet, the combination of different languages and the use of similar pronunciations and homophones gave rise to many Internet slangs. Various text, video, and images about hot social events, movies, music, games, TV dramas, and shows are now widely spread or discussed on Internet forums, which are also refined into Internet slang. Internet slang is linked to digital communication and symbolic interactionism due to its digitization. In the process of thinking with language, humans create a variety of symbolic symbols and use them to communicate their experiences in an interactive process that presents the self to the environment, others, and themselves [5]. The concept of symbolic interaction emphasizes the relevance of meaning in human conduct; human civilization is the process of employing symbols to produce culture. Since the Internet is virtual, symbols like Internet slang have become the essence and expression of cybersociety.

2.2. Analysis of the Characteristics of Internet Slang

Internet slang is characterized by simplicity, diversity, and sustainability. The three main features contribute to the transmission and popularity.

2.2.1. Simplicity

In today's fast-paced Internet era, with the rise of short videos, fragmented information dissemination has become the norm, and information with a small carrier capacity is more likely to spread quickly in the Internet environment. A large portion of Chinese Internet users, mainly young people, are gradually abandoning the practice of typing out specific Chinese words in online communication and are instead using shorter letters, numbers, or abbreviated words to express their meaning. For example, "88" is the harmonic of "bye-bye" in Chinese, which can mean "goodbye" on the Internet. "5" in Chinese is the harmonic of "wū" and the continuous typing of "5" can indicate the sound of crying and the emotion of weeping. "1" can be used to indicate agreement with an attachment or to indicate that you are online. "6" can be used as a compliment, indicating amazing or successful. "YYDS" is the pinyin acronym for the Chinese phrase "yǒng yuǎn de shén", which means "forever god" and can be used to praise someone or something as a god. "XSWL" is the pinyin acronym for the Chinese

phrase “xiào sǐ wǒ le”, which means to laugh to death. It is similar to the English Internet slang “LOL” (laughing out loud), which expresses the emotional state of laughing happily.

2.2.2. Diversity

Internet slang is diverse in both types and origins. In addition to numbers and acronyms, there are many words and phrases derived from social events, song lyrics, dialects, interviews, movies and TV shows, live streaming and short videos that have become Internet slang. For example, “shuāng jiǎn” (Double Reduction) refers to a recent education policy in China to reduce the burden of homework on students in compulsory education and the burden of off-campus training. “nì xíng zhě” (Heroes in Harm’s Way) is a word used to describe frontline healthcare and other positions in the fight against the COVID-19 epidemic. “rán shāo wǒ de kǎ lù lǐ” (Burning my calories) is from the name and lyrics of a Chinese pop song, which became a slogan calling for weight loss on the Internet because it was brainwashing. One of the reasons for the popularity of Internet slang is that it is constructed in a variety of ways and from a variety of origins, giving young Internet users a free and rich choice and opportunity for creativity. Internet slang has diversified under the interference of various local or foreign regional cultures, entertainment products, and social trends, which is consistent with young people’s trend-oriented ideas.

2.2.3. Sustainability

Since many Internet slangs originate from real life, history, and hot social events, in a social context, Internet slangs have a long timeliness and can be popular for many years. For example, In 17th-century France, “fán ěr sài” (Versailles) refers to a suburb of Paris where the Palace of Versailles was constructed. Louis XIV asked all prominent nobles to live in the country to prevent local aristocratic forces from rebelling. It represents luxury. In modern Chinese Internet Slang, “fán ěr sài” refers to a low-profile action that conveys superiority, based on its historical basis and updated meaning [2]. Moreover, “diǎo sī” (real-life losers and poor people) and “tǔ háo” (the wealthy) are Chinese Internet slang that became popular in 2012 and 2013 and have the attribute of contrasting rich and poor. As the gap between the rich and the poor has always existed in society, these two internet slangs have been popular until today. Due to the attributes they have, they can be combined with other words to categorize things. “tǔ háo-X” is something for the rich, mainly expensive and precious. For example, “tǔ háo-gold” refers to the gold color reserved for the wealthy. It originated from the gold-colored version of the iPhone 5s being released, which was considered only affordable for the rich due to its high price. “diǎo sī-X” is something that meets the needs of the poor, focusing on low prices, decent quality, large quantities, with a certain cost-effectiveness, to meet the needs of a long time.

2.3. Discussion

The spread of Internet slang is influenced by memetics. Dawkins’ memetics theory explains cultural development by describing concepts that are copied and passed down from generation to generation. Culture is based on memes, which spread through imitation [6]. Language may transmit memes or become a meme. Internet language has the three meme traits of fidelity of reproduction, prolificity, and longevity due to its simplicity, diversity, and sustainability. A meme’s longevity means it continues to exist in the minds of individuals. A successful meme must be regularly duplicated, and the more popular it is, the more copies will be made. For example, the popularity of Taobao style shows how Internet slang and memes have changed the distance of mass communication and accelerated the speed of social and cultural popularization and transmission. Taobao style refers to the conversational style of online communication between Taobao e-commerce sellers and their customers. Sellers will call their customers “qīn”, which means “darling”. This way of

communicating has become popular on the Internet because of its friendliness and loveliness. “qīn” is also used in real life, such as in job advertisements, university admission text messages, and traffic police propaganda, all through the Taobao style of this light-hearted and humorous way to convey serious social information and shorten the distance between the audience and the various social institutions to communicate [7].

3. The Effects of Internet Slang and Memes on Teenagers

In the era of new media, adolescents are more and more accessible to the Internet than before. The average age of Chinese underage Internet users is shrinking, and they are trying to develop their own personality, independence and dependence, self-consciousness and childishness alternately change and develop. The psychological changes of teenagers are called the “rebellious period” and “adolescence”. As a result, teenagers often deviate from society to show their maturity and independence. They also have youthful fantasies and need to relieve stress and emotions regularly. Their curiosity about the world drives them to try new approaches to challenges and get diverse results [8]. Frequently exposed to the Internet environment, teenagers are susceptible to the impact of Internet slang and memes during their growth stage, when all aspects of their lives are still immature. It mainly reflects the effects on teenagers’ language expression, perception and thinking ways, and mental health.

3.1. The Effects on Teenagers’ Language Expression

First of all, in terms of positive impact, since some Internet slang originates from hot social events, teenagers will have more chances to learn about the hot social events and participate in the discussion to express their own opinions when they are exposed to these Internet slang. Secondly, in a state where internet slang is being updated all the time, adolescents are motivated to participate in using traditional language to adapt and thus create internet slang, which helps to appropriately assist adolescents in their creativity.

In the impatient and fast-paced Internet era, people are increasingly lazy to express themselves in language in a deliberate and detailed manner in order to respond or express their opinions quickly on the Internet. In this environment, Internet slang tends to make adolescents dependent on informal language use that progresses from online to offline in real life. Internet slang is mostly cobbled together through various words and phrases, with many confusing pronunciations, misspellings, ambiguities, and a lack of logic. Nowadays, teenagers mainly obtain information through the Internet, and they are extremely vulnerable to the culture of Internet slang. Teenagers’ formal, high-level language use and expression have gradually been depleted and replaced by Internet slang. Internet slang can easily disrupt the formal language learning of adolescents and lead them astray. Teenagers are mentally immature in their growing up stage and are unable to fully and accurately distinguish the appropriateness of the use of Internet slang. Adolescents indiscriminately use Internet slang in real-life conversations, writing assignments, and exams.

3.2. The Effects on Teenagers’ Perception and Thinking Ways

Internet slang has a huge impact on how teenagers perceive and think about things and society. The environment shapes people’s thinking, and the network revolution is reconstructing environmental elements. Thinking is internal, while language is the external emotional expression of thinking. The innovative, ideological, and concise attributes of Internet slang affect people’s thinking about things after using it for a long time, changing their thinking framework patterns [9].

In the high-context situation of the Chinese language, the Internet slang composed of various words is likely to disperse and subvert the original meaning of each word. Take Chinese pop idol Cai

Xukun's meme, for example. Cai Xukun's meme originated from a video of his self-introduction on a TV show, in which Cai Xukun's center-parted hairstyle, strappy pants, lines, comical basketball and dance moves, and brainwashing background music were second-handedly created and deconstructed into internet slang, meme emoji pictures and spoof videos, and wildly disseminated on the internet. First of all, the first lyrics of the background music are "zhǐ yīn nǐ tài měi" (Just because you're so beautiful) in which the word "zhǐ yīn" (Just because) is easily heard as "jī" (Chicken) due to the hyphenation of the singer's pronunciation of the word, "zhǐ yīn nǐ tài měi" has been transformed into "jī nǐ tài měi" (chick, you're too beautiful), which has been spreading rapidly as Internet slang because of its wit and fun. Many teenagers follow trends and use this Internet slang, saying "jī" as "zhǐ yīn". Teenagers are not only keen on spreading these internet slangs and stems, but also appear to be avid imitators of Cai Xukun's basketball playing and dancing moves in real life. Teenagers are very sensitive to the elements of Cai Xukun's meme, generating all kinds of associations and dispersions in many teenagers' minds. More and more teenagers who encounter the words chicken, kun, center-parted hairstyle, backpack pants, and basketball will immediately associate them with those Internet terms, and will even be distracted by them in class. These examples show that Internet slang mixes up the perception of things in teenagers' minds by associating a thing with words that are unrelated in lexical nature and meaning. The frequent and repetitive use of Internet slang also causes adolescents to think in a superficial and one-dimensional way.

3.3. The Effects on Teenagers' Mental Health

Most Internet users approach societal issues from their own perspective, and their perspectives are often one-sided and excessively paranoid, critical, or playful. Most Internet language in such a setting is fun, sardonic, passive, and critical, which will harm teenagers' mental health [10]. According to the data, 38.3% of underage Internet users have encountered undesirable or negative information in the course of surfing the Internet. Among them, content showing off personal wealth or family background was the most common, at 21.2%; followed by content promoting the idea of getting something for nothing, negative learning or work, at 16.3%; bloody and violent content, at 15.8%; content distorting traditional culture or historical figures, at 14.0%; and obscene and pornographic content, at 10.9% [1].

For example, Internet slang such as "diǎo sī" (real-life losers and poor people) and "tǔ háo" (the wealthy) crudely labels and categorizes things between the poor and the rich. The dichotomy tends to create a one-sided and misperceived perception of the rich and the poor among teenagers, and their own inferiority complex, jealousy, and self-conceit will be distorted and inflated, and crazy behaviors of showing off their wealth and comparing with others will be promoted on the Internet. In addition, the Internet slang terms "tǎng píng" (lie down) and "bǎi làn" (let it rot) are also popular in the Chinese Internet environment. "tǎng píng" and "bǎi làn" propagate an attitude to life of settling for the status quo, avoiding competition, lowering desires, abandoning attempts and efforts, slacking off and conforming to everything. These negative ideas are detrimental to the positive and healthy growth of young people's mental health.

4. Reflections on the Monitoring System and the Mechanism

Monitoring, educating and guiding young people is a gradual process. The internet world inherently possesses both positive and negative aspects. The pertinent regulatory bodies ought to actively discourage the use of crude and non-standard language during networking activities. They should establish dedicated entities and implement appropriate regulations to rectify and eliminate such vulgar language. Government departments should enhance their efforts in advertising and administration, aiming to build a set of civilized network conventions. In today's diversified Internet age, the curiosity

and creativity of teenagers are easily stimulated. Parents and teachers could not report or block all teenagers' Internet access directly and forcefully, as this would touch on the rebelliousness of teenagers' growth stages and be counterproductive. Parents and teachers should give teenagers a comprehensive understanding of the meaning of Internet slang, appropriate usage and contexts, and standardize the formal use of language in real life. Parents and teachers should also actively guide and cultivate their teenagers' Internet literacy, to be able to try to distinguish between positive and negative things and to maintain independent and rational thinking, avoiding blindly following the crowd and imitation.

5. Conclusion

The simplicity, diversity and sustainability of Internet slang and memes attract teenagers to copy, imitate and create them. At the same time, Internet slang also causes irregularities in language expression, illogical mixing, diffusion, and homogenization of perception and thinking patterns, as well as negative impacts on mental health. Regulators need to be responsible for cleaning up the online environment, while parents and teachers need to actively guide teenagers to learn about formal culture, standardize the use of language, and improve their thinking. The limitation of this research is that due to the limited understanding of the language and cultural backgrounds of different countries, this research only explored the influence of Internet slang and meme on Chinese adolescents and did not explore the influence of Internet slang and meme composed of other languages on teenagers in other countries, so that comparisons and categorizations could not be made to further analyze the influence of the dissemination of Internet slang and meme. The research can be improved by trying to break down the cultural barriers, contacting and understanding the Internet slang and memes derived from the cultural backgrounds of other countries with different languages, comparing them with those in China, and categorizing them to further analyze the impact of the spread of Internet slang and memes around the world.

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