

Analysis of the Dissemination Mechanisms and Popularity Factors of New Online Literature: Postprint

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Date: 2023-03-24T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

Various forms of internet catchphrases construct a unique landscape of online subculture. Internet catchphrases represent not only a linguistic and cultural phenomenon, but also a social phenomenon that reflects epochal transformations and group psychology. This paper interprets the production and dissemination mechanisms of internet catchphrases from three theoretical perspectives in communication studies—meme theory, interaction ritual chains and participatory culture, and meta-communication—and analyzes the reasons for their popularity from three dimensions: media technology, netizen psychology, and pragmatic functions, thereby seeking to better comprehend and grasp the generation and dissemination patterns of contemporary internet catchphrases.

Full Text

An Analysis of the Communication Mechanisms and Popularity Factors of New Internet Literature

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Abstract: Various catchphrases construct a unique landscape of internet subculture. Internet memes represent not only a linguistic and cultural phenomenon but also a social phenomenon reflecting epochal changes and group psychology. This paper interprets the production and communication mechanisms of internet memes from three theoretical perspectives in communication studies: meme theory, interaction ritual chains and participatory culture, and meta-communication. It also analyzes the reasons for their popularity from three dimensions: media technology, netizen psychology, and pragmatic functions, to better understand and grasp the generation and dissemination patterns of contemporary internet memes.

Keywords: Internet memes; communication mechanisms; communication theory

1. Introduction

From “Versailles literature” to “girl literature,” “nonsense literature,” “emo literature,” and more recently “crazy literature” and “Arthur literature,” these so-called literary genres that have gained popularity online are essentially specific “memes” that have proliferated into a meme culture with distinct linguistic characteristics and expressive forms. Strictly speaking, these new forms of internet literature, composed of catchphrases, lack traditional literary qualities. The inclusion of the term “literature” clearly carries ironic, satirical, and deconstructive intentions toward tradition. However, any emerging language that can be widely accepted, used, and circulated serves as a mirror reflecting spiritual outlook, social environment, emotional psychology, and cultural symptoms, and in this sense, they all achieve certain literary effects.

On one hand, thanks to the development and maturation of the internet and new media, literary discourse power has once again shifted to the grassroots. This online literature exhibits styles and orientations distinctly different from official discourse, characterized by obvious group participation and mass writing [1]. On the other hand, through the method of “new wine in old bottles,” netizens spontaneously create new languages and expressions that present new meanings, influencing social culture as well as people’s spiritual life and production. Therefore, these phenomena merit research and discussion.

These various new expressions that have emerged alongside internet development collectively constitute an important component of internet subculture. Although they display different linguistic forms, textual characteristics, and communication mechanisms, they all belong to online youth subculture and share certain commonalities in terms of dissemination patterns and popularity factors. Through observation and participation in the dissemination and application of these online literary forms, this paper extracts and interprets the commonalities among them from a communication studies perspective.

2.1 Meme Replication, Imitation, and Diffusion

The concept of the meme originated with British scholar Richard Dawkins, who proposed that memes are the basic units of cultural inheritance and evolution, also known as cultural genes. He argued that memes are the driving force of cultural evolution, and that cultural transmission primarily relies on the replication, imitation, and diffusion of memes. Based on their authenticity, reproductive capacity, and life cycle, memes are classified as either strong or weak. Strong memes typically exhibit high authenticity, long life cycles, and strong replication capabilities [1]. The positioning of strong and weak memes is not static; it often shifts over time, according to changes in the public opinion environment and audience focus.

In the various popular new forms of internet literature, their distinctive stylistic expressions are memes. These memes are characterized by novelty, strong contextual adaptability, and textual blank spaces. First, novelty refers to fresh and unconventional expressions that can attract audiences to actively participate in meme replication and dissemination. For instance, Versailles literature differs from conventional boasting by employing a “humblebrag” approach—using self-deprecation followed by self-praise and self-questioning followed by self-answering to inadvertently showcase a high-quality lifestyle. Second, strong contextual adaptability means these memes can be flexibly adapted through netizens’ competitive imitation and recreation, splintering into multiple versions that circulate across various social scenarios. This fission occurs not only in textual reconstruction but also in multiple variations of expressive forms. For example, crazy literature originated from dialogues between netizens and e-commerce customer service representatives urging shipment delivery, where netizens used long passages of exaggerated, disordered, and emotionally saturated text, producing unexpected effects. As it rapidly fermented and spread, various versions emerged, including school editions, workplace editions, and romance editions. Beyond textual changes, numerous “crazy” emojis, short videos, and even peripheral products such as stickers, phone cases, and T-shirts appeared. The ability of these linguistic memes to attract audience attention and usage, ultimately forming a media phenomenon and internet culture, stems not only from the inherent laws of memes but also from their capacity to effectively integrate into dynamic social contexts and be used meaningfully. Finally, textual blank spaces do not refer to grammatical or semantic flaws in the language but rather to the strong innovative nature of these memes, which prompts readers to interpret and re-encode meanings according to their own needs. Moreover, the usage threshold is extremely low, basically consisting of simple everyday language that is easily imitated, copied, and disseminated.

2.2 Interactive Ritual and Participatory Culture

The interaction ritual chain theory was proposed by American sociologist Randall Collins, emphasizing the emotional and affective connections and sharing among participants in community interactions. According to this theory, the initiation of interaction rituals in virtual spaces requires four conditions: virtual co-presence, identity recognition among participants, focused attention, and emotional resonance. In the production and dissemination processes of various new internet literary forms, originally dispersed audiences are drawn together by a common focus—a novel linguistic style—forming temporary virtual communities where they discuss, interact, and continuously produce and create content. This sharing, interaction, and processing constitutes an exclusive ritual. This ritual is not a formal, codified ceremony but rather a process that helps stimulate participatory consciousness and shared experiences and emotions [1]. In various popular new internet literary forms, community formation lacks the clear boundaries and strict admission rules found in other communities; anyone who grasps the essence and uses the relevant discourse expressions, emojis,

and other forms can become a member and interact with others. Beyond highlighting self-expression, people in these interactions more importantly obtain spiritual energy. For instance, nonsense literature superficially outputs meaningless text but actually alleviates social anxiety and dispels loneliness, while crazy literature borrows literary language forms to output pressure and vent emotions.

Henry Jenkins' s concept of participatory culture emphasizes creativity and group participation, highlighting that the creation of internet literature is a process in which everyone can participate. Jenkins introduced the concepts of "poaching" and "nomads" to describe participants' appropriation and reproduction of original works in online spaces. In the formation of new internet literature, netizens playfully engage in word games, achieving a process of meaning production through imaginative and creative deconstruction and reconstruction via the collage and combination of various texts, creating culture representing their own class and aspirations. For example, in crazy literature, netizens appropriated content from the classic novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, re-empowering it to construct a new linguistic style called "Lin Daiyu crazy literature," achieving the practical purpose of expressing personal feelings through others' words. When a friend hasn' t replied to a message for a long time, one can send, "You must be tired, to reply to me so perfunctorily" ; when complaining about work pressure, one can use, "In any case, with such a small salary, they still expect 24-hour service." The creation and dissemination of catchphrases is itself a free and equal process of universal participatory creation, representing the ultimate embodiment of participatory culture [2].

Both interaction ritual chains and textual poaching are inseparable from people' s interaction and remarkable creativity. The formation of a catchphrase is not merely a simple linguistic understanding but also a manifestation of human social attributes and subjectivity, as well as a dual pursuit of emotion and belonging.

2.3 Meta-Communication: A Form of Relational Communication

The concept of meta-communication was first proposed by American sociologist Gregory Bateson to describe communication behaviors conducted for the sake of communication itself. The essence of meta-communication is relational communication, emphasizing that the relationship between communicators, rather than the content itself, plays a decisive role. On one hand, in the internet era, people' s social relationships have been re-tribalized on online platforms, with reliance on relational communication gradually surpassing mass communication. On the other hand, alongside the explosive and fragmented growth of online information, the exchange value of information has exceeded its actual use value. Netizens' active participation in various language games is actually largely unrelated to the textual content itself; what matters is the social significance represented by this collective behavior. People establish exclusive labels

or symbols to pursue relationship building and identity recognition.

A shared discourse system typically conveys the same emotion or attitude, while the same information can be decoded differently depending on the communication relationship. Consequently, one group often finds it difficult to understand another group's popular discourse. Today, most enthusiasts of new internet literature are young people who grew up alongside the internet, are well-versed in its communication mechanisms, and excel at establishing indirect, implicit discourse and rhetoric to maintain their differences and create boundaries with other groups. Simultaneously, they use discourse to find positioning and reach mutual understanding in communication. Middle-aged and elderly people can only linger at the edges of discourse constructed by young people; for them, accepting and precisely using catchphrases is difficult. The proliferation and evolution of each internet discourse is rapid and complex. Skillful application of a catchphrase requires not only understanding its original meaning but also keeping up with constantly added new meanings and connotations. The continuous emergence of new language forms overwhelms them, leaving them unwilling and unable to understand the underlying mechanisms, further excluding them from online life.

Beyond this deep understanding of interpersonal relationships and communication, Edna Rogers further proposed two levels of message meaning—content meaning and relational meaning [1]. In the dissemination of new internet literature, the relational meaning of messages always surpasses their content meaning. The internet is filled with various new jokes and meme cultures. Even though these new literary forms may not bring development and progress to orthodox literature, we must allow the existence of such meaningless discourse because the communication behavior itself is a form of pleasure. Individual consciousness formation and social relationship establishment are built through these purposeful and unconscious relational communication processes.

3.1 Growth Soil: Digital Media and Diverse Expression

The construction and dissemination of new internet literature inevitably rely on technical support. The internet provides people with a virtual co-present space, enabling participation and interaction without physical presence, while its immediacy creates a more authentic interactive experience. This virtual field offered by the internet provides the foundation and prerequisite for the production and dissemination of online literature. Digital media plays a crucial role in dissemination forms and channels, allowing internet catchphrases to be presented as text, transformed into image-text emojis, or integrated as material into videos, continuously developing new expressive forms and connotations during transmission. The everydayness, brevity, and entertainment of various internet catchphrases align well with internet communication characteristics such as massive volume, speed, and low cost, accelerating the transformation from simple media symbols to media spectacles. On social platforms, there are even specialized mini-programs for generating related literature, including not only

text generation but also various emojis. Netizens can complete the expression and dissemination of catchphrases through simple operations according to their needs, greatly saving time and communication costs.

3.2 Netizen Psychology: Identity Recognition and Discourse Expression

Identity recognition includes both self-cognition and identification with one's group. Self-identity is an internalization process in which individuals constantly connect with the outside world, reflect on themselves, understand themselves, and confirm themselves [1]. In online spaces, netizens, especially the younger generation, attempt to demonstrate individuality and novelty, establish a perfect "front-stage" image, gain affirmation and respect from others, and seek compensatory psychological satisfaction in real life through social platforms. They subvert traditional language and normative expressions, producing and participating in a linguistic symbol system with distinctive features and styles, continuously shaping their image and constructing their identity, using internet catchphrases as symbolic markers of identity. They transfer implied emotions and ideas to humorous and witty popular literature, using language as a medium to exercise their will and emotions. Second, beyond achieving self-identity, humans as social animals also need group belonging and social recognition. As a sign system containing signifiers and signifieds, internet catchphrases accommodate people's appeals and condense their emotions. As the most basic carrier of communication and interaction, catchphrases easily gather dispersed individuals online, forming cultural boundaries and group identification. Members enjoy emotional resonance, and group belonging emerges naturally through interaction. Netizens as participants obtain self and social identity through continuous processes of encoding and decoding.

Today, netizens have adapted well to the role transformation from recipients to disseminators, placing higher demands on personal expression and information transmission. The trend of rising self-awareness and pursuing personal discourse power has become increasingly evident. The grassroots discourse field, carrying diverse civic opinions and expressions, exhibits a cultural foundation of negotiation and debate, criticism and creation. Whether through confrontation, satire, self-contradiction, playfulness, or even what some scholars consider an "oily" manner, internet catchphrases reflect the grassroots discourse field's struggle and appeal for discourse power, as well as social psychology and emotions that are difficult to release in real life. At times, the authority and strength of official discourse cannot resist the expansion of grassroots discourse and must adopt a mild, circuitous strategy to guide and co-opt it. For netizens, while enjoying discourse carnival, they also gain the pleasure of mastering discourse power. The continuous emergence of new language forms online has become an important way for citizens to expand discourse and express public opinion [2].

3.3 Pragmatic Function: Emotional Expression and Gaining Attention

Catchphrases originate from life and absorb the essence of everyday expression, providing symbolic representation for experiences and feelings that were previously difficult to articulate or describe. This enables internet catchphrases to convey complex meanings more concisely and clearly. For example, the term “emo” is an abbreviation of the English word “emotional,” originally referring to an emotional music style, but later used by netizens to describe feelings of depression, melancholy, or sadness—one can simply say “I m emo” to express these emotions. “Nonsense literature” uses brief responses that seem to say something yet say nothing to express dissatisfaction, impatience, and weariness. “Crazy literature,” as the name suggests, expresses a state of mental collapse and unsustainable life conditions. Thus, behind each linguistic form lies the overall social psychology and emotional changes presented by people at that time. Netizens use discourse practices on social platforms to express their thoughts and outline group portraits, using catchphrases as an invisibility cloak to vent their true emotions while maintaining mystery and privacy. In fact, there is often a dislocation between the surface meaning of many popular online expressions and the spiritual substance people want to convey—what appears to be admiration is actually a form of “rebellion.” People relieve their inner selves and achieve reconciliation with themselves through a self-entertaining manner of indifference [3].

In an era where traffic is paramount, people always want to gain more attention. However, the complex information world leaves people at a loss when selecting and interpreting information. The addition of inherently popular internet catchphrases can easily make one’s information stand out from large amounts of dull, homogeneous language. Whether mainstream media, self-media, or individual netizens, to keep up with trends, approach audiences, and make information more readable, the use of catchphrases has become a necessary strategy for capturing attention and enhancing engagement.

4. Conclusion

As a completely new discourse system and social method, the production and dissemination of these new internet literary forms are inseparable from the combined influence and interaction of media technology, mass psychology, and social pragmatics. For individual netizens, the use and dissemination of catchphrases help relieve pressure and emotions, enhance individuality and subject consciousness, construct the self, and seek identity. For society and the collective, catchphrases represent a form of popular literature that includes netizens’ appropriation and transformation of classic literature, satire of social reality and events, subversion and resistance of traditional values, and other connotations—an innovative collective action and cultural carnival that helps achieve social consensus and collective identity in terms of emotion and cognition.

While new internet literature brings freshness and fun to public entertainment and life, it also raises various concerns for the future. The emergence and dissemination of various new internet literary forms are exerting profound and lasting influences on public language habits and thinking patterns. First, excessive reliance on and frequent use of catchphrases can cause aphasia, gradually making expression impoverished and monotonous, lacking rationality, while emphasizing emotional expression can also lead to the disappearance of communicative meaning, value, and norms behind language [1]. Second, the iteration speed of catchphrases is very fast; people become addicted to formal stimulation and pleasure, using simple happiness to numb their brains, unconsciously entering a state of “amusing ourselves to death.” Finally, the primary users of catchphrases are young people and teenagers representing the new internet generation. While young adults can maintain sobriety and possess some self-control, for adolescent groups with low media literacy and poor discernment, playing with memes without bottom-line principles will only negatively impact their values and physical and mental health. Therefore, all sectors of society must pay attention and jointly lead civilized and healthy forms of expression.

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