

## A Memetic Perspective on the Propagation of “Involution”: Analysis of Driving Factors and Critical Reflections (Postprint)

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### Abstract

Taking the internet buzzword “involution” as a case study, this article analyzes the propagation drivers of this term from a memetics perspective. Furthermore, the generalized dissemination of this linguistic meme is also related to social psychological catharsis, user self-expression, and group identity. The paper also offers critical reflections on issues in the propagation of internet buzzwords from macro, meso, and micro levels.

### Full Text

#### An Analysis and Reflection on the Motivations for the Spread of “Involution” from a Memetics Perspective

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### Abstract

This article takes the internet buzzword “involution” as a case study to analyze the motivations behind its spread from a memetics perspective. Additionally, the generalized dissemination of this linguistic meme is related to social psychological catharsis, user self-expression, and group identity. The paper also offers reflections on problems in the spread of internet buzzwords from macro, meso, and micro levels.

**Keywords:** meme; involution; linguistic meme; reflection

With the rapid development of internet technology and the swift rise of various social media platforms, an efficient and fast communication infrastructure has been established, making online social interaction an integral part of people’s daily communication. As popular expressions originating from specific social

events or hot topics, internet buzzwords can centrally reflect the public psychology and social mentality of a given period due to their high acceptability, rapid spread, and wide reach [1]. In recent years, “involution,” originally an academic term, has quickly gone viral after fermenting online, with discussions about “involution” becoming part of everyday conversation. Based on this, this article takes the internet buzzword “involution” as a case study to analyze the motivations behind its spread from a memetics perspective and offers reflections on problems in the dissemination of internet buzzwords from macro, meso, and micro levels.

## 1. Memes and Linguistic Memes

In 1976, biologist Richard Dawkins proposed the concept of the meme in *The Selfish Gene*, drawing an analogy between culture and genes and arguing that culture also possesses evolutionary functions [2]. Language itself is a form of meme; any character, word, sentence, paragraph, or even entire text can become a meme as long as it is copied and disseminated through imitation [3]. In the process of online language transmission, language can be replicated and spread like genes, influencing the development and dissemination of language and continuously expanding its boundaries.

## 2. The Generation, Diffusion, and Evolution of “Involution”

### 2.1 The Generation of “Involution”

The concept of involution was first proposed by anthropologist Weiser to describe a process in which a system becomes increasingly refined and complex under strict constraints on external expansion. Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* mentioned involution in the evolution of human society and contrasted “involution theory” with “evolution theory.” Anthropologist Geertz, while studying the agricultural economy of Java, Indonesia, discovered that local farmers adopted intensive cultivation methods to avoid sharp declines in per capita income, which he defined as “agricultural involution.” This concept was later used by Philip Huang to analyze rural development in North China and the Jiangnan region, subsequently entering Chinese academic discourse [4].

### 2.2 The Diffusion and Evolution of “Involution”

The popularization of the term “involution” in the early 20th century coincided with the implementation of the “up-or-out” tenure system reform in universities. The enforcement of this policy became a major reason why young faculty members had no time to focus on teaching or truly valuable research. University teachers believed that this “growth without development” in academia fit the definition of involution [1]. “Involution” thus detached from its original academic meaning and spread widely within academic circles. In 2020, “involution” broke into mainstream popularity due to several viral images online:

“someone reading a book while riding a bicycle, someone using a laptop while cycling, someone whose bed was covered with piles of books...” Among these, the student “using a laptop while cycling” was dubbed the “involution king” and became a trending topic [2]. Subsequently, “involution” achieved explosive popularity in a satirical form, with numerous parodic expressions (such as “If involution doesn’t kill you, push it to the limit” and “Everything can be involuted”), emojis, and short videos proliferating rapidly as linguistic memes. These were widely applied to various social scenarios through social media. Additionally, impacted by the pandemic, intensifying pressures regarding employment and further education sparked even more heated discussions about involution at the societal level. The boundless nature of media expanded the dissemination and sharing of “involution,” while the continuous diffusion process gradually diluted the concept itself. The meaning of the term “involution” was constantly reconstructed, its application scenarios expanded, and it eventually became a catch-all word used to describe various forms of anxiety.

### 3. Analysis of Motivations for the Generalized Spread of “Involution”

The internet buzzword “involution” has achieved viral spread not only due to the inherent replicability of linguistic memes but also because of its close connection to social psychological catharsis, user self-expression, and group identity.

#### 3.1 Projection of Anxious and Helpless Social Psychology

Internet buzzwords emerge and develop based on the psychological needs for stress relief and venting, reflecting netizens’ widespread concerns and fundamental judgments about real life while also expressing their non-mainstream emotions and providing an outlet for emotional catharsis. From birth to entering society, young people have been educated and guided by mainstream values such as “knowledge changes fate” and “hard work leads to a better life.” However, young graduates who remain in first-tier cities face harsh realities: exorbitant rent, fierce employment competition, and strict household registration point systems. Meanwhile, some self-media influencers, aiming to attract traffic, target netizens’ pain points, fabricate novel concepts around social realities such as consumption levels, income, and quality of life, and exploit their powerful influence to amplify social anxiety [3]. In the clash between ideals and reality, the psychology of some young people is impacted. They expect to integrate into new social scenarios with a positive mindset yet feel powerless to change their current predicament. Survival pressures, living costs, and housing burdens easily generate contradictory emotions among youth groups, and corresponding resistant expressions emerge accordingly. The “involution” meme precisely provides an outlet for young people to vent these emotions.

### 3.2 Satirical and Exaggerated Expression

Internet buzzwords, to a certain extent, represent public opinion and often reflect societal dissatisfaction and protest against issues such as unequal resource distribution and intense social competition hidden behind social events. The “spectacle/performance” theory proposed by British scholars Abercrombie and Longhurst suggests that when media enters people’s daily lives and functions as a tool for self-presentation, individuals engage in self-performance and observe others through media. In this process, they display their inner, real, or constructed desires and appeals through performative discourse [4]. Online platforms provide a “stage” for the public to perform their authentic selves, allowing users to express needs they were previously unwilling to reveal publicly. The popularity of the “involution” linguistic meme implicitly contains netizens’ critique of a social reality where effort and reward are mismatched. On the other hand, the anonymous nature of online platforms provides channels for free expression. Compared to real-name complaints, venting emotions in virtual spaces obviously carries a lower cost. Therefore, users of internet buzzwords dare to express their dissatisfaction and protest in a satirical and entertaining manner on virtual platforms.

### 3.3 Emotional Identification Among Group Members

Social identity refers to an individual’s awareness of belonging to a specific social group and the emotional and value significance that comes with group membership [1]. A group is a collective with specific common goals, a sense of belonging, and interactive relationships; its essential characteristics include shared goal orientation and subject commonality. In group behavior, individuals can achieve circle identity by finding and integrating into their group, obtaining needed information and a sense of security through the circle [2]. For example, the main participants in “involution”-related discussions are typically young people facing pressures from education, employment, or working in industries such as internet technology and finance. This group shares their experiences of involution competition in reality to gain comfort and understanding from other members. Participants can feel the resonance and identity generated by a “common voice” and release pressure through opinion expression, achieving psychological liberation.

## 4. Reflections on Addressing the Generalized Spread of “Involution”

The phrase “everything can be involuted” demonstrates the tremendous influence of internet buzzwords. However, as representations of social problems and pressures, their viral spread also raises issues worthy of our consideration.

#### **4.1 Macro Level: Government Must Attend to Social Issues Facing Youth and Correctly Guide Mainstream Values**

As the influence of online media further expands, internet buzzwords have become a discursive representation of real society, intermingled with netizens' value orientations. The Party and state need to address the substantive issues pointed to by internet buzzwords and introduce relevant policies to alleviate the survival pressures faced by youth groups. Relevant departments should research and examine the current needs of young people and, based on actual circumstances, implement corresponding policies on education, employment, housing, and healthcare to effectively guarantee their quality of life. On the other hand, it is necessary to actively respond to the negative emotions in internet buzzwords by producing a series of special programs in forms that resonate with young people to promote socialist core values, thereby correctly guiding public opinion and enhancing people's confidence in overcoming negative emotions.

#### **4.2 Meso Level: Platforms Should Fulfill Their Responsibilities and Resist Inferior Linguistic Memes**

Platforms must play the role of “gatekeepers”: on one hand, they should conduct positive publicity and guidance, encouraging netizens to fully exercise their creativity on social media and promoting correct usage of internet buzzwords to foster diversified development; on the other hand, they should actively guide users to resist the spread of low-quality internet buzzwords. Social platform administrators need to regulate users' online language behavior, implement a blacklist system for those who violate rules regarding internet language use, and work together with users to build a healthy and orderly online environment.

#### **4.3 Micro Level: Netizens Need to Recognize Meme Value and Promote Mainstream Culture Construction**

In the circulation of online language, if netizens excessively amplify negative emotions, it not only hinders the cultivation of a positive social mentality among youth groups but also easily leads to undesirable phenomena such as group polarization and cyber violence, polluting the online ecological environment. When using internet buzzwords, netizens need to improve their online literacy and standardize their language use. They should also face difficulties in life squarely, share optimistic and positive thoughts on online platforms—for example, by creating uplifting videos and copy—and actively take on the responsibility of promoting mainstream values to jointly foster the healthy operation of the online ecosystem.

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*Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.*

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