Research on the Spread of Memes and the Positive Mental Health of Adolescents in the Internet Environment

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Abstract: With the proliferation of social media and Internet culture, playing memes has emerged as a primary mode of communication among teenagers, demonstrating their ability to interpret text and recreate language. Teenagers transform and use Internet memes in the rapid development of the Internet, constantly carry out innovative transformation and creative development in the development of Internet culture, draw inspiration from learned idioms and allusions and daily life practice, adapt, add, innovate, and form new forms of expression, so as to provide themselves with entertainment and the operation of mental thinking. This new activity promotes positive mental health and aids in the holistic development of teenagers. The purpose of this paper is to explore the influence of playing memes on adolescents' positive mental health in the Internet environment, using a literature review and case analysis. The study found that moderate participation in meme-playing activities under the correct guidance can enhance the sense of group belonging and social interaction among adolescents, thereby promoting their mental health development.

Keywords: Memetics, Internet, Meme culture, Adolescent group

1.   Introduction

Internet memes are a cultural trend that has emerged from the Internet's development. Due to the rapid iteration of information technology, the Internet has permeated all aspects of young people's lives, and various forms of expression such as memes, videos, images, and texts have also transmitted, replicated, and evolved meme culture. Language, behaviour, and media can transmit meme culture. According to the 2023 Research Report on Minors' Internet Usage in China, there were over 200 million juvenile netizens in China with an internet penetration rate of 97.2%, reaching 95.1% among primary school students[1]. In recent years, the popularity of the Internet as a new network culture has led to the emergence of network language as a prominent feature in The Times. It not only serves as a means for teenagers to establish social connections and seek validation but also plays a significant role in their mental well-being. Certain popular memes with vulgar or negative content, on the other hand, may provide entertainment but can also have adverse effects on teenagers' daily communication and studies. This means that teenagers should pay more attention to the degree of play, avoid injury abuse, treat the Internet language with respect to its essence, respect differences, and understand personality.

This paper, grounded in meme theory, delves into meme creation and dissemination, examines how playing memes affects teenagers' subjective well-being when using the internet from a social

psychology perspective, and investigates the mechanisms that enhance group belonging and improve virtual social participation in relationships. Through a rigorous logical structure, this paper clearly shows the influence of internet memes on teenagers' positive mental health. Furthermore, it not only deepens the understanding of internet meme culture, but also provides a new perspective for teenagers' mental health education.

2.   Literature Review

Richard Dawkins introduced the concept of a meme in his book *The Selfish Gene*. Similar to biological evolution, memes are units of genes that transmit, replicate, and evolve through cultural dissemination. Memes are the fundamental units of cultural evolution. Any replicable cultural element, such as faith, ideas, style, customs, music, etc., can be considered a meme. Memes can be disseminated and inherited through language, behavior, tradition, media, and other means. Like genes, memes also possess characteristics of replication, variation, and selection. Memes can be People can reproduce memes through communication and dissemination, and different selection pressures in different environments can cause them to mutate during transmission. The dissemination and evolution of memes significantly contribute to the formation and development of culture. It also provides a framework for explaining cultural dissemination, cultural variation, and cultural evolution. The concept of memes is very important for studying cultural phenomena, social behavior, and communication media. The core idea of memetics, a science that studies meme replication, propagation, and evolution, is that different memes adapt to their social and cultural environment to varying degrees[2]. Memes, as a cultural form of internet memes, have sparked a unique trend in teenagers' internet culture in terms of language expression ability. "Meme" has roughly three types of connotations: first, it refers to a joke that is "straight" in crosstalk; second, it refers to plot fragments that fall into three categories: funny fragments, hidden foreshadows, and frequently appearing fragments; and third, it refers to the unspoken network language, which is content that is difficult to understand on the internet without explanation[3]. Meme culture is a form of network buzzwords that are part of contemporary culture. Meme culture often criticises and satirises the political and social status quo in a humorous and fashionable way, which is an indispensable part of internet culture[4]. Through the transmission and interaction of internet memes, individuals who "understand" and "can" memes come together to form a new community, known as a "memes" culture. This culture fosters information exchange, emotional sharing, and identity formation through the internet[5]. As a buzzword within the circle, "meme" does not have the same wide dissemination and popularity as network buzzwords[6]. People form different circles because of their values, interests, and surroundings. Although contemporary network culture seems to be "decentralised" and "no main trend", it has also produced countless small circles. Often, a discourse barrier exists between these small cultural circles. Although different circles can communicate, they may not adapt and understand each other. The "meme" they create within their own small circles is a direct result of the enclosure process. As a result, the "meme" has evolved into a distinct identification sign, indicating that they belong to the same cultural circle as others. When using memes, people can disregard life's rules and express their emotions through them. In other words, hot memes create a carnival that transcends class. The carnival netizens in the internet culture lack rank, status, and identity, akin to a grand masquerade party. Everyone is friendly and casual, allowing them to express themselves in a way that does not align with their usual identities. They also have the freedom to engage in activities they have never dared to undertake, with no abstinence or restrictions[7].

Youth culture defines a meme as a classic passage that is repeatable or interpretable[5]. By imitating and deducing existing hot memes and related materials, individuals can establish a common language and symbol system in a specific group[8]. In addition to reflecting the psychological state of contemporary youth and focusing on hot issues, the youth group's meme culture also enables

teenagers to release pressure and seek emotional resonance in their communication, with entertainment serving as the value orientation, resonance as the basic premise, and integration as the fundamental goal. The youth groups behind the "meme" culture build the "language game" based on their common interests, appeals, value orientations, and other factors. This behaviour, along with the cultural landscape it presents, essentially represents a type of youth culture that embodies emotional, social, and complex characteristics[9]. Just like the contemporary hot topic "Kong Yiji literature," the wave of "Kong Yiji literature" spreads young people's doubts about the significance of education and their confusion about career development. The continuous fermentation of "Kong Yiji literature" will have a complex impact on the establishment of correct values and the social development of young people[10]. Simultaneously, some intriguing memes serve as concentrated representations of specific social phenomena and collective demands of certain groups, reflecting objective reality, satire, and education. For example, 996, 007 (996 means a work system that starts at 9 a.m. and ends at 9 p.m. and works six days a week; 007 refers to working from 00:00 of the day to 00:00 of the next day, seven days a week) objectively reflects the workplace problems of huge work pressure and serious disorder in young people's lives, thus triggering intense social discussions. It also prompts young people to think about the significance of work. Another illustration is the portrayal of "bricklayers" and "experts," a satirical depiction of high-ranking intellectuals disengaged from social reality. This portrayal provokes young people to scrutinize these highly educated individuals and challenges their blind obedience. The "rectification of the workplace" in the post-00s also mirrors practitioners' perspectives on resource allocation and other related issues.

3.   The Transmission Route of the Internet Memes

Internet memes exhibit varying trends over time, evolving from traditional text-based formats to contemporary iterations including emojis, videos, audio clips, and other multimedia forms. The evolution primarily reflects attributes such as diversification, rapid iteration and updating, swift transmission speeds, and extensive reach.

The rapid development of the internet has also led to the rise of social media, which has spread memes in various ways. Social media platforms, for example, are important communication channels for internet memes. Social media platforms such as TikTok, Twitter, and Bilibili are the main channels and birthplaces for the spread of memes. These platforms have a large population flow, a large user base, rapid information transmission speed, and automatically push content according to personal interests. So once a meme becomes popular on social media, it can spread in its corresponding circle in a short time. Additionally, social media platforms, functioning as virtual networks, provide a platform for individuals to freely share and disseminate information. Netizens mainly engage in "participatory" communication, while media platforms mainly engage in "reporting" communication. The mutual flow between different channels and different circles stimulates and promotes the formation of the "fission effect." It has further boosted the popularity and spread of internet memes.

Furthermore, communication tools such as WeChat and QQ play an important role in meme spread. Every day, users communicate or share a variety of memes, facilitating their spread. At the same time, post bars and other forums are also important places of origin and dissemination. Due to people's strong desire to express themselves, the forum presents memes in a simple and entertaining form, encouraging discussion. Due to its rapid creation and spread, once a popular meme emerges, netizens swiftly disseminate and share it, subsequently disseminating the intriguing meme to their social circles. Bloggers typically adapt, imitate, or rework secondary dissemination as a strategy to increase traffic and draw attention. This secondary dissemination not only re-exposes internet memes, but it also facilitates their further spread on the internet.

4.   The Association between Online Meme Play and Positive Mental Health in Adolescents

With the rise of the internet and social media, memes, as a special expression of network culture, have become popular among teenagers, forming a unique youth culture. It attracts teenagers' attention with humor, exaggeration, and a unique expression. The phenomenon of online memes is also becoming more common, and there is a close correlation with teenagers' mental health.

The online meme phenomenon refers to all kinds of memes on the internet, such as popular movie and TV drama lines, network buzzwords, and so on. Teenagers find it easy to utilize the numerous memes that circulate on the internet. Playing memes has become a way for contemporary teenagers to participate in life and express their attitudes. Short and concise "memes" have a better expression effect than long words. Teenagers are one of the primary groups that play memes online, sharing and discussing them on social media as a way to express their opinions and emotions. Because teenagers are under the pressure of academic, interpersonal, and daily life, they are eager to vent their negative emotions, and the meme has humorous, ironic, self-deprecating, and other comedic effects. When teenagers participate in a meme activity, they can relieve anxiety and release pressure through the fun brought by humor, ridicule, and parody.

First, playing memes can help adolescents relieve stress and seek positive emotional experiences. Playing memes can bring humour, teasing, and fun and help adolescents relieve anxiety and release stress. This behaviour generates a positive emotional experience, which naturally reinforces the behaviour and encourages its continuation. Teenagers in modern society face significant academic and life pressure, but meme culture, a lighthearted and humorous form of language expression, can temporarily alleviate this pressure, fostering a relaxed spirit of relaxation and emotional release. For example, on the eve of the exam, some students will take an online meme oath: "The best way to eliminate fear is to face fear; persistence is victory," in order to motivate morale and relieve the pressure before the exam. If you want to make fun of something gently, you can sometimes use meme culture.

Secondly, engaging in memes can cater to the social needs and experiences of teenagers: they express their preferences and attitudes through the use of buzzwords and popular memes, while some teenagers showcase their individuality and uniqueness through these memes, thereby establishing themselves as the center of social interaction and gaining acceptance from a wider audience. The conformity effect causes teenagers to conform to the group in order to avoid the loneliness that comes with being separated from it.

In addition, playing memes also contributes to the formation of adolescents' self-concept and helps them seek group identity. Teenagers adapt to their peer group through playing memes and feel accepted by the group, which is of great significance to their self-concept development and group identity. This not only strengthens the communication between friends but also makes the language expression more interesting. Memes also serve as a form of identity, particularly within their respective circles, where individuals use specific memes to define their sense of group belonging.

However, the impact of online memes on teenagers' mental health is two-sided. On the one hand, proper teasing can relieve stress, enhance social interaction, and help alleviate feelings of loneliness and anxiety. On the other hand, there are also potential negative effects. Excessive addiction to online memes may lead to social estrangement, and if the intrinsic value of memes involves vulgar content, it may also cause a distortion of values and outlook on life.

5.   Conclusion

This paper focuses on the positive effects of memes as a specific expression in youth culture. Playing memes can help teenagers relieve pressure and seek positive emotional experiences. Playing memes can satisfy teenagers' social needs and experience of conformity. However, emphasizing the positive

effects of memes is not a simple linear effect, but rather a mechanism that introduces new ideas and strengthens interpersonal relationships. The meme carnival actually serves as a means for the youth group to foster a sense of group integration and a sense of belonging within the community.

More longitudinal research and analysis will be anticipated in the future because the cross-sectional data used in this study may underestimate changes in the longitudinal study. This study exclusively focused on language-expression memes, providing a theoretical framework for creating memes such as videos and emojis. Future research should incorporate additional cultural forms of memes and encourage more individuals to delve into the beneficial effects of internet memes on mental health as they emerge as a new form of youth culture.

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