Memes Contest: The Group Communication Mechanism of Internet Memes in Group Emoji Competition

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Abstract: Based on the rapid development of the Internet era, Internet memes as a form of information visualization have shown implosive development and viral spread, and gradually evolved into a collective carnival within online communities. This study takes the group communication mechanism of memes in the process of group emoji competition as the entry point, and uses a questionnaire survey as the research method to initially explore the psychological motivation and communication mechanism of group communication of Internet memes. It is found that psychological motivation plays a primary role in the group communication mechanism of Internet memes; group ecology is a limiting factor in the communication of Internet memes; and group members' attitudes toward the use of memes can accelerate the spread of Internet memes.

Keywords: Internet memes; group communication; psychological motivation; group ecology; usage attitude

1 Introduction

In the post-epidemic era, online entertainment has become a normal life style for people around the world. Based on the development of digital technology and interactive platforms, a large number of Internet memes have emerged on major social media with extremely fast spreading speed and wide range, and have rapidly become hot topics of discussion. These memes are produced and reproduced at an abnormal speed, attracting selective attention and retweets from netizens, generating a fission

effect and forming a group orgy, but are soon replaced by another wave of memes. With the rise and fall of the memes, netizens are gradually submerged and eventually become a species that "amuse itself to death".

We observe that emojis play a extremely important role in driving the rapid proliferation of Internet memes. A large amount of memes have entered the realm of group and interpersonal communication from the Internet in the form of emoji interaction. Many memes and entertaining actions are made into emojis, and group members learn about the latest Internet memes in the emojis and search for related topics on their own initiative, which intensifies the spread of memes. In the process of communication among group members, a small competition of "receiving and comparing pictures" is implied. When new memes emerge, new pictures reatled to themare easier for group members to get satisfaction and recognition from the competition. Therefore, the new memes spread among the group members and can be reproduced and multiplied in the group communication to achieve better communication and marketing effects.

In this regard, we became curious: Why do group members like to use and forward emojis? How do Internet memes replicate and proliferate in the process of emoji communication? What is the role of group psychological factors in this process? Based on the above questions, this paper attempts to explore the group communication mechanism of Internet memes in the emoji contest with the theoretical support of memetics.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Literature review on the phenomenon of memes communication

Phenomenon of memes communication has attracted multiple perspectives in the academic research. Foreign scholars Mortensen and Neumayer (2021) have conducted a general analysis of the mechanisms by which memes work in terms of political discourse expression, pointing out that memes communication may create political solidarity or intensify polarization. Foreign scholar Zidani (2021) systematically analyzed Internet memes from the perspective of digital culture and proposed that it is a mapping tool for daily life, outlining the boundaries of society, politics, and culture.

And domestic scholars Li Chunlei and Ma Siyong (2021) used questionnaires

and random interviews to propose through field research that pan-entertainment communication behaviors such as memes subvert the proper care for disaster events. Scholar Kuang Wenbo (2017) investigated college students' WeChat emojis use behaviors through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, and came up with three psychological motives for using emojis, namely softening chatting tone, expressing emotions, and enlivening atmosphere. Guo Xiao'an (2016), a domestic scholar, used textual analysis and in-depth interview method to analyze the case of "Dibar Expedition" and concluded the role of memes communication in the mobilization of co-intention in the online nationalism movement. Domestic scholars Song Xidong and Han Yong (2021) studied the psychological motivation of the spread of memes from a subcultural perspective, showing that the psychological motivations for the prevalence of memes are to express self-expression, seek social identity and compete for subcultural discourse. And scholar Han Lu (2021) conducted a detailed study on the function of memes communication in the era of map reading from three perspectives: "agenda setting" "use and satisfaction" and "deconstruction and construction". Domestic scholars Liu Xinyu and Hong Linxiu (2021) studied the mechanism of memes from the perspective of the image era.

However, although these studies have examined political discourse, psychological motives, communication functions, and mechanisms of action, they have neglected the mechanism of group dynamics on the spread of memes. Therefore, this paper will focus on the group dynamics factor in memes communication to fill the relevant research gap.

2.2 Literature review on the memes theory

The word "meme" means "something that imitates". The concept was first time to be introduced by British scholar Richard Dawkins in 1976 in his book "The Selfish Gene". Dawkins argues that meme is a basic cultural unit that undergoes replication, mutation, and then transmission, and that all cultural activities have the potential to be transformed into memes.

After entering the Internet era, the openness, interactivity, freedom and virtual nature of the Internet provide an ideal environment for the reproduction and proliferation of memes, and the concept of Internet memes was born. Foreign scholars Shifman (2013) defined Internet meme as a unit of popular culture, which is spread, imitated and adapted by Internet users. Scholars Gagnon and Diniz (2018), on the other

hand, proposed that meme is a cyberspace or virtual place from spatial framework perspective, in which the struggle between different ideologies is manifested. Foreign scholars such as Hakoköngäs (2020), through the discourse analysis, see Internet meme as a specific form of communication that uses multimodal combinations of different elements and linguistic records to persuade and mobilize audiences.

Domestic scholars Zhang Liang and Miao Jiale (2021) concluded in a simulation study of the Internet memes contagion model that when Internet memes have unique and distinctive characteristics that are easy to learn and imitate, it can promote self-replication and achieve "viral" spread. A domestic scholar Zhou Xiang (2016) conducted a content analysis study, which summarized the characteristics of cross-cultural adaptation of online video memes. Domestic scholars Cao Jin (2016) used corpus research methods to analyze and study the deep-seated reasons for the differences in online language communication effects, and proposed a view that is the characteristics of "strong memes". Domestic scholars Sui Yan and Li Yan (2020) proposed that memes replication is a major element in the process of social communication of individual emotions in the Internet era from the perspective of social construction theory of emotions.

However, these studies did not study the phenomenon of group communication of Internet memes from the perspective of group dynamics, and therefore did not answer the question about the influence of group dynamics on the memes communication behavior.

2.3 Problem Formulation

Therefore, this paper will attempt to answer the following questions from the perspectives of memes theory and group dynamics theory.

Why does the orgy phenomenon of memes contests occur in groups? How do psychological motives of group influence the memes orgy phenomenon to make it special? What is the influence of group dynamics on the reproduction and proliferation of Internent memes in the process of memes communication?

3 Research Method

3.1 Hypothesis formulation

Based on the questions above, the corresponding hypotheses are presented here.

H1: There is a strong correlation between the motivation of using memes in social media and the frequency of using them

H2: There is a strong correlation between the motivation of using memes in social media and intra-group usage preference

H3: There is a strong correlation between the motivation of using memes in social media and the attitude of using them

To prove the hypothesis, this study used the research method of questionnaire survey to sample the overall population and create a questionnaire.

3.2 Theoretical explanation

This study defined memes as a way to express feelings by using images, including both pure images such as social media's own emoticons and emoticons made from popular Internet memes with certain textual support symbols; both static and dynamic images, all of which are a kind of emoticons.

3.3 Questionnaire method

The corresponding research object of this study is the network user group. The survey was distributed online through WeChat Moments, Qzone, Weibo and Questionnaire Star sample database.

A total of 242 questionnaires were collected in this study, among which 26 invalid samples were removed from the question "from which side does the sun rise", and 216 valid data were obtained, with a recovery rate of 89.25%.

The survey sample was mainly female, accounting for 77.24%, and male accounted for 22.76%. In terms of age distribution, the youth group aged 19 to 40 mainly accounted for 93.5%, while the remaining underage group and middle-aged and elderly groups accounted for 4.47% and 2.03% respectively. The proportions presented by the sample are more consistent with the characteristics of the population using memes

presented by the current online society.

4 Results

Among all the samples, more than 80% of the respondents use memes "very often" or "often" in their daily lives. In addition, 75.93% of the sample group used memes for the most important reason of "to help express emotion and active chatting atmosphere", while 11.57% of the sample used memes mostly "to shape personal image". The results of the cross-tabulation analysis between usage motivation and usage frequency showed that $p<0.01$, indicating a significant difference between the two, so H1 holds.

The sample data showed that emojis and cartoon memes were the most popular, and peer-to-peer usage scenarios were the most popular. Cross-tabulation analysis of usage motivation and usage preference showed that $p<0.05,<0.01$, respectively, indicating that H2 holds, but the correlation between usage motivation and scene preference is stronger.

The last three questions of the questionnaire were operationalized as an attitude coefficient, and the lower the score, the more positive the attitude toward emojis. The results show that the mean value is 6.43, which indicates that people have more positive attitudes toward the use of memes. The correlation analysis between usage motivation and attitude coefficient was then performed, and it was found that $p<0.01$, which is a strong correlation between the two, indicating that H3 is valid.

Table 1 Results of cross-tabulation analysis

	Usage frequency	Usage Preferences		Usage attitude
		Type Preference	Scene Preference	
Usage Motivation	p<0.01	p=0.025	p<0.01	p=-0.228

5 Conclusion and Discussion

5.1 Emotional expression plays a primary role in the communication behavior of Internet memes

Interaction is the source of social dynamics. Internet users create and spread a

large number of Internet memes in various channels to meet different psychological needs, forming widely intertwined group interactions, which in turn further contribute to the reproduction and proliferation of Internet memes. According to this study, emotional expression is the primary motivation for the spread of Internent memes. As the main presentation form of Internet memes, the emotional meaning carried by emojis can meet people's most basic spiritual needs, i.e., the need for emotional expression. In the process of group interaction, people usually use emojis as image symbols to assist in transmitting emotions, accumulate positive emotions and dissipate negative emotions in emoji interaction, so as to create a harmonious and pleasant group psychological atmosphere. At the same time, Goffman's dramaturgical theory (1959) provides a research perspective on the psychology of self-image shaping in the communication behavior of Internet memes. To a certain extent, the use of memes in group communication interactions is a "role-presentation performance" performed by group members under the gaze of other members, in which group members construct an idealized personal image with the content, emotion and style of memes to satisfy the social need for self-expression.

Based on psychological needs such as emotional expression and self-expression, group members tend to apply meme symbols in social environments with high frequency to achieve desired goals. And depending on the specific needs expressed by individuals, members usually choose different types of memes, such as cartoon memes or classic memes like emoji, according to their personal interests and aesthetic needs. In the process of using memes to achieve their needs, individuals in different groups usually take into account the differences in effects caused by the heterogeneity of communication scenarios, thus making the ecology of memes in different groups somewhat different as well.

5.2 Different preference ecologies within groups are constraints on the spread of Internet memes

The ecological differences within different groups lead to different preferences and scenarios for the use of Internet memes, so different usage motivations will drive people to consciously choose appropriate scenarios to satisfy their needs. The behavioral characteristics of group members' use of Internet memes reflect, to a certain extent, their interest-related identification with their group. Online communities can transcend

the limitations of time and space, allowing people to communicate with each other through their hobbies and interests, and to build up a community of interest. On the basis of individual differences in the background, thinking and personalized aesthetics, the selection and acceptance of Internet memes by different groups show a great tendency of differentiation. The strong memes in one circle may not be understood and accepted by the members of another circle and may become weak memes, while the weak memes may become strong on the contrary. As the main force of Internet memes communication, young people tend to choose the circle of their peers with whom they share a space of common meaning for communication, and the emotional resonance caused by memes provides positive feedback to the communication behavior of group members, strengthening the sense of group belonging and identity among members and motivating them to re-propagate in their own circles. Therefore, based on meeting the needs of emotional expression, self-expression and image construction, the main field for the spread of Internet memes is the usage scenario among peers with the same background and mindset, and the second field for the spread of memes is the online community formed based on interesting relationships. In the study of the communication mechanism of Internet memes, we cannot ignore the role of different preference ecologies in the group.

5.3 Group members' usage attitudes accelerate the spread of Internet memes

The third major finding of this study is that there is a significantly strong correlation between the usage motivation and usage attitude toward Internet memes. The social theory of consumption states that when people construct social relationships through consumption behavior, the object of focus is not the function of the object itself, but the symbolic meaning acquired in the process of the object being used. When members of a group spread Internet memes out of group interest or individual positive needs, the positive emotions such as identity and psychological satisfaction gained by individuals in the process of using memes will be mapped onto the medium of Internet memes, affecting the cognitive structure of individuals towards Internet memes and thus helping to strengthen positive attitudes towards Internet memes. While the members of the group who give realistic utilitarian motives to the Internet memes see them more as a tool to achieve their goals when they use them. This "instrumental rationality"

makes it difficult for group members to obtain purely mental satisfaction from the Internet memes, and thus their attitudes toward using Internet memes are neutral or even negative. Therefore, the different cognitive attitudes of group members toward Internet memes will further affect their communication behaviors and have a positive relationship with the communication effects of Internet memes.

6 Reflection and Prospect

This study theorized the phenomenon of group communication memes in the context of memes theory through a questionnaire survey, and attempted to answer the question of the group communication mechanism of Internet memes. It was found that psychological motivation, group ecology and group members' usage attitudes have a great influence on the group communication mechanism and effect of Internet memes, among which the psychological motivation of group members plays a constraining role on individual communication behavior and is the base of the group communication mechanism of Internet memes.

In the era of eyeball economy, visual culture is developing rapidly, and the collective carnival brought by Internet memes meets the psychological needs of individual self-expression and image construction, forming an open, inclusive, relaxed and pleasant field atmosphere. However, as a more vivid way of expression, the Internet memes mainly consist of emojis, which enhance individuals' reliance on image symbolic expressions and makes them easily lose their ability of verbal expression and independent thinking, and becomes a "rabble" addicted to visual enjoyment under the effect of group infection mechanism.

In the face of the continuous iteration of the Internet memes wave, the real world is the real home of all Internet users. With the continuous updating of social forms, more new ways of expression will be created and become popular. The only way to avoid being manipulated by tools and falling into the emotional whirlpool of national carnival is to maintain rational thinking and judgment, and to make reasonable use of various information exchange media.

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