Analysis of youth internet slang cultural phenomenon

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Abstract: As a cultural phenomenon, Internet slang fully embodies the creativity of contemporary youth and expresses their cultural aspirations. Quantitative research on the usage of Internet slang among adolescents reveals its characteristics of high adoption rates and diversification. By actively participating in the production, reproduction, and dissemination of Internet slang, young people express their emotions and ideas to gain group recog internet buzzwords; adolescents; production; dissemination; cultural phenomenonnition and a sense of belonging.

Keyword: sinternet buzzwords, adolescents, production, dissemination, cultural phenomenon

1. Introduction

1.1. What is internet slang: Definition and youth characteristics

There is no unified definition of "Internet slang" in academic circles. Many scholars agree that Internet slang belongs to the narrow sense of Internet language and represents its most dynamic component. Currently, Internet slang mainly refers to words, phrases, and stylistic expressions created, borrowed, or adapted from existing vocabulary spontaneously by a broad range of netizens, primarily adolescents, that spread widely in cyberspace for a certain period and exert certain influence and communicative power on real society. Internet slang is spontaneously used and disseminated by young netizens, representing their "voluntary collective behavior"[1]. It can be said that Internet slang serves not only as a linguistic tool for interactive communication among young netizens but also as a vehicle for the ideological consciousness and value concepts of the adolescent group.

1.2. Formal characteristics: Conciseness, novelty, and memorability

In terms of word formation, Internet slang exhibits characteristics of conciseness and novelty. The high efficiency and rapidity of online communication determine that Internet slang must consist of concise and succinct words or short sentences. Compared with lengthy verbosity, succinct expressions are obviously more conducive to audience memory and rapid reposting. Furthermore, the word formation of Internet slang is novel and unique, breaking conventional norms. Taking "passive employment" (bei jiuye) as an example, "employment" is originally an act voluntarily undertaken by individuals and does not possess passive connotations, yet when combined with the passive marker "bei," it creates a contradictory yet innovative expression.

From the perspective of linguistic rhetoric, Internet slang tends to be vivid and lively, possessing entertaining qualities. Internet slang employs a wide variety of rhetorical devices, with homophonic puns being the most prevalent. Homophonic words render language more humorous, witty, vivid, and playful. Additionally, metaphor is also a commonly employed rhetorical device. For instance, "fishing" originally referred to a leisure activity but now also denotes the act of deliberately setting traps to lure people into schemes for specific purposes.

In terms of emotional coloring, Internet slang demonstrates personalized and emotive characteristics. In the Internet era, adolescents have gained unprecedented freedom for individual expression, and Internet slang has become increasingly rich in personal characteristics and emotional hues. For example, the expression "Don't be obsessed with me, I'm just a legend" reflects the extremely narcissistic mentality of adolescents.

From the perspective of dissemination characteristics, Internet slang possesses timeliness and universality. It serves as a vivid record of the times. Reviewing Internet slang from various years allows one to trace the footprints of historical development and understand the dynamic changes in national policies, social conditions, and people's lives—from major national policies to trivial daily matters such as household necessities and minor personal concerns—all of which can be reflected in Internet slang.

1.3. Research design: Questionnaire, sampling, and data overview

Based on the aforementioned understanding of adolescent Internet slang, this study employs nationwide survey data as an empirical foundation to analyze and explore the characteristics and significance of adolescent Internet slang as a cultural phenomenon. This research adopted the questionnaire survey method to collect data, using quota sampling to select adolescents aged 12–28 nationwide as respondents. During sampling, adolescents across the country were divided into three regions—eastern, central, and western—and samples were allocated according to region, age, and gender based on national demographic statistics. The collected sample data came from 18 provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities directly under the central government, excluding Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan regions. A total of 1,506 questionnaires were distributed, with 1,415 valid questionnaires returned, yielding an effective response rate of 93.9%. The survey deadline was July 31, 2015.

The data presented in this paper constitute a component of this research project. The questionnaire primarily included questions regarding adolescents' familiarity with Internet slang, their frequency of usage, occasions of use, and motivations for use, aiming to examine the subjective and objective reasons and patterns underlying adolescent group's use of Internet slang. By entering the collected questionnaire data into computer systems and analyzing it using SPSS software, the relevant survey results were ultimately obtained.

2. Basic characteristics of adolescent internet slang usage

Adolescents constitute the main force in using Internet slang. The survey found that the overall familiarity with Internet slang among surveyed adolescents is remarkably high. Among 10 randomly selected Internet slang terms from 2006 to 2015, nine achieved a recognition rate of 90%. Regarding usage behavior, the following basic characteristics were observed.

2.1. High overall usage rate with slightly higher female usage

Survey data indicate that 86.1% of adolescents use Internet slang, while non-users constitute a relatively small proportion at only 13.9% of respondents, demonstrating that Internet slang is widely accepted among the adolescent population. Cross-tabulation analysis introducing gender as a variable revealed that 88.7% of female adolescents use Internet slang, slightly higher than males (83.2%), suggesting that females prefer using Internet slang for communication relative to males. Cross-analysis introducing variables such as age and region found that usage rates vary slightly across different age groups and geographical regions, though the differences are not pronounced.

2.2. Primary usage in cyberspace with peers as main recipients

The highest proportion of Internet slang usage occurs during online chatting, reaching 85.5%; followed by communication with peers of similar age, accounting for 77.3%; and online posting, commenting, or status updates, representing 54%. Adolescents primarily use Internet slang on social networking platforms, with their main interlocutors being peers (including classmates, colleagues, and friends). Only 7.6% of adolescents use Internet slang when communicating with parents and elders. Notably, while adolescents express themselves freely in cyberspace, they tend to "restrain" themselves in formal settings or public spaces, using Internet slang less frequently. The survey shows that only 12.8% of adolescents use Internet slang in classrooms, and the proportion using it in workplace settings is similarly low at merely 7.6%.

2.3. Diversified usage motivations

During the questionnaire design phase, this survey seven reasons for adolescent Internet slang usage, as shown on the vertical axis of Figure 1. Respondents were asked to judge whether these reasons applied to

them and to what extent. As illustrated in Figure 1, all seven reasons demonstrate relatively high applicability rates, indicating that adolescent motivations for using Internet slang are characterized by diversification.

Among these, the option "vivid and entertaining, adding fun to conversations" ranked highest at 96.4%, suggesting that this represents the primary motivation for the adolescent group. 92.3% of adolescents use Internet slang because it is "easy to understand and facilitates communication." 89.9% agreed that using Internet slang "shortens the distance between people," demonstrating that Internet slang plays a significant role in building intimate interpersonal relationships among adolescents.

88.9% of adolescents use Internet slang because "everyone is using it, so I follow suit," indicating a prevalent conformity psychology among adolescents when using Internet slang. 88.1% believe that Internet slang can "implicitly express meanings that are inconvenient to state directly," reflecting the fact that adolescents are enthusiastic about Internet slang with metaphorical meanings and prefer expressing their views on matters indirectly.

Furthermore, 82.4% regard using Internet slang as following a popular fashion, which corroborates why Internet slang can quickly gain favor among adolescents and be imitated by them within a short period. Additionally, 77.8% use Internet slang because it is "novel and unique, allowing for self-expression and individuality."
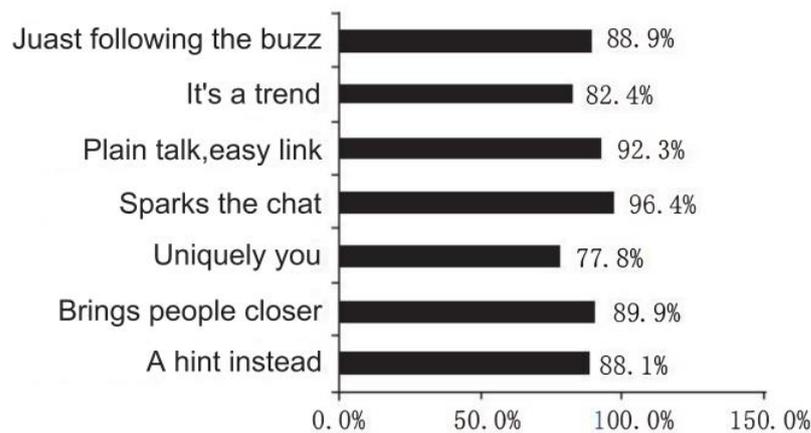

Figure 1 Reasons for Adolescent Internet Slang Usage

These three aspects outline the basic characteristics of adolescent Internet slang usage. It is evident that adolescents are heavy users of Internet slang, with clear distinctions in usage scenarios: it is very common in online, informal settings, but rarely used in offline, formal occasions. This suggests that individuals and groups are gradually realizing the necessity of possessing two sets of discourse to adapt to different contexts. The motivations for using Internet slang demonstrate diversified characteristics, among which making communication among adolescent groups more convenient and entertaining represents the primary motivation. Additionally, popularity, intimacy, and expressiveness are also important reasons for adolescents to use Internet slang.

3. Adolescent participation in the production and dissemination of internet slang

Adolescents are active agents in the production and dissemination of Internet slang. How, then, is Internet slang produced, and how does it spread? As is well known, not all online language achieves instant popularity and becomes slang. Chen Lidan and Shi Wenjing, in their article "Analysis of Internet Slang Characteristics," noted that Internet slang is "unintentionally created, yet deliberately unsuccessful"[2]. In other words, the popularity of Internet slang possesses a certain degree of contingency. However, this paper argues that necessity exists within contingency, and that the production and dissemination of Internet slang still follow certain patterns.

3.1. Textual Production of Internet Slang

One way adolescents produce Internet slang is by utilizing similar phonetic sounds to create homophonic words. These homophonic words are more humorous and entertaining than the original terms. Typically, these words emerge when adolescents mistype while using input methods during online activities; they deliberately preserve these errors to generate distinctive effects, such as (I like), (microblog/scarf), (gain posture/knowledge), and so forth. To facilitate more convenient communication with netizens and improve keyboard input efficiency, adolescents often condense and refine entire sentences they wish to express into brief words. Such abbreviated terms often lack grammatical logic and possess obscure, difficult-to-comprehend meanings that frequently leave people baffled. For instance, the prototype of (life is hard, don't expose) derives from a lyric in the song "Lying": "Life is already so difficult; some things are better left unexposed."

Collage and deconstruction are also commonly employed methods in the textual production of Internet slang. By breaking linguistic rules, young netizens deconstruct, collage, and reconstruct vocabulary to form highly creative postmodern language. For example, the coined character, composed of two characters, describes someone as extremely foolish or depicts two people as intimately close. Adolescents also combine their learned English with Chinese to form numerous Chinese-English hybrid terms. For example, the expression "hold " (hold) was originally coined by Taiwanese university student Xie Yilin; "hold" means "to control or maintain" in English, combined with the Chinese character, meaning "to maintain or sustain," specifically used to cheer for others or oneself.

Adolescents also extract key statements from protagonists in hot events or people's opinions, endowing them with new meanings. From this type of Internet slang, we can review the full picture of events as well as people's views and evaluations of these events. For example, (da jiang you, buying soy sauce) originally meant purchasing soy sauce, but its emergence as Internet slang stemmed from a television interview where a journalist asked a passerby about the "photo scandal" incident, and the passerby responded that they were unconcerned with the matter, merely out to buy soy sauce. Consequently, netizens endowed with new meaning, using it to refer to indifference toward or deliberate avoidance of sensitive issues or events.

3.2. Reproduction of internet slang

During the dissemination process, adolescents personalize and adapt Internet slang through secondary creation, a process termed the reproduction of Internet slang. The meanings generated through reproduction are richer than the original connotations, thereby promoting further diffusion and propagation of the slang. Various Internet slang genres are most likely to trigger reproductive behaviors among adolescents due to their fixed syntactic structures. Young netizens also transform Internet slang into emoticons, combining text with images to more intuitively express the meaning of Internet slang while simultaneously expanding its dissemination scope.

3.3. Dissemination of internet slang

Academic circles generally study the dissemination mechanisms of Internet slang from the perspective of linguistic memetics. "Memetics" was first proposed by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book The Selfish Gene. The core concept of memetics is the meme, which attempts to interpret the universal connections between things and the evolutionary patterns of cultural heritability from both diachronic and synchronic perspectives [3]. Memetics posits that just as genes perpetuate themselves through heredity, memes are the "genes" of language that replicate and spread through imitation. Heylighen argues that memes also possess their own life cycles, generally undergoing four stages when spreading from one host to a new host: assimilation, retention, expression, and transmission.

The dissemination of Internet slang basically follows the following model (see Figure 2):
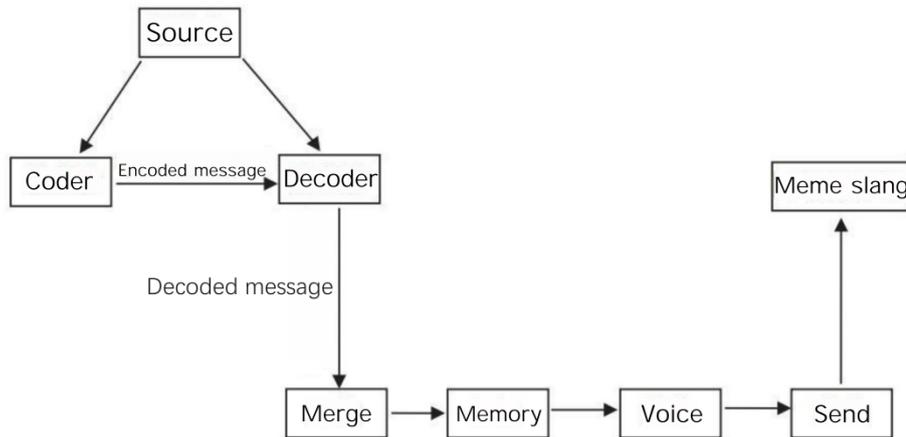
Figure 2 Dissemination Model of Internet Slang

The source information in Figure 2 refers to the original sources of Internet slang, including message sources, individual cognitive systems (the brain), social corpora, mass media, and so forth. The encoder refers to the creator of Internet language (primarily adolescents), who encodes information through the aforementioned production methods and then transmits the encoded information via the Internet to the decoder (i.e., the recipient of Internet language). The decoder comprehends the source information based on personal experience or through media assistance, decodes the encoded information, and subsequently enters the next stage of meme transmission. Assimilation in meme transmission refers to the decoder's ability to understand and identify with the meaning and connotation of this Internet language; the decoder then generates memory and is willing to further incorporate it into their own linguistic system, internalizing it as their own discourse. The decoder then uses Internet language to express their emotions and meanings, generating sustained usage behavior. Finally, Internet language achieves widespread dissemination through online and interpersonal channels, and Internet slang is thus born.

As primary participants, adolescents play a crucial role in the production and dissemination of Internet slang. The production and reproduction of Internet slang reflect the creativity and imagination of the adolescent group, contributing their efforts to the diversity of Internet language. On the one hand, the dissemination of Internet slang relies on the immediacy and efficiency of information transmission through network media; on the other hand, it is attributed to adolescents' active efforts to understand and identify with Internet slang and their frequent use of it in both online and offline social contexts.

4. Cultural significance of internet slang for adolescents

Internet slang serves as a window and medium for adolescents to express themselves, carrying their emotions and thoughts while conveying their views of the world. Its significance for adolescents lies in its expression of their own culture. When individuality encounters the discipline of mainstream culture, adolescents utilize Internet slang as a linguistic medium to demonstrate their rebelliousness and proclaim their difference from mainstream culture. Through casual parody and playful manipulation of language, adolescents assert their individuality while gaining unprecedented pleasure. Within the adolescent group itself, Internet slang is used to call upon friends, vent frustrations, or engage in banter, thereby maintaining interpersonal relationships and enabling them to obtain a sense of group belonging and identity.

4.1. Emotional and conceptual expression of adolescents

In cyberspace, adolescents use Internet slang to express their emotions and attitudes. Among surveyed adolescents, 92.3% believe that Internet slang is "easy to understand and facilitates communication." They can speak their minds freely without barriers. From Internet slang, we can observe adolescents' joys, sorrows, anger, and complex emotions. They pursue exaggerated and extreme expressions, sparing no praise

for beautiful things and showing no mercy toward things they detest, often overreacting to astonishing matters.

Through observation, it has been found that many current Internet slang terms reflect the anxious mentality of contemporary adolescent groups. Adolescents use parodic, teasing, or satirical Internet slang to vent and relieve inner dissatisfaction and depression. For example, adolescents use (loser) to mock themselves, expressing inner feelings of powerlessness and frustration. Internet slang has become a form of psychotherapy for self-comfort or to elicit resonance from those in similar situations.

From Internet slang, we can glimpse adolescents' views on love. Adolescents harbor aspirations and desires for perfect romance; they value their partners' appearance and economic foundation, admiring fu (tall, rich, handsome) and (fair, rich, beautiful)—indicating relatively pragmatic views on love. In romance, adolescents are sentimental and psychologically fragile, seemingly always easily hurt, frequently expressing that they are (too tired to love) or (feel like they will never love again). However, compared to their parents' generation, contemporary adolescents hold more open views on sexuality. Expressions regarding sex and the body in Internet slang are explicit and unreserved. Adolescents frequently use sexually suggestive slang such as (testicle pain) or (picking up soap), challenging traditional sexual taboos.

Internet slang also reflects adolescents' extensive social participation. When social hot events occur, young netizens immediately initiate discussions about the parties involved, generating numerous Internet slang terms. They have clear-cut loves and hates, showing intense hatred toward corrupt officials who have fallen from grace while expressing deep sympathy for socially vulnerable groups, criticizing social evils and promoting social morality. However, sometimes their participation in social topics is irrational, easily clouded by angry emotions, leading to personal attacks and verbal violence against the parties involved in events.

4.2. Resistance to mainstream culture and power elites

In his book Subculture: The Meaning of Style [4], Hebdige consistently interprets subculture as a form of resistance. From the author's perspective, Internet slang also represents a symbolic and semiotic form of resistance. Through stylized Internet slang, adolescents intentionally proclaim their difference from mainstream society, thereby conveying their unique individuality and assertions while venting and expressing their dissatisfaction with and rejection of mainstream culture.

The emergence and dissemination of Internet slang reflect adolescents' resistance to mainstream culture. "Beyond direct confrontation and conflict, there is more often standoff, deviation, and even the expression of dissatisfaction and departure from mainstream culture through blocking and neglect"[5]. Being in their rebellious phase, they insist on their individuality, striving by all means to break free from the constraints of mainstream culture and express themselves as they please, thus no longer meekly accepting the linguistic rules prescribed by mainstream culture. By subverting traditional, normative language, adolescents create their own linguistic system to resist the regulation and disciplinary effects of mainstream culture. In the survey, 77.8% of adolescents believe that Internet slang is novel and unique, allowing them to demonstrate their individuality. This corroborates why some uncivil Internet slang terms (such as [pretentious] or [I bought a watch last year—a homophonic profanity]) are rejected by mainstream linguistic norms yet widely disseminated among adolescent groups.

The resistance of Internet slang culture is manifested not only as an assault on mainstream language but also as adolescents' rejection and resistance toward social power elites and official discourse. Many adolescents come from ordinary civilian families; they have perceived the wealth gap and class solidification from their parents' generation and thus indirectly express their exclusion and resistance toward the elite and power classes through Internet slang. Particularly when certain social incidents occur, the anger of young netizens is instantly ignited. For example, the widespread circulation of "my father is Li Gang" offers a glimpse into the prevalent anti-official and anti-wealth sentiments among young netizens, who "rush about" in cyberspace, waving the banner of "the people" and advocating for the interests of "the people."

4.3. Linguistic play and carnival

For adolescents, a significant aspect of Internet slang culture lies in entertainment. In this era of entertainment supremacy, language cannot escape the tendency toward entertainment. 96.4% of respondents use Internet slang because it is "vivid and entertaining, adding fun to conversations." Undoubtedly, Internet slang has become a playful game for adolescents in online communication. They deliberately violate grammatical rules, randomly collage or parody various words and sentences, or from their original contexts to transform semantic meanings and obtain new signifieds. For example, single people are described as "single dogs", and girls with straightforward, strong personalities are called "tough girls". Another example is the idiom, which originally meant "reaching agreement without prior consultation," but after being by netizens, it became interpreted as "becoming homosexual due to lack of dates for too long." In fact, Internet slang gains popularity and spreads through adolescents' playful manipulation of language. They use Internet slang to parody themselves and others, during which their intelligence and wit are stimulated, thereby obtaining unprecedented pleasure and a sense of accomplishment—what John Fiske refers to as "productive pleasure" in his book Understanding Popular Culture [6]. The purposes of these linguistic games are either to mock and satirize certain phenomena while wildly venting dissatisfaction, or to subvert and deconstruct certain authorities to construct their own culture, temporarily and imaginatively escaping from reality to express themselves freely and equally, thus achieving a collective linguistic carnival.

4.4. Construction of identity

Identity is a form of self-consciousness, representing "the confirmation of one's self-identity, answering questions such as 'who am I,' 'where do I stand,' and 'where am I going'"[7]. Adolescents are in a stage of life characterized by confusion; as newcomers to the world, they cannot position themselves and often lose their way. However, the Internet slang they create and use in cyberspace helps them find their sense of existence and recognize their own creativity. In the process of producing Internet slang, they discover their own meaning and value, achieving self-identity. This identity is an affirmation of the self and a confirmation of the value and significance of individual existence.

Beyond self-affirmation, adolescents possess a strong conformity psychology. The survey shows that 88.9% of adolescents begin using certain Internet slang terms because people around them are using them, and they are influenced to follow suit. Adolescents actively seek groups with similar ideas and attempt to integrate into them, thereby obtaining group strength and a sense of belonging. 89.9% of adolescents believe that Internet slang can "shorten the distance between people." Within this group, Internet slang serves as the "jargon" required for communication among companions—a shared language established by convention.

5. Conclusion

Currently, Internet slang has become a distinctive cultural landscape for adolescent communication in cyberspace. The entertaining and liberating nature of Internet slang, along with the richness and efficiency of information transmission, constitutes important reasons for adolescent usage. The production and dissemination of Internet slang fully embody young people's creativity and imagination, expressing their own emotions and attitudes while reflecting various aspects of contemporary adolescents' spiritual outlook and value concepts. They yearn for affirmation, reject being defined, pursue individuality, and strive to integrate into peer communication circles to obtain a sense of recognition and belonging.

However, adolescent use of Internet slang also reveals certain drawbacks and problems, such as the vulgarization and pan-entertainment of language. The emergence of some uncivil Internet slang terms inevitably exerts negative impacts on the healthy development of adolescents. Furthermore, Internet slang also reflects relatively negative aspects of adolescents, such as premature aging and yin (making a fuss about nothing), all of which warrant further exploration and attention.

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