

A Study on the Utilization of Protest Memes by Chinese University Students

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Abstract: Social media has gradually taken over the lives of young people in the Z-era. With the birth of memes, offline communication is not a necessary mode of communication. It has attracted the attention of experts in a variety of fields. They investigated the spread of memes, language and social communication, and the privacy crisis. There is, however, a gap in the causes and effects of protest memes that are popular among youth groups. Thus, the topic of this paper is the origin of protest memes in social media and their impact. According to the questionnaire on the utilization of protest memes in social media among Chinese university students, the study will collect data from the questions they filled in on the causes and effects of protest memes and psychological situations. Therefore, the percentage analysis is the basis of this study. According to the results, most young people use protest memes because of anxiety or dissatisfaction in school and life, which cannot be vented in reality. Also, there are two sides of protest memes. On the one hand, they meet the emotional catharsis needs of young people and the development of industrial chains at the economic level. On the other hand, they can mislead youth groups about their values and violate the rights of certain people's images.

Keywords: protest memes, Chinese university students, anxiety, psychology

1. Introduction

The concept of meme was proffered by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* in 1976 [1]. First, He interpreted genes from a biological perspective, leading to the concept of memes. That is, the essence of biological evolution is really competition among genes. Genes that are better suited for survival will be retained. Similarly, there will be competition between cultures. For example, Yang refers to cultures that can be copied, transmitted, and perpetuated as what can be considered memes. With the development of the times, in 1999, Blackmore proposed that memes are units that can be copied and spread indefinitely [2]. Then there is the age of Z, where the internet and social media are extremely popular and many media platforms offer contemporary youth the opportunity to release their stress and communicate with each other. Thus, language is not the only means of expression. And, the popularity of social media has fostered a diversity of communication methods, such as memes. To be more specific, memes can be broadly understood as humorous pictures, texts, which are copied and widely spread by people or communities on virtual online platforms [3]. For example, background images are mainly composed of stars, cartoon characters, and various objects that exist

in life. Moreover, they constantly occur in conjunction with words corresponding to the conception of the picture, and are intended to express the peculiar sentiments of the people.

Memes are especially popular among youth who have been exposed to the Internet since childhood and are therefore familiar with the rules of the Internet and popular culture [4]. As a typical Z-era group, Chinese university students have grown up with the Internet and other fast-moving technologies, so they have bigger expectations for life and are more eager to achieve freedom and self-worth. As a result, today's Chinese university students are in the midst of an era of Internet and electronic device proliferation and indoctrination. As a group of people who have been exposed to the Internet from a young age, their relationships are relatively distant and their ability to express themselves in words is not very strong. Unable to obtain timely interpersonal support and a sense of group identity in real life, memes are created in the virtual space of the Internet.

In recent years, from the epidemic era to the present. The impact of social phenomena such as school closures and low employment rates are overwhelming the lives of university students. Their anxiety and fear for their future had greatly increased. As a result, the psychological quality and health of university students are at risk. The inability of these negative emotions to be vented in real life has led to the emergence of protest memes. They are greatly exaggerated, and contain perverted and humorous matter. By reversing the chaotic word order and using cartoon characters, small animals or real objects in the background, the resulting memes can express the anxieties and breakdowns of college students. In addition, these memes can serve as cathartic for university students to express their dissatisfaction and anger towards reality through memes.

The protest memes, with copywriting such as "I don't want to go to school, I'm going to sell pancakes" or "I'm going to push the limit for a while, take a step back and take a step further," are paired with otherwise normal pictures of smiling people, creating a sense of irony. This emotional catharsis can be linked to Bakhtin's carnival theory. According to Bakhtin, people create a second world that can completely free them from the constraints of real life, such as gender, age, religion, occupation, social status, etc. In the second world, people can have free and equal conversation to have a carnival [5]. In other words, the online platform can be seen as a second world and carnival square where Chinese university students can communicate entirely freely using protest memes. So the protest memes that have formed in the so-called Mardi Gras Square are an excellent way for university students to find identity and spiritual comfort. Moreover, this paper will study the utilization of protest memes for Chinese university students.

2. Literature Review

Starting from a broad definition of memes decades ago, which is that memes are units that can spread in large numbers. Nowadays, they are refined and given an entertaining character. Previous literature has looked at the relationship between young people and certain popular texts that express feelings of resistance and breakdown, such as Crazy Literature. For example, Shen studies the characteristics of "Crazy Literature" ---a kind of popular text that is popular among young people and the negative effects of dispelling mainstream culture and misleading young people's values. He also argues that Crazy Literature is conflictive, rebellious and carnival, which can meet the emotional needs of young people to vent [1]. But too much dissemination may make the young more impetuous, and rely too much on such superficial expressions. As a result, there is no certain cultural accomplishment in studying the classics. It will lead to the extinction of the mainstream culture, which is the fine traditional culture. In addition, Yang studied the origin of Lin Daiyu's Crazy Literature and the internal and external causes that contributed to its popularity. Lin Daiyu's Crazy Literature originates from the Chinese classic literature *A Dream in Red Mansions* [2]. During the epidemic period, the young people who were bored at home were inspired by Lin Daiyu's classic characters: lovely and frank but sensitive and clever [2]. Hence the creation of Lin Daiyu's Crazy Literature for the younger

generation. That is to say, by imitating the tone of Lin Daiyu, to express the various discontents of the heart. The popularity of popular texts depends in part on their own easy-to-understand, practical and stylish features. In addition, they rely in part on strong media appeal and public demand. However, different from Shen's view, Yang believes that language has a filtering function, and classics will never be in danger of dying out due to external factors [2]. Also, Zhang and Zhao have combined the theory of Crazy Literature texts and Collins interactive ritual chain, and concluded that the use of Crazy Literary memes can promote the emotional catharsis and emotional connection of young people [6].

Additional authors have focused on the role of Internet memes and their forms of transmission in the field of resistance politics. For example, after the presidential election in Singapore, Soh. W. Y has focused on that meme against the office of the current president broke out wantonly on the Internet, stimulating the resonance of the masses to form a series of famous anti-political memes [7]. In addition, Makhortykh and Aguilar focus on anti-government movements in Ukraine and Venezuela as a backdrop to explain how memes can use simple emotional messages. It means relying on the emotions of the masses to achieve propaganda or polarizing purposes. In addition, the emotional potential of politically related memes is commonly amplified by the common memory of the masses [8]. The indirect re-emergence of negative historical events is used to further strengthen the common feelings of the masses, in order to achieve the effect of promoting the corresponding political process. In addition, Hakokongas has highlighted the role of Internet memes in the spread of two far-right groups in Finland. By analyzing the rhetorical function of Internet memes, it is concluded that Internet memes can stimulate the anger of refugees to a certain extent and mobilize their emotions to encourage the nationalist struggle [9].

This literature is helpful in helping us understand some background information about memes. However, there are still some research gaps. While there is a large literature on the propagation mechanisms of memes in the field of political resistance, there is a limited literature on the transmission patterns of memes in the field of mental health among Chinese university students. In addition, a large number of Chinese texts have been devoted to the deep causes and transmission mechanisms behind the spread of popular texts popular among the youth. However, there is extremely little literature on the impact of these popular texts expressing madness and feelings of revolt on university students. In addition, the cause of the prevalence of popular texts among Chinese university students has not been investigated after they were incorporated into memes and spread in large numbers. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to study the utilization of protest memes among Chinese university students so that relevant state departments can utilize their rallying power and focus on the psychological demands and health of Chinese university students from the top down. By studying protest memes frequently used by Chinese university students, more social departments can promote mental health and growth among university students. In order to achieve the desired goals of this study and to make this research important, it is necessary to carry it out. This paper will study the utilization of protest memes in Chinese university students through questionnaires.

3. Methodology

For this survey, the questionnaire star platform was used to collect the questionnaires. After the questionnaire poster was made, it was distributed to a social media platform called Xiaohongshu. The distribution period was two weeks and a total of 120 questionnaires were collected during this phase. However, only 107 questionnaires were valid. There are two ways to identify the invalidity of a questionnaire: First, all answers show a clear regularity. Second, choose the same answer in each question.

This questionnaire mainly uses quantitative research methods and presents data quantitatively. Quantitative research has the benefit of being broad-based, low-cost, with few variations, and not

limited by region, time, or personnel. Moreover, the sample consists of representative cases and is statistically classified by structural logic, and the results are generalized from the sample to the whole study. Statistical methods are then used to analyze the data, such as making the survey results into percentage, column, and pie charts for analysis.

This survey mainly uses stratified sampling, where all units in the population are divided according to certain characteristics. In this survey, age is the first level (that is, Chinese university students should be divided by age level), whether they have psychological problems is the second level, and how to vent negative emotions is the third level (that is, to screen out the use of online protest memes). The use of stratified sampling is conducive to reducing sampling errors, making the sample more representative, and improving survey accuracy.

4. Results

In this questionnaire, participants will first be asked about their basic personal information, such as gender, city of residence, age group (divided into 18 years old, 18 to 22 years old, and 22 years old), and those who choose 18 to 22 years old, namely college students, will fill in their academic year. Of these, 40 percent of the participants in this questionnaire were male and 60 percent were female. Among all the 120 questionnaires, 97.5% of the participants are Chinese university students aged 18-22, and the number of participants is sophomores (39.32%), juniors (35.04%), freshmen (13.68%) and senior students (11.97%) respectively. They cover nearly all provinces in the country.

Then the participants moved on to the second part: According to the results of the mental health survey, although only 10.26% of Chinese university students said they constantly have psychological problems, more than half of them (52.14%) said they frequently have psychological problems, and there are numerous Chinese university students who sometimes have psychological problems, accounting for 34.19%, only 3.42% of Chinese university students think they have no psychological problems at all. Therefore, in addition to the Chinese university students who think they have no psychological problems at all, when other Chinese university students are asked about the psychological problems they will have in life, the three psychological problems of “exhaustion” (72.57%), “anxiety” (66.37%) and “think life is not interesting” (59.29%) are selected most commonly. This was followed by “wanting to go crazy” (50.44%), “depression” (46.02%) and “fear of the future” (38.05%). When they were asked about the reasons for these psychological problems, the most common answers were “employment rate and employment trends” and “academic pressure,” followed by “family conflicts,” “socializing,” “social rules and traditional ideas,” “peer pressure,” “excessive parental expectations,” and finally “illness.” At the end of the second part, “inattention” (70.8%), “insomnia” (69.91%) and “emotional instability” (67.26%) were considered as the most important manifestations after experiencing negative emotions.

In the third part, participants were asked questions about online protest memes. First of all, when asked “when there are psychological problems in life, which way are they most inclined to vent and vent”, more than 90% (92.04%) of Chinese university students choose “to vent with resistance emojis on the Internet”, and the rest choose “to find psychological counseling offline” or “merely output with text on the Internet”. The participants who chose “output on the Internet with protest memes” were followed by the question “why they are more inclined to vent their emotions on the Internet with protest memes”. Nearly 80 percent of Chinese university students believe that it is easier to gain a sense of identity online and vent to people they do not know, and that venting offline is subject to various restrictions from society and others. When asked about the people they normally communicate with through protest memes, “classmates and friends” was chosen by 90% of Chinese university students, and almost 70% chose “unknown online friends”, while “family and relatives” or “teachers” were only selected by about 40% of Chinese university students.

In the fourth part of the questionnaire, when asked about the advantages of protest memes, “compared to words, memes can express emotions better,” “relieve stress and satisfy the desire to vent negative emotions,” “relieve embarrassment in online chats,” and “relieve anxiety.” The frequencies of the four options “conducive to the progress of communication” and “obtaining the recognition and resonance of others” were approved by 81.73%, 77.88%, 65.38% and 39.42% respectively. Similarly, in the next question, “The Disadvantages of Fighting memes,” The frequencies of “replacing and maliciously tampering with traditional ideas to a certain extent”, “forming a negative closed loop of emotions”, “racist and sexist content and uncivilized words will mislead values”, and “infringing on privacy and image rights” were 78.85%, 72.12%, 66.35% and 28.85%, respectively.

5. Discussion

Protest memes have come to mean a way for some Chinese university students, unable to vent their emotions in real life, to find an outlet for their emotions and seek emotional resonance. One of the reasons for their need to release negative emotions is the Covid-19 pandemic, which has led to a reduction in the supply of jobs and social resources. As a result, Chinese university students are feeling not only the stress of studying due to the strong competition rate, but also the confusion of low employment prospects in the future and fear for their future life in the face of severe shortages. In such cases, prolonged self-repression can lead to depression and anxiety, and using protest memes is a helpful solution to the dilemma. They can serve the purpose of emotional catharsis to varying degrees, while not causing substantial harm to others and themselves. However, while Chinese university students generally go crazy on the Internet, they will continue to return to reality to deal with the pressure and anxiety from various aspects, including university life, career planning, peer pressure and high expectations. It is likely to form a negative cycle.

The viable solution for universities and education bureaus is to encourage quality education, but not exam-oriented education. In addition, additional recreational and social activities should be carried out in the spare time. In such cases, students are advised to make more like-minded friends offline and find a sense of belonging. It would be better if universities provided professional psychological teachers and activity rooms for students to vent their emotions. For parents, they are recommended to encourage and communicate more with their children, holding a respectful attitude and trying to listen to what their children are thinking. And the government could implement more student-friendly policies, such as additional jobs for prospective students and professional employment platforms, to answer student confusion. At the same time, it is essential to promote liberal democratic values but not repressive ones. As a result, college students dare to seek help from outside sources such as parents, friends, teachers and psychologists, but this education based on overall social values has changed from a repressive to an encouraging one.

Moreover, protest memes reflect the psychological demands of contemporary college students. That is, trying to break away from social norms and wanting to be free, a resistance psychology that has spawned protest memes. The underlying reason is that under the influence of the Internet and social media, everyone has the right to share his or her life online, which allows university students to see a diverse world and feel fresh. As a result, they want to get away from reality altogether and try different ways to stimulate themselves. While it is indisputable that it has promoted an awakening of liberal consciousness, and that university students, far from being easily complacent and conservative, are more energetic and creative, the disadvantages are also apparent. First, it is easy to propagate negative values. To a certain extent, this will lead to the demise of some fine traditional cultures. On the one hand, the values of university students are not completely fixed, so they are susceptible to outside interference. For example, some protest memes with uncivilized words and vulgar phrases have gradually eroded the minds of university students, especially the image of the

middle finger with words similar to the curse of the world. In addition, some extreme ideas were simultaneously spread through protest memes. Although they can build a positive group identity, some memes will significantly convey racist, sexist ideas and prejudiced contents [3]. As in the popular “proud boy” meme movement abroad, these memes spread freely on the Internet under the banner of “the West is best” [3]. They have a misleading effect on young people who have not yet formed their values thoroughly. In addition, the meme movement argues that feminism has harmed Western society. The move to exclude women from the “proud boy” meme group reflects its distorted values [3], which may misguide young people. And, while memes are particularly humorous and entertaining, some of them are often unsupervised in the communication process, such as some memes with swear words, which have a negative impact on the ideology and morality of teenagers and lower the quality of youth.

On the other hand, in the context of Chinese culture, it is profound and has been spreading for 5,000 years. Protest memes, in their current form of expression, have no profound cultural significance. Their peculiarities, like the excess of simplicity, and the inclusion of exaggerated and sarcastic words, tend to produce a violent diffusion which sufficiently covers the traditional culture. As a result, some excellent traditional literature or culture has been replaced by a culture of protest memes that are partly negative and satirical [1]. In order to solve this problem, it is necessary to pay great attention to internet supervision and try to eliminate some of the vulgar protest memes. At the same time, universities are responsible for enhancing student quality and holding lectures to guide university students to form the correct values.

Protest memes are a specific form of language popular among college students. For university students who have been exposed and brought up on the Internet for a long time, the frequency of offline communication has decreased to some extent. As a result, their ability to express language is weak, and memes are an important way to address this. Based on the psychology of university students whose anxiety cannot be fully released, as mentioned in the first two points, such protest memes with low requirements for expressive power and the ability to relieve emotions came into being. According to Danesi in 2016, memes are known for their ability to break linguistic boundaries and serve to build and maintain social bonds in the course of informal interactions. Therefore, they can facilitate communication and reduce communication barriers [10].

However, after university students taste the sweets, they will gradually change from cartoon characters as background images to celebrities, ordinary people and even national government leaders. It shows serious violation of portrait rights because their appearance in the dataset is likely to raise privacy concerns [11]. Therefore, the government should set up relevant laws to protect the rights of portraits of figures. Also, it would be better to require an upgrade of the software used to make memes. And, the context should strictly identify protest memes of relevant people and reject the creators' requests to preserve images that may violate the rights of others to protest, thus reducing the wanton spread of subsequent protest memes.

6. Conclusion

This paper focuses on the causes and effects of the use of protest memes by Chinese university students and the corresponding solutions to their negative effects. As for the causes of the use of protest memes by Chinese university students, this paper makes the following findings: As protest memes can meet the needs of Chinese university students who cannot vent their negative emotions in life, and as a new expression system to make up for the weak language expression ability of contemporary Chinese university students, protest memes are prevalent among Chinese university students. In addition, the impact of the use of protest memes among Chinese university students was divided into positive and negative effects. On the positive side, the use of protest memes allows for maximum emotional catharsis without hurting others or themselves, as well as relieving

embarrassment and breaking the language barrier in conversation. As for the negative effects, some protest memes are prone to convey uncivilized and biased ideas, misleading university students to a certain extent, while others maliciously tamper with classical culture, easily accelerating the process of its dissolution. Therefore, in response to the above issues, this paper proposes solutions in the form of government, schools, social media platforms, parents, society, individuals and others to promote the maximum advantage of resistance memes. Inspired by previous studies on crazy literature (a new form of language) and the sociolinguistic function and influence of emojis, this study fills the gap in the investigation of protest memes and focuses on Chinese university students as a group. Unlike previous research, this study combined the mental health status of Chinese university students with the use of protest memes to explore the correlation between the two. Although this study has explored the use of protest memes by Chinese university students to some extent, the results are imprecise due to the limited sample size and the insufficient scope. It is hoped that future research will further expand the scope of this investigation and delve into the topic of balancing the pros and cons of protest memes.

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