A Review of Research on the Impact of Internet Memes on Ideological and Political Education

Xiangyi Zhu[1,a,*]

[1]*School of Foreign Languages, Beihang University, Beijing, 100191, China*
a. zhuxy128@163.com
*corresponding author

Abstract: With the development of internet and social media, undergraduates have become one of the main forces on internet platforms. Among this age group, internet meme is a very popular emotional carrier in the process of network communication. Undergraduates are the main force of the future society and students' life in university is a significant period of founding correct values. Therefore, how to understand internet memes, how to regard the impact of internet memes, and how to guide college students to use them reasonably becomes an important tasks for college educational workers. This paper is a literature review, that aims to summarize research about the effects of internet memes against ideological and political education in the past decades. The study is based on all the previous research included in CNKI and mainly adopts the literature reading method. The research concludes that educators need to innovate the form of ideological and political education and solve the realistic problems of undergraduates.

Keywords: internet meme, pop net language, ideological and political education, undergraduate, higher education

1. Introduction

Internet meme, also called popular net language or network meme, has been regarded as an important subculture nowadays. In 2018, the proportion of internet users aged under 30 raised to around 50%. Among them, users aged between 20 to 29 occupied 27% [1]. The effects of internet memes on teenagers and college students are catching the eyes of scholars in the field of linguistic.

An Internet meme is an idea, image, style, word, short sentence, or behavior that is spread via social media platforms [2]. Usually, a meme contains letters from a particular language, punctuation, symbols, Pinyin, icons (pictures), and words. In China, internet memes first sprout out around the early 1990s. After decades of development, Chinese scholars clarify the definition of internet meme: popular words and signs which was widely used by internet users on the online platform [3].

Lin analyzes internet memes by connecting them to China's social background [4]. According to Lin, internet memes reflect the desire for 'equality' of the younger generation and their resistance to mainstream values. Young people are the driving force of social development, but compared with the social main groups, they do not have complete discourse power and are at the edge of society. Lin regards this as a way to seek for personal survival and further development. Such point of view also appears in Wang and Ping's research [5], they hold the idea that subcultures including internet memes reflect the existing contradictions in modern society. For example, 'involution' is the annual

hot meme in 2021. It refers to irrational competition in schools and work areas, which shows young people's complaints about excessive life pressure.

In order to have a generalized view of previous studies, this paper mainly adopts literature reading method. To ensure that various viewpoints on this topic are included, the scale of documents will cover all the relevant papers recorded in CNKI, China's largest scholar platform.

Although researches about relationships between internet memes and ideological and political education have achieved much progresses in the past decades, we are a lack of review in this area. Considering that the importance of ideological and political education is emphasized more and more frequently, it's necessary to arrange a summarization to provide support for further researches, so that we could have a clearer view of the shortcomings and potential innovative points in present studies.

2.   Review of Previous Studies

To ensure the accuracy of the result, we choose 'internet meme' and 'ideological and political education' as keywords and search for papers that contain these keywords in their titles on CNKI. From the perspective of research trends released in Figure 1, the number of research papers published from 2010 to 2023 shows a like wave-like growth trend. There were 47 research papers published in the past 13 years. It reached the peak of 8 papers in 2017 and 2018, then showed a downward trend.
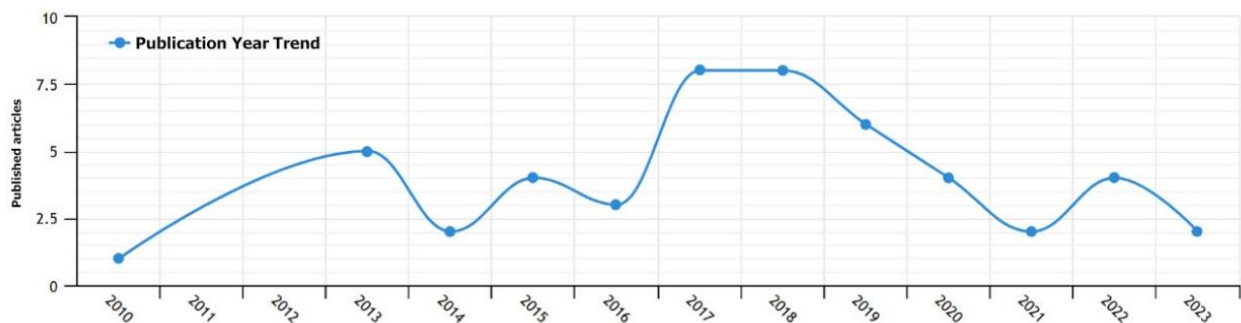

Figure 1: The publication year trend of previous studies.

Data from Table 2 shows that 76.4% of the research are related to higher education. 9.8% are about 'political parties and mass organization'. Meanwhile, the origins of the research papers are also attractive. Among 47 results, we found that 28 papers are published in academic journals, which occupies a proportion of 59.57%. When it comes to detailed data shown in table 3, among the top ten journals most papers are published on, 28.58% are academic journals, 14.29% of the research is published in university journals, 14.29% is published on journals related to ideological education and party building.
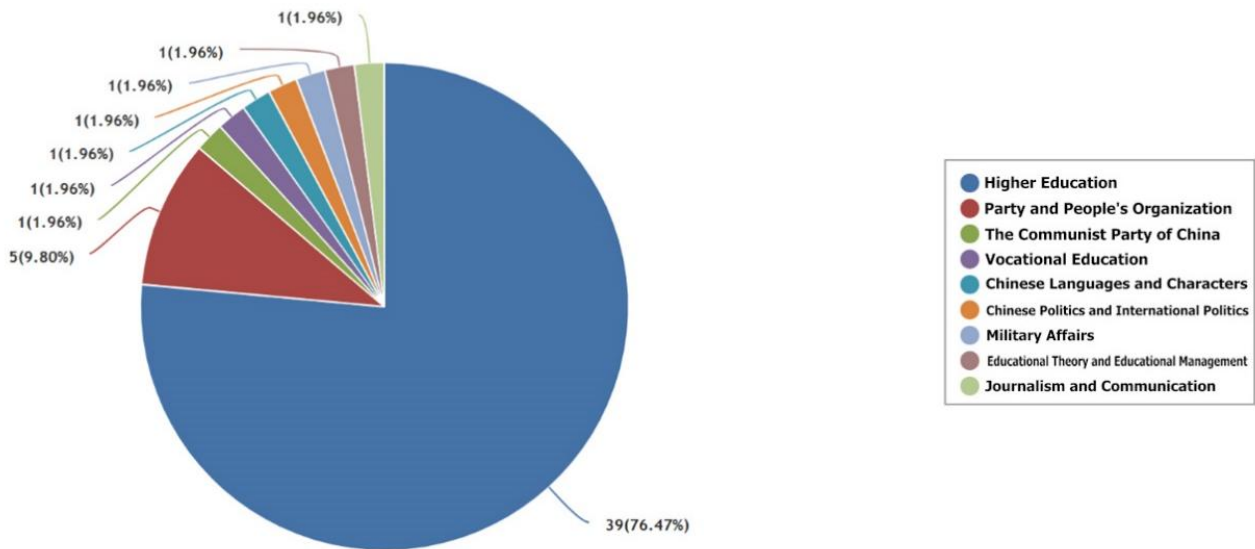
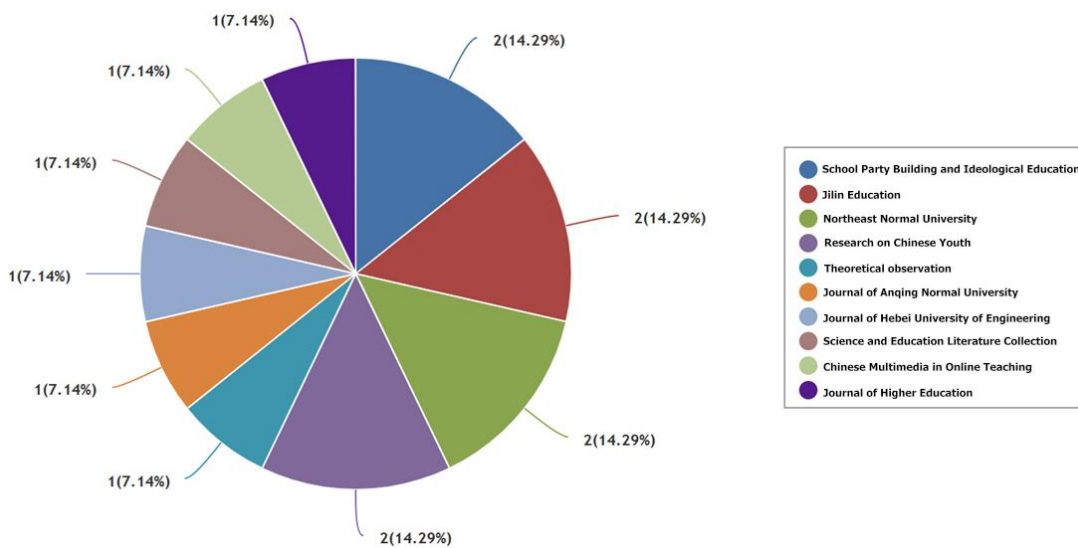Figure 2: Origins of relevant research papers.

Figure 3: Top ten journals with published papers.

The data above releases the fact that internet memes and undergraduates' education are no longer overlooked, not only do universities pay attention to this issue, but also the government is concerned.

3. Positive and Negative Effects of Internet Memes

Regarding the impact of memes on ideological and political education, there are two main viewpoints among linguistic scholars.

Zhao and Zhang confirm the positive role internet memes play in daily life [6]. They argue that internet meme is highly favored by undergraduates due to its rich content, convenience, vividness and its creativity. On one hand, for young people, the anxiety comes with the rising competition in their daily life drives them to express their emotions. Internet memes fully meet their mental needs. On the other hand, using internet memes can quickly break the ice between strangers and create a

good atmosphere. Memes also shape a humorous and approachable image for its users, which is beneficial to social interactions.

However, many scholars hold negative views against internet memes. Wei points out two negative effects of internet memes [7]. First, many internet memes violate the norms of language. Memes usually simplify their syntactic components, therefore most of their structures are mixed and the expressions are casual and awkward. Wei worries that this will harm the expressive ability of undergraduates. An investigation made by Bi in 2018 support Wei's idea. The result of the investigation shows that 63.55% of undergraduates agree that the form of some memes made them confused. Besides, it is hard for them to understand all their meanings because memes update too quickly. 55.1% of undergraduates stand for the view that the overuse of internet memes harms traditional Chinese literacy cultures. 33.07% of undergraduates have the idea that internet memes are vulgar and rude, memes cannot be used on formal occasions [8].

For the negative effect of memes against expressive ability, Wei and Xu name this phenomena 'literal Aphasia' [9]. Aphasia is a professional term in the medical field, referring to the language dysfunction caused by brain tissue lesions. With the popularity of the internet and the widespread use of internet memes, contemporary young people have a non-pathological expression of 'Aphasia'. Their ability to organize language declines, and they are unable to express their emotions and views clearly. Instead of using logical and critical expressions, they tend to summarize their thoughts into several simple words.

Second, internet memes hinder undergraduates' development of correct values. With the explosive growth of internet users, memes which include violent and offensive expressions also emerge. This has brought a harmful impact on traditional cultures and values. As college students are not mature enough to tell good from bad, they are more likely to follow the trend and imitate others blindly. The wide use of uncivilized memes may lead to cyberbullying and deteriorate the internet atmosphere.

4. Shortcomings and Solutions

4.1. Shortcomings of Present Higher Education

Internet meme has aroused scholars' reflection on higher education, Wang and Jiang pointed out many shortcomings of ideological and political education [10]. Firstly, there are gaps between the discourse system of higher education and today's internet context. Due to the rapid pace of updates in the internet area, it is difficult for the ideological and political discourse system to keep up with the pace. Secondly, present ideological and political education is not attractive enough to undergraduates. Cao argues that under the influence of internet pop culture, traditional higher education is facing a crisis [11]. The narrative style of ideological and political education is standardized, grand, and serious. Also, it was often expressed in fixed language. In contrast, popular internet memes are funny, casual are updated at a quick speed. Educators seldom understand the inner world of undergraduates, they cannot effectively participate in their daily conversations and guide their value orientation on time. Thirdly, the misconducts of some educators also limit the progress in higher education. Indoctrination in teaching still rooted deeply in many teachers' mind. Teachers have misunderstandings towards pop culture and haven't found the right way to communicate with students, which impedes the communications between teachers and students.

Ni discusses this topic from the perspective of internet development [12]. He argues that the channels of information become more diverse in modern society, and undergraduates can seek for more information rather than follow the instructions from their teachers. This also helps to widen the gap between internet platforms and ideological and political education systems. In the eye of

younger generations, school and educators are no longer the symbol of authority. In order to reach the goal of personnel training, higher education need to be down-to-earth.

Scholars also disagree with the strategies of limiting the use of internet memes, they believe this can only lead to the opposite effect. Yang mentions 'keywords filter' in his research [13]: in order to mitigate the impact of public opinion, relevant departments often use keyword filtering to block and ban relevant online comments. But such measures stimulate users to use internet memes to declare their requirements. Tracing back to the source of many popular internet memes, Yang discovers that many of them are derived from the substitutes created by internet users trying to step over censorship. For example, 'hide and seek', 'Tiger Zhou' and "cousin". Each of these memes refers to a sensitive scandal in reality. This indicates that the demand for discourse power among contemporary young netizens must be taken seriously. One-sided 'prevention' can only be counterproductive.

4.2. Solutions

For the improvements of ideological and political education, scholars hold a relatively consistent view, which can be mainly divided into the following points [14].

First, educators should persist to the student-oriented ideological and political education. Educators need to be more patient and friendly in front of younger students and show more respect to pop culture.

Second, educators should try their best to seek common language with their students and innovate the educational discourse methods. Teachers must know some simple internet memes or skim websites which are popular among undergraduates [3]. Participating in online communication platforms such as QQ, Weibo and WeChat groups can bring the distance closer between teachers and students. In 2002, the Ministry of Education conducted a survey on the ideological and political situation of college students nationwide. The result of the survey shows that 62% of college students use Internet as the main means of obtaining information, and 40% of students use 'BBS' and 'chat rooms' as the main channels for expressing opinions on campus [15].

Third, educators should strengthen the construction of social media in the ideological and political education area. Educators can use fashionable forms to narrate their contents while teaching, such as short videos and slides.

Fourth, educators need to coordinate various forces and work together to create a better atmosphere for college students. Teachers should help young people to find their role in their family and society, and lead their behaviors in a right way. Universities need to be equipped with advanced technological equipment to conduct dynamic statistics, analysis, and judgment on the ideological and political education information of contemporary college students. Ideological and political educators in universities should persist to improve their ability of obtaining information on the internet effectively and quickly. Besides, educators need to evaluate information critically and participate in the creation of information. They also need to enrich the content of ideological and political work in schools [16].

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, educators should also keep pace with the development of pop culture. For the effect of internet memes, there are both positive and negative sides, therefore we shouldn't reject them completely. Ideological and political education and internet memes are not controversial sides, internet pop culture can also provide a chance for elders to understand the inner world of undergraduates and narrow the gap between two generations. The innovation of ideological and political education should focus on the adjustment of the pattern of discourse and respond to

realistic problems of undergraduates. Educators should communicate with young people in a more equal and inclusive manner, and provide positive guidance on their values.

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