A Study on the Mechanisms of Internet Memes Influencing Emotional Transmission among Adolescents

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of highly developed online emotional transmission, viral internet memes have become the primary vehicle for adolescents' emotional expression and empathetic resonance. This paper examines the mechanisms through which memes influence adolescent emotional transmission, constructing a tripartite "psychological-societal-technological" framework grounded in interdisciplinary perspectives. By analyzing memes' emotional encoding characteristics, transmission pathways, alienation risks, and the three-dimensional framework, it delineates the complete chain of emotion: encoding-transmission-resonance-mutation. The study reveals that viral memes achieve multifaceted emotional expression through minimalist symbols, forming dissemination pathways through the synergistic interplay of technological, social, and psychological factors. Concurrently, risks of emotional polarization and affective commodification persist. Their impact on adolescent emotional transmission is dual-edged: while simplifying expression, fostering group identification, and facilitating positive emotional regulation, they may also precipitate information silos, expressive capacity atrophy, and distorted value systems. This paper constructs an integrated analytical paradigm spanning psychological, social, and technological dimensions. Within this framework, it investigates the mechanisms through which viral internet memes influence adolescent emotional transmission.

Keywords: Internet memes; Adolescents; Emotional contagion; Influence mechanisms; Duality

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of the rise in online emotional contagion, viral internet memes have become a significant form of cultural expression among young people. They not only influence how adolescents interact with one another but also serve as a vital channel for expressing emotions and seeking resonance. Young people's active participation in creating and disseminating these memes imbues them with rich emotional connotations. Existing research has explored the drivers behind the popularity of viral internet memes from multiple perspectives.

Scholars generally agree that this is closely linked to adolescents' identity formation, group belonging, and emotional states [1–2]. Platform technologies accelerate meme dissemination, creating an "amplifier" effect for emotional diffusion [1–3]. Simultaneously, memes are viewed as a form of "social currency" and subcultural symbols [2–3]. It is noteworthy that the influence of such emotional contagion has shown a trend towards younger age groups, potentially exerting negative guidance on adolescents whose values are still developing [4]. Current research largely remains at the level of describing viral memes and their impact, with the mechanisms through which they influence emotional contagion among adolescents yet to be fully explored. How exactly are emotions encoded within viral memes? During participatory dissemination among adolescents, how do emotions undergo resonance, amplification, or even distortion? How do technological platforms, community interactions, and psychological contexts synergize throughout this process? These questions warrant further investigation.

This paper aims to focus on the "mechanisms of influence", seeking to construct an integrated analytical framework. It prioritizes examining how online viral memes trigger emotional resonance among adolescents, enabling rapid dissemination and potentially leading to emotional polarization.

2. The multidisciplinary impact of viral memes on adolescent emotions

A Study on the Impact of Viral Internet Memes on Adolescent Emotional Transmission is grounded in an academic framework that draws upon multiple disciplines. From a communication theory perspective, adolescents actively engage in the dissemination of memes as a means to fulfil diverse needs, including emotional catharsis and group identification, thereby constituting the intrinsic motivation for their participation in such transmission [5]. Castells' theory of the "network society" reveals that, empowered by technology, viral memes function as "fluid symbols" of the digital age. They leverage digital media technologies such as algorithmic precision targeting on short-video platforms and viral social dissemination [1]. Simultaneously, by virtue of its simplicity and ease of dissemination, it has transcended the temporal and spatial constraints of traditional communication, thereby establishing an exclusive emotional interaction space for young people.

At the psychological level, social identification theory explains the mechanism by which adolescents reinforce group belonging through the use of viral memes—these memes serve as a "token of recognition" within young people's social circles, enabling them to identify kindred spirits through a single reference and thereby solidify emotional bonds within the group [3]. The theory of emotional contagion provides a framework for understanding the emotional transmission effect of viral memes. The condensed emotional symbols within these memes rapidly disseminate through social interactions, generating collective emotional resonance at the group level [6].

Within the field of cultural studies, the Birmingham School's subculture theory posits that viral memes function as a form of "clique code" among youth. At their core, these phenomena represent groups seeking validation and expressing attitudes through self-generated or popularized modes of expression. The emotional transmission process inherent in such phenomena implicitly involves dialogue and negotiation with mainstream culture [7]. Digital cultural studies, meanwhile, focus on platform technologies and algorithmic logic, examining how these shape the dissemination pathways and emotional evolution trajectories of viral memes.

3. Current research progress and limitations

3.1. Three core issues in existing research

Existing research has crystallized into three core themes: Firstly, studies examining the correlation between viral meme dissemination and adolescents' social psychology. Empirical investigations have confirmed that the prevalence of viral memes is highly correlated with adolescents' psychological states, such as stress venting and identity anxiety. The spread of viral memes like "lying flat" and "internal competition" reflects contemporary adolescents' existential predicaments and emotional demands [2]. Secondly, research into dissemination mechanisms enabled by technology has focused on analyzing how functions such as algorithmic recommendations and social sharing accelerate the emotional diffusion of viral memes, forming the technical logic behind "viral spread" [8–9]. Thirdly, research into the societal impact of viral memes has yielded both positive assessments of their role in fostering group cohesion and enriching emotional expression, alongside concerns over potential issues such as emotional polarization and value distortion [10–11].

3.2. Limitations of existing research

In terms of research perspective, studies tend to favor single-dimensional analysis, lacking an integrated examination of psychological mechanisms, social interactions, and technological platforms. Regarding research content, emphasis is placed on phenomenological description and impact assessment, with insufficient analysis of the complete chain of emotion "encoding-transmission-resonance-mutation." Research methodologies predominantly employ quantitative approaches centered on disseminating data statistics, while qualitative studies fail to delve deeply into adolescents' individual experiences, resulting in superficial understandings of influence mechanisms.

4. Trending memes and their dissemination mechanisms among young people

4.1. The emotional encoding mechanism of viral internet memes

The emotional transmission of viral internet memes originates from their unique emotional encoding mechanism. This encoding exhibits two defining characteristics: firstly, symbolic transformation, whereby "complex feelings are distilled into concrete expressions—such as conveying emotional breakdown with 'broken defenses' or conveying utmost praise with 'YYDS'—simplifying emotional articulation"; Secondly, dual emotional attributes: a double entendre where a single meme may encapsulate two or more emotional expressions. For instance, a meme might ostensibly convey humor, anger, or joy, yet conceal underlying sentiments. "EMO" signifies not merely sadness but also the latent loneliness beneath; "giving up" appears as resignation yet truly expresses a sense of powerlessness towards life, studies, or work. This imbues seemingly simple memes with complex emotional layers.

The emoticons trending in viral memes do not emerge from thin air, but are intrinsically linked to real-world social events and shared collective experiences. This approach not only fulfils young people's need for rapid emotional expression, but also fosters a sense of group identity through emotional sharing, as these memes are understood only by those "in the know."

4.2. The diverse pathways of viral internet memes

The dissemination of viral memes is not a linear process, but rather the result of the interplay between technology, psychological identification, and social dynamics, forming a transmission pathway characterized by

"technological empowerment – group interaction – emotional amplification" [12]. At a technical level, algorithmic recommendation systems precisely deliver trending memes to target audiences based on user preferences. Meanwhile, the "like", comment, and share functions on social platforms provide convenient channels for emotional interaction, enabling individual sentiments to rapidly coalesce into collective sentiment [13–14].

At the level of social interaction, adolescents adapt and imitate trending memes through acts such as "secondary creation" and "mimetic dissemination" before propagating them further. This interactive process not only amplifies the original emotional resonance of the meme but may also transform it, generating distinct emotional connotations. Moreover, emotions can "set the tone", guiding adolescents' expressions to ultimately forge a unified emotional response, thereby propelling the emotional transmission of trending memes.

4.3. The risk of alienation in emotional transmission

The emotional contagion of viral memes, while yielding positive effects, also harbors risks of alienation. On the one hand, emotional polarization is becoming increasingly pronounced. Under the dual influence of algorithmic "information silos" and adolescent group identity, extreme sentiments within viral memes tend to be amplified, exacerbating emotional antagonism between different groups. Some adolescents, seeking group acceptance, blindly follow trends by disseminating trending memes laden with negative sentiment. This spreads pessimism, anger, and similar emotions within their circles, thereby eroding young people's capacity for rational, neutral problem-solving.

On the other hand, a pronounced trend towards emotional consumption has emerged. Certain platforms and merchants capitalize on the traffic generated by viral memes, packaging the emotional symbols within them as "selling points" to attract attention. Examples include merchandise such as plush toys and clothing inspired by the viral phrase "Chicken, you're gorgeous." This commercialization dilutes the original emotional resonance of viral memes, gradually eroding young people's authentic sense of self-expression in emotional communication. Moreover, as younger adolescents possess underdeveloped judgment and lack the capacity to independently discern complex emotions within memes, they become susceptible to negative influences, fostering one-sided or even extreme perspectives.

4.4. Psychological-social-technical influence mechanism framework

The impact of viral internet memes on adolescents' emotional contagion is fundamentally the result of the interaction between three-dimensional factors: psychological, social, and technological [15]. The psychological dimension determines adolescents' selection and receptiveness to viral memes, providing the intrinsic motivation for emotional contagion; the social dimension reinforces the direction of emotional contagion through community norms and the prevailing online atmosphere; the technological dimension influences the speed and scope of emotional contagion via platform features and algorithmic recommendations.

These three dimensions are interwoven and dynamically interact: technological platforms generate viral memes that satisfy adolescents' psychological needs; adolescent group interactions then amplify emotional contagion through technological channels, while the effects of this contagion in turn influence platform algorithms and societal culture. This integrated framework facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the underlying logic by which viral memes shape adolescents' emotional contagion.

5. Research findings

5.1. Points of convergence with existing research

Internet memes, through their heightened emotional resonance and viral transmissibility, provide adolescents with a low-cost vehicle for emotional expression and a sense of group belonging. This finding aligns closely with prevailing perspectives in the literature. At the level of emotional resonance, the mechanisms underpinning the popularity of memes such as "lying flat", "emo", and "breaking down" observed in this study's case studies corroborate the theory of emotional contagion referenced in the literature [16]. These viral memes transform complex, nuanced personal emotions—such as anger, sadness, or shock—into symbolic, replicable cultural units, significantly lowering the threshold for expressing and understanding feelings. When adolescents employ these viral memes, they are not merely conveying a word but achieving an instantaneous emotional resonance. Without needing to elaborate on specific grievances, they swiftly garner "likes" or empathetic comments from peers sharing identical sentiments. This rapid, widespread emotional resonance amplifies the efficacy of emotional transmission, aligning with scholarly perspectives that "symbolized emotions accelerate social identification" [16]. At the level of identity formation, the theory of social currency cited in the literature review indicates that mastering and creatively employing trending memes within specific subcultures has become a crucial means for adolescents to establish identity within their peer groups and distinguish "self" from "other." This precisely corroborates existing research highlighting the pivotal role of "subcultural capital accumulation" in adolescent identity construction [17].

5.2. Differences from existing research and analysis of reasons

This paper also diverges from certain perspectives in the literature: the impact of viral internet memes on adolescents' emotions is not merely a matter of "negative catharsis", but also encompasses a positive function of emotional regulation and meaning construction [18]. Much early scholarship posited that viral memes fostered moral relativism and diminished communicative capacity. Yet this case study reveals that the deployment of internet memes frequently constitutes a dual-faceted form of emotional regulation. For instance, the popularity of the viral meme "mental energy drain" has not only provided young people with a term to describe their anxious state but also sparked widespread discussions and sharing of experiences on "how to reduce internal friction." By externalizing and downplaying negative emotions through humor, young people gain a sense of control and psychological distance from their feelings, itself a positive coping strategy for managing distress. This wisdom of finding humor in hardship is overlooked by the "pessimism theory" perspective.

The reasons for this discrepancy may lie in two factors: firstly, the temporal relevance of the research subjects. Recent viral memes increasingly focus on expressing complex social sentiments, with their evolution reflecting shifts in young people's motivations and societal moods, moving beyond the simpler emotional venting observed previously. Secondly, the depth of the research methodology. This paper captures the positive aspects of viral memes by deeply analyzing their contextual usage and interactions within social settings, whereas macro-level trend studies predominantly observe only the superficial phenomenon of emotional venting.

5.3. The Construction of emotional identity and group belonging among adolescents

Trending memes, being prolonged recipients of emotional value, are easily swayed by the deliberately conveyed emotional value of others, leading to distorted interpretations of emotional value among adolescents. Young

people seek emotional resonance and social recognition by employing shared "cultural code" memes such as "EMO" and "YYDS" [1]. Thereby fostering a sense of group belonging.

Trending memes possess "emotional value", offering stress relief and an outlet for emotional expression. However, it is important to note that overreliance on such memes may weaken one's ability to articulate thoughts. Some adolescents may become immersed in the instant gratification provided by memes, retreating into an "emotional comfort zone" that diminishes their capacity for deep reflection and expression, leading to a phenomenon known as "textual aphasia" [2].

5.4. Platform algorithms and reinforcement mechanisms in emotional transmission

The authors have observed that platforms employ technological means such as intelligent recommendations and interactive features to enhance the dissemination efficiency of viral memes. Algorithms guide user engagement through actions like likes and comments, precisely delivering trending memes to create "information silos" and "emotional echo chambers." Research indicates that the relationship between emotional intensity and user engagement is non-linear; that is, stronger emotions do not necessarily yield more pronounced interaction effects. In contrast, simple emotions like joy or sadness are more likely to trigger deeper emotional resonance (such as empathy or moving experiences) among users, thereby fostering interaction. Moreover, the impact of negative emotions on engagement is complex. While anger may boost interaction, it risks fueling emotional polarization and negative information diffusion. Conversely, emotions like sadness or fear may diminish the user's willingness to engage. Consequently, data indicates that highly arousing content—such as that evoking anger or empathy—is more likely to garner likes and shares, thereby receiving algorithmic amplification [19].

The closed-loop mechanism of "emotion-interaction-recommendation" continuously amplifies emotional responses, while rational and complex expressions of sentiment are consequently marginalized [19].

6. The double-edged sword nature of emotional contagion
6.1. The positive impact of viral internet memes on emotional transmission among adolescents

Trending memes, as "symbolic carriers" for emotional transmission, lower the threshold for expression. By engaging with such memes in group interactions, adolescents gain both emotional resonance and a sense of collective belonging, aligning with the logic of social identity theory [13]. The intelligent recommendation system, functioning as a "diffusion engine", precisely delivers tailored content to reduce acquisition costs and primarily facilitates rapid emotional resonance. The open nature of the online environment grants young people equal rights to express themselves, thereby amplifying the proactive nature of emotional transmission [20].

6.2. The negative impact of viral internet memes on emotional transmission among adolescents

The "information silos" fostered by intelligent recommendation algorithms homogenize young people's language, solidify cognitive boundaries, and readily provoke emotional polarization. The irrational nature of viral memes and linguistic distortion erodes adolescents' expressive and communicative abilities, intensifying their entertainment-driven tendencies. This traps them in fleeting pleasures, diminishing their capacity for critical thought [21]. The emotional resonance generated by viral memes can lead adolescents to become overly reliant on the internet, trapping them in a vicious cycle of "real-world needs being neglected — reliance on

the emotional resonance of viral memes — deterioration of academic and social skills", thereby distorting the normal logic of emotional transmission.

7. Conclusion

This paper employs a psychosocial-technological triadic framework to dissect the mechanisms through which viral internet memes influence emotional contagion among adolescents, tracing the complete chain of emotion encoding, transmission, resonance, and mutation. Findings reveal that memes achieve emotional encoding via symbolic transformation and dual emotional attributes, forming highly efficient transmission pathways through the synergy of algorithmic amplification and group interaction. They thus emerge as core vehicles for adolescents' emotional expression and group identity formation. The emotional transmission of viral memes exhibits marked duality: on one hand, serving as vehicles for emotional expression and social currency, they aid adolescents in gaining emotional support, regulating moods, and fostering group belonging; on the other, algorithmic recommendations create "information silos", the proliferation of stale memes, and erosion of psychological well-being can readily lead to cognitive narrowing, diminished expressive capacity, and distorted values among young people. The impact of viral internet memes on adolescents' emotional transmission stems from the complex interplay of psychological, social, and technological factors.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author contributions

Xiang Lin and Jiahao Zheng conceived the idea of the study. Hao Geng and Yuyi Zhu performed the experiments. Xintong Liao and Jiali Su analyzed the data and wrote the paper.

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