

The Similarities and Differences between Entertaining Memes in Different Internet Development Eras

Jueyan Lin¹, Ziyu He², Juntao Yan³, Zekai Fang⁴

¹The Affiliated High School of Fujian Normal University, Fuzhou 350007, China.

²Woodberry Forest School, Orange 22989, China.

³Beijing Haidian Kaiwen Academy, Beijing 100093, China.

⁴Nanjing Foreign Language School Xianlin Campus, Nanjing 210023, China.

Abstract

A meme is an idea, behavior, or style that spreads by means of imitation from person to person within a culture and often carries symbolic meaning referring to a particular phenomenon or theme. (Merriam-Webster Dictionary.) In China, the rapidly development of live-broadcast platform in 2016 makes individuals life change dramatically, especially in the forms of buzzwords, which mostly are memes inherently. The changes of meme also lead to enormous changes in the communication mode, social focus, and economic development. To clarify the differences and similarities between memes in different internet era in China, the work has conducted social research by survey and interview on line. In total, there are 200 valid questionnaires through the Internet targeting individuals who usually surfing online, with an average age of 18.39 and 17.72 in two parts of the questionnaire. By analyzing the results of the survey and the interview, the work comes to the conclusion that there are three similarities between memes after 2016 and memes before 2016: the more applicable usage, people follow the social trend for better social networking, and the fun and entertaining. Additionally, there is one results in years after 2016 that different from the years before: the re-creation stimulates stronger propagation.

Keywords

Entertaining memes, internet development, different internet eras of China.

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of technology, people have more access to entertainment. Using phones and computers and smart watches to emerge ourselves into the world of entertainment, sometimes even excessively. But these devices are merely a frame. Apps within people's phones are what really attracts us and seduces people to stay using it.

The applications people use mostly are social media and video apps. YouTube and Instagram in America, WeChat and TikTok in China. Among the many factors that attract viewers to stay, this paper aims to analyze one particularly interesting fraction: memes. Meme first appeared in biologist Richard Dawkins's book *The Selfish Gene*. Dawkins defines memes as "small culture unit of transmission, analogous to gene, that spread from person to person by copying or imitation." [1] As in 2020's society, memes are always correlated with extreme viralness and popularity. It is safe to say that memes are spread mostly by the acceptance and love of its audiences.

Memes emerge and reproduce from entertaining videos, which are correlated by technological development in society. In China, live streaming is one of the most popular types of entertainment, about 3.12 hundred million people owned personal live streaming accounts in

2016. [2] And that does not include the number of people watching live streaming, which would be many times more. Due to the increasing number of users on entertaining sites, the work decided to set the year of 2016 as the border for internet age development and analyze the similarities and differences of reasons why entertaining memes spread before and after 2016. Before constructing the research, the work sketched several hypotheses on both similarities and differences based on existing literature works. Firstly, the work believes that memes before and after 2016 all have applicable usages in the society people live in. Through China's rapid development on economic culture and faster pace of life, citizens tend to carry a lot of pressure on their backs, and many people need to find ways to express their feelings, often through memes such as "XX dog" to intentionally mock themselves and explore new ways of living life.[3] Memes can act as an abreaction to release people's wrecks when needed.

Secondly, people might spread memes to follow the social trend for better social networking, which should apply to all entertaining memes. As mentioned above, memes spread from person to person by imitation and copying. Many TikTok creators imitate other popular videos that have millions of likes, which often involves popular memes. The repetition and replication in some ways, don't necessarily undermine the core information, but enhance its evolution and spreading. [4] In addition, repeating popular sayings is an easy way to be engaging in the current society. Imitation is a very low cost, but promising method. It acts as a "social currency" to quickly fit into a social group. [5] Even though one doesn't understand the origin or the meaning of a meme completely, simply saying it to other people reduces the distance between individuals.

The last common thing is that memes all share is that they are all fun and entertaining. Most memes carry a fun meaning behind them that aim to make people laugh. The biggest purpose, perhaps, for one to watch entertaining videos is to discover fun things and be surrounded by happiness. In recent years, hosts from live streaming platforms in China such as DouYu TV and Panda TV often wanted to say comical and hilarious vocabularies to transmit positive emotions to their audiences. [6] Therefore, those viewers might say those words in other incidences due to its funniness, and a new meme will appear gradually.

The research also came up with one difference between the diffusion of memes before and after the year 2016. Before 2016 when live streaming and other entertaining platforms have not gone so popular, memes were more likely to be original, being less commercially used. However, after 2016, many live streaming platforms might want to produce popular memes as a way for audiences to stay. For example, commercial promotion helped to spread the meme "koi fish" including the use of lottery activity to attract and cover much more audiences. [7] In order to make more profits, hosts of live streaming might be willing to even create memes in their broadcasting room such as doing something dramatic and name the action something easy to say around.

After the construction of the hypothesis, the work hopes to validate the assumptions using responses from the surveys and interviews the work produced.

2. Methodology

2.1. Summary

The methodologies are: Finding related published materials online, doing survey, and doing case studies. There are a lot of researches done by scholars studying the popularities of memes. These are resources that the work can make good usage with the project. Doing survey is another method, which is suitable for the project because such method produces the first-hand opinions from the people, also with high validity since the meme is close to people's lives. The third method is interviewing, which the work obtains the chance to collect specific and in-depth meme information from individuals.

2.1.1. Reading Materials

The work collects 12 different papers, mostly academic papers published on CNKI or Google Scholar. The work also looks for the papers that talk about the internet development in China, hoping to find a cue for supporting the hypothesis that the different stages of internet give impact to the extent of memes going viral.

2.1.2. Doing Surveys

The work made two questionnaires based on the two stages of internet development (the internet before 2016 and after) in the hypothesis. The work firstly finds out two memes to add to each of the questionnaire; these four memes in total have the highest click rate in Baidu, and they each represents a year. For 2015-2016 questionnaire, the work selects two Chinese memes: first one is “Duang”, a funny onomatopoeic word created by Jackie Chan when he plays with his hair in a shampoo commercial. The second meme is “woyeshizuile” in Mandarin phonetic symbols, which is a way in Chinese to express “I am speechless”, a way of saying it that is preferred by the internet users. For 2017-2018 questionnaire, the work selects another two Chinese memes: the first one is “pipixiawomenzou” in Mandarin phonetic symbols, which can be translated as “let’s go, mantis shrimp”, and it is about a funny and absurd picture of a person riding on a mantis shrimp. The second one is “tiangou” in Mandarin phonetic symbols, which have the same meaning with an English meme called “simp”, both meaning a man who puts himself in a submissive position to chase a girl.

The work applies these most representative memes at each of the two stages as the subjects for the survey. The work has three kinds of questions: multiple choices, fill-in questions, and numerical questions. The questions are drawn from the hypothesis, and they were spread online among mostly teenagers on WeChat. The test takers are from all over China, around age 16 to 18, with 70% female, 30% male. Since the project investigates the internet memes, the work eliminates people who do not use internet and thus have no ideas to online memesjjjjj j... The work collects all the results and creates fan charts, and lists of answers in Excel showing the answers from the filling-in-the blank questions.

2.1.3. Doing Interviews

The work also does the case studies, interviewing different people, mainly peers. The work makes questions based on the hypothesis, but these questions are more specific or complex than those of the survey, which helps to come up with qualitative results.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. Why Do You Use Memes?

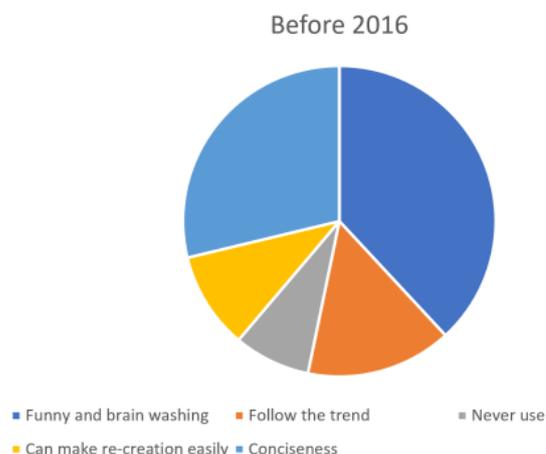


Figure 1. The reasons for using memes before 2016

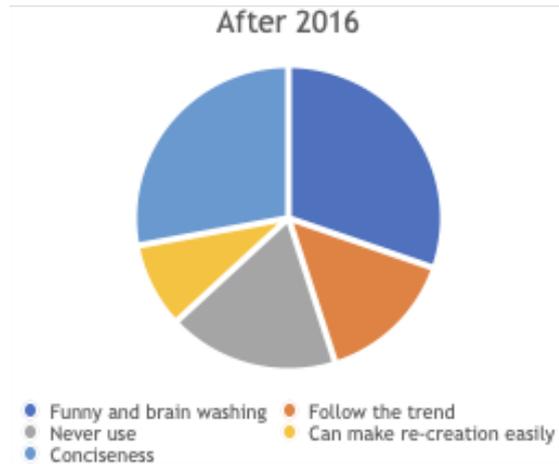


Figure 2. The reasons for using memes after 2016

Figure 1 and Figure 2 show that no matter the memes are created before or after 2016, the percentage of the people who spread it just to follow the trend is very close, which is about 19.5%. Before 2016, the percentage of people who claim that fun and entertainment will stimulate them to spread these memes is 49.07%; in 2016 the number decreased to 40.22%. Fewer people use the memes for conciseness and the percentage changes from 37.04% to 35.87%.

3.2. Do You Think Memes Have Any Positive Functions or Meanings?



Figure 3. Whether the memes before 2016 are positive

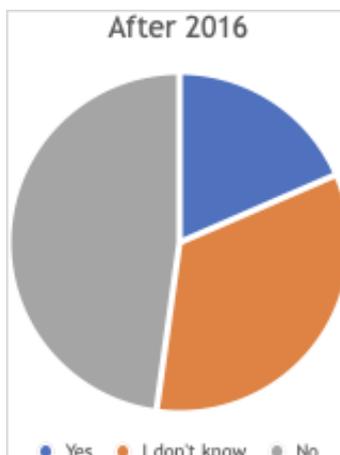


Figure 4. Whether the memes after 2016 are positive

Figure 3 and Figure 4 show that more people think the memes before 2016 have positive functions and meanings, whose percentage is 25%. However, the percentage after 2016 is only 18.48%. More people think the memes after 2016 have no positive functions or meanings and the percentage increases from 43.52% to 47.83%.

3.3. If You Thought the Memes Were Funny Before, Do You Think They'Re Still Funny Now?

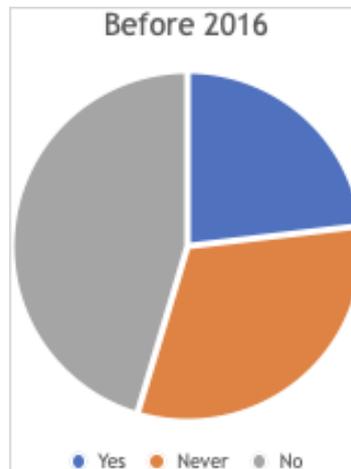


Figure 5. Whether the memes before 2016 are still funny now

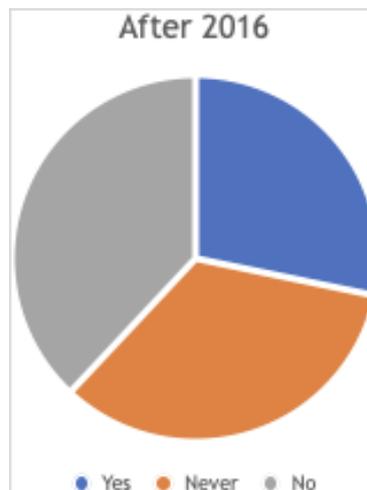


Figure 6. Whether the memes after 2016 are still funny now

Figure 5 and Figure 6 show that 23.15% of the people think the memes before 2016 remain interesting. It is 5.11% lower than the percentage after 2016, which is 28.26%. And the memes before 2016 are considered not funny by 45.37%. The number after 2016 decreases in a scale of 7.33%, which is 38.04%.

3.4. Did You First See the Memes from Original Works or Re-creations?



Figure 7. The origins of the memes before 2016

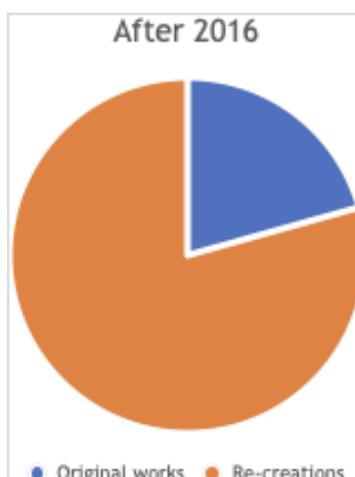


Figure 8. The origins of the memes after 2016

Figure 7 and Figure 8 show that before 2016, the percentages of people first saw the memes from original works and re-creations are 36.11% and 63.89% respectively. After 2016, it's clear that there is a significant growth of the people saw the memes from re-creations, which is a 15.46% growth. And the results turn into 20.65% and 79.35%.

3.5. When You Saw the Re-Creations, Did You Want to Re-Create Or Spread?

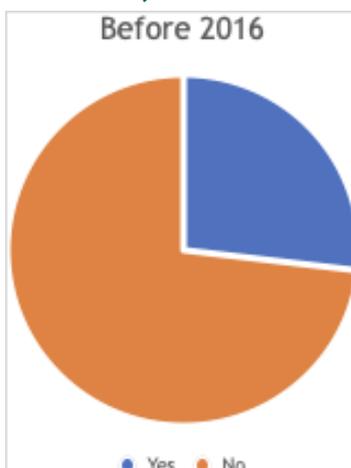


Figure 9. Whether viewers want to spread the memes before 2016

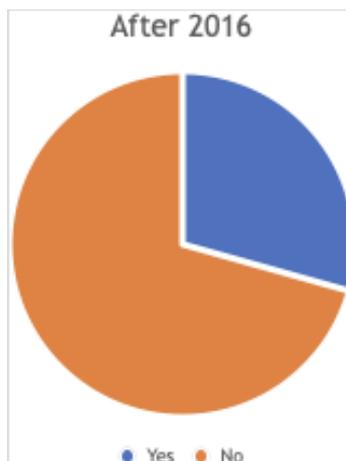


Figure 10. Whether viewers want to spread the memes after 2016

Figure 9 and Figure 10 show that before 2016, 26.85% people want to re-create or spread the memes and 73.15% people do not. After 2016, people want to re-create or spread take up 29.35%, and people who do not want to do so take up 70.65%. Comparing the statistics together, there is a 2.5% difference.

3.6. Similarity 1st: More Applicable Usage

When looking at the spread and formation of memes, the results shows a basic trend that not many memes will be used for more than two year and different ages produce non-conventional memes. According to the response from the survey gave out, the average of 106 people who think that the two memes the work selected before 2016 lasted for 14 months. And the work got the same average results from 90 people on the second survey about the two memes the work selected after 2016. The result shows that memes don't tend to last long, even if they are popular.

The fact that memes are mostly periodic supports the original hypothesis that the spread of memes provide a more applicable way for people to express their feelings. The work is by no means saying that Chinese or English don't already have enough words to persuade emotions freely, but the emergence of memes might just add a little more layer to the meaning for younger people to use (under 25). Memes tend to be more concise and right to the point, which helps us to speak faster and more effectively. Below is a part of the interview about a meme before 2016, "woyeshizuile" which has similar meaning with "I am speechless", which is conducted with a 17 years old girl.

Interviewer: Why don't you ever pick speechless?

Interviewee: Because "woyeshizuile" fits perfectly to comment things like this. Because I cannot punctuate the word speechless and it does not feel too intense when I just use speechless.

She feels more important when she uses the meme. Based on the response of this young girl, the work can tell that she doesn't like to say things without much emphasis on her emotion. Maybe she prefers the meme over the word in the dictionary to draw out more attention to herself.

Another part of the same interview but with a meme after 2016, "tiangou" which means "simp" in English.

Interviewer: Is there any particular reason that you use the meme "tiangou" ?

Interviewee: Before I knew this meme, I couldn't find other words to describe the same thing.

As a result, more applicable is a reason for the spread of all memes, not divided by 2016. The answer this time gives us a more direct sense of the spread of this meme because she simply couldn't find any word to replace the new meme before. The scenario that sucker describes is

about a boy or girl pursuing their significant other using a very low and degrading way. But is it possible that this scenario did not occur in China before the emergence of the meme? In other words, does the meme come with a certain social behavioral trend?

To answer those questions, the work needs to first examine the following two interviews about the same meme “tiangou” or “simp” in English. The first interview is with an 18 years old boy and the following one is with a 16 years old girl.

Interviewer: Do you think this meme has a positive effect on our society?

Interviewee (1): Yes. It helps bring back those suckers from their misbehaving. I use this meme as a joke to warn and wake up my friends.

Interviewer: Do you think this meme has a positive effect on our society?

Interviewee (2): Yes. At first, this meme kind of exemplified myself. Later, I often use this meme to do the same thing: make other people stop being a sucker for love. It has a positive effect on society and largely highlighted the action.

Although this meme sounds a bit rude, both interviewees agreed that it has a positive impact on the society because it could stop the act of suckers. From this meme alone, the work can infer that it develops with the pace of the society. As an aggressive and mocking meme, it does good for the society people live in; as a meme, it spreads fast because the society needs it to grow; as a social norm, it ensures to correct the wrong actions taken by people.

When the work turns the scope towards social development and the spread of memes, there might be a positive correlation. From the research done for this paper, the work can distinguish that “woyeshizuile” was widely used because individuals were searching for a way to express the feeling of speechlessness but just wanted to show a little more reluctance. The fact that speechless was no longer enough of a feeling demonstrated the pressure that the quick development of society gave to each individual, especially to younger people. When they say “woyeshizuile”, it might also be a resounding protest against the society that many couldn’t keep up with. Moreover, the meme “tiangou” exemplifies its relevance with society even clearer. When a false behavior occurred in the society, citizens as a collective found a relatively insulting way to call out the action. It then spread as a form of meme to be easy to use and repetitive. In the future, people might not see any suckers due to the effectiveness of memes.

3.7. Similarity 2nd: Memes Are Generally Funny for People

The role memes play in people’s lives can be often considered as an hilarious existence. When reaching to topics related to memes, people will often find themselves laughing for it; indeed, memes can naturally make people feel the sense of humor.

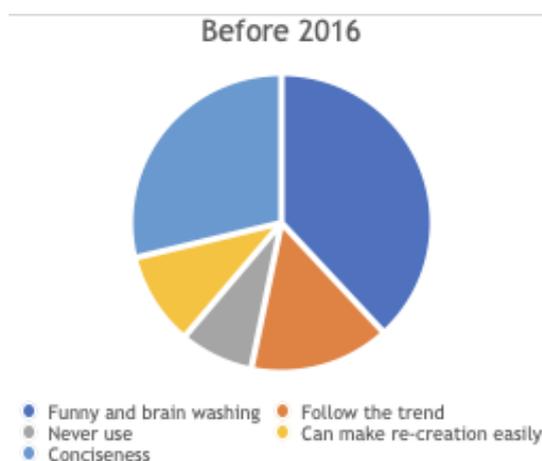


Figure 11. The reasons for using memes before 2016

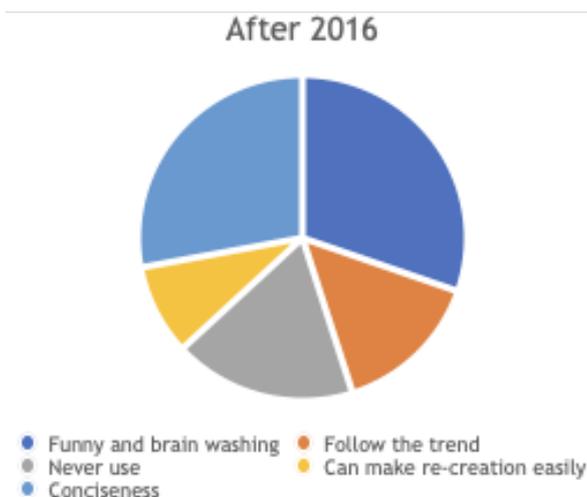


Figure 12. The reasons for using memes after 2016

Figure 11 and Figure 12 show the percentage of the reasons why people use memes before and after 2016. In both of the questionnaires, it is shown that a majority of people consider memes as hilarious, which in the 2015-2016 questionnaire the percentage saying that they use memes for the sense of humor is 49.07% and in the 2017-2018 questionnaire that percentage is 40.22%.

Homophonic memes

The sense of humor for homophonic memes is shared among people. In fact, this idea can be associated with the use of internet, where the modern concept of memes emerges: Different from writing on paper, when people are spelling the words using online typewriting, they often find some other unwanted homophonic words, which, however, are likely to be interesting and funny. [8] According to this process, some of the funniest memes with monophonic elements are likely to be more and more popular and are likely to be spread among the internet users.

The memes are linked with a humorous story

Sometimes a meme makes people laugh for the reason that it has some interesting background story or idea, and when people reach to such meme, they will, without saying it, imagining the story and getting the sense of humor. Such meme is effective especially when the background story is really popular, and everyone can react to such meme in the same manner which also enhances people's feelings of humor toward it. A good way to think about this can be that imaging a joke, a joke that gains numerous popularities has a title, and when people simply mention this title maybe at a moment when the joke fits very well, people will laugh about it. The story behind a meme is known for everyone, so people can recall their experience for the story, and associate the story with the current context.

3.8. Similarity 3rd: People Use the Memes to Follow the Social Trend for Better Social Networking

Nowadays, there are more and more ways of communication and many people tend to give up their own opinions, but to follow others' words and behaviors, especially use the memes on the Internet. Acting as a new cultural form, Internet meme expands rapidly during the spread, which provide a tool to build a cultural community for like-minded people. [9]

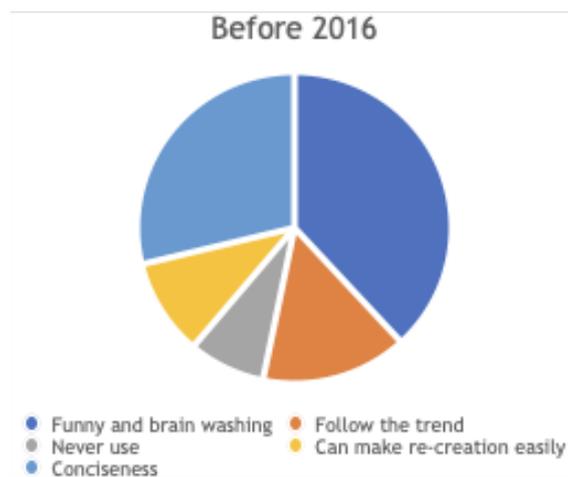


Figure 13. The reasons for using memes before 2016

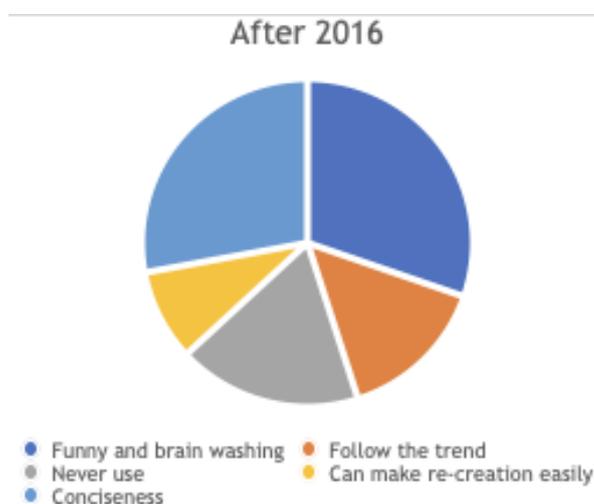


Figure 14. The reasons for using memes after 2016

Figure 13 and Figure 14 show the percentage of the reasons why people use memes before and after 2016. The work finds that no matter the meme is created before or after 2016, the percentage of people who spread it just to follow the trend is very close, which is about 19.5%. The work draws the conclusion that the conformity of using entertaining memes is the same in different Internet developing eras.

However, according to the papers and interviews with people in different ages, the work lists two main reasons of the bandwagon effect: social contact and keeping up with the times. The former is for teenagers and the latter is for middle-aged.

Social Contact for teenagers

In the interviews, many teenagers claim that when they see most people are using a meme, they will imitate, like quoting the meme to comment a video and sending re-creations to friends. Internet memes are the objects to imitate for today's teenagers, since the memes are funny and using them has no threshold. Through imitating the upper class and authority's job performance and personal updated posts, like performing stars, web celebrities, and politicians, to show the similar attribute and interact with the members, in order to build emotional connection, or to form an identity distinction between people in the same group and the ones in the different group. [10] They think there is almost no meaning or function in memes, at most making communication easier. And they do not consider memes are created deliberately.

Instead, they appear just because people think they are interesting. However, they seem not so funny now. Here are excerpts from an interview with a 17-year-old boy.

The author: Why you would like to use the memes in your daily life?

L: To follow the trend. Because everyone is using the memes.

The author: Following the trend is for having common topics with others, befriending with strangers, or other reasons?

L: Both.

Teenagers are curious about new things and want to explore more unknowns. They enjoy sharing fresh things with others, so using memes is an ideal approach for them to realize the purpose.

Keeping up with the times for middle-aged

Based on the interview with middle-aged, the work finds that they mainly learn memes from the younger and do not know the origin but usage. They use memes to show that they are not outdated and to make conversation more interesting. They believe that memes are the creative discovery of young people and some of the memes are made deliberately. Generally, they hold a positive attitude towards memes. With the development of the times, the older people have to learn more fresh things to catch up with the times. Psychologically, people are willing to keep up with the times and they are interested to the social popular elements. Especially in current society which is highly open and developed, the nations relaxed attitude towards social network speech makes people accept fresh things more and more easily to keep up with the times and gain social identity. [11] Here are excerpts an interview with a woman teacher at her fifties.

The author: Do you know some of the famous memes?

H: I do not know the origin but usage. I learn mainly from the teenagers.

The author: Do you want to use and spread them?

H: I often use them in due course to show that I am not outdated.

The author: Can you describe the scenario where you use the memes?

H: In the banter, using memes can close the distance.

Compared to young people, middle-aged are not so fascinated by fresh things. For them, what is really important is to keep pace with the times. They do not want to show they are too old to communicate with youngsters. Therefore, they learn the terms teenagers often mention and try to use them in the daily life.

3.9. Difference: The re-creation Stimulates Stronger Propagation

In the Internet era, online social media has provided users with an interactive creative experience. The openness and interactivity of the network provide convenient conditions for the multi-level dissemination of "memes" and promote various types of networks. [12] According to the analysis of questionnaire data, the work clarifies a trend that individuals are more likely to spread a meme when getting in touch with a re-creation of the original meme after 2016. The questionnaire shows that in memes before 2016, the percentage of people who claim that seeing a re-creation of memes will stimulates them to spread these meme more compared to the situation that when they never saw the re-creation is 26.85%; in 2016 the percentage of that individuals increase to 29.35%, which indicates a 3.50% increase in a sample near 100.

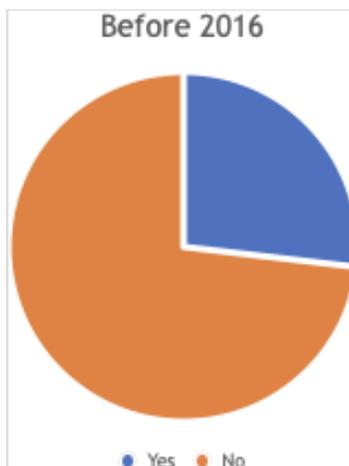


Figure 15. Whether viewers want to spread the memes before 2016

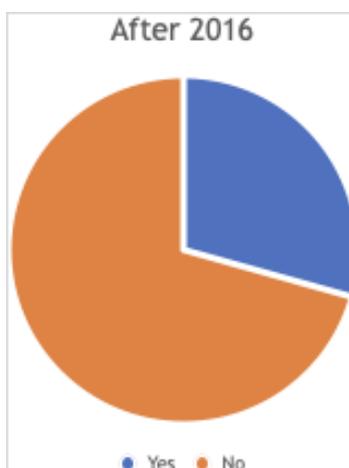


Figure 16. Whether viewers want to spread the memes after 2016

Figure 15 and Figure 16 show the percentage of the people who have incentive to spread or re-create the memes after seeing the re-creations. The work finds out that re-creation after 2016 has a more powerful impact on the spread of memes, according to the interview results and documents, there are two main reasons: the larger variety of platforms and the development of fan economy.

The larger variety of platforms

According to the interview, more than half of the interviewees who behave more likely to spread the memes after seeing the re-creation have a more various use of platform, especially the use of live-broadcasting platform like DouYu TV and video platform like bilibili after 2016. There are two main reasons for this kind of platform to develop quickly: entertainment and consumer culture. Entertainment is a necessary condition for live broadcast to survive and develop in the context of popular entertainment culture, which makes live develop in the fierce competition. The live webcast from the perspective of consumer culture, in a sense, reflects the characteristics of mass culture dissolving authority. Whether ordinary people or celebrities, any user can produce content and make their own voice. The style of live webcasting is more obviously popular and secular. [13] All these factors offer users more interest with recreation, which leads to the increasing number of re-creation in the market for viewers, this kind of repetition and duplication, does not destroy the transmission energy of core information, but promoted its inheritance, evolution and transmission. There are excerpts from interviews.

The author: is there any change after 2016 in your use of platforms online after 2016?

C: Yes, I get in touch with bilibili after the year, getting in touch with more re-creation in there ever than before.

The author: Will you have any feelings when seeing a re-creation?

C: I will be more interested in spreading it, because it is quite funny and quite a lot people talk about it, especially the most popular ones on the list.

In this case, C shows the increasing number of re-creations brought by the development of video platforms, which has a positive impact on the spreading of memes. Especially, the style of webcasting infers her a sense of belongings: she spread the most popular ones because many people talk about it.

The development of fan economy

The main characteristics of the fan economy are: fast, sharing, trust to grasp the idol's heat, actively suck fans, and expand the idol's fan base; sharing is mainly to fully play the role of fans, so that they can be connected with idols. Related content is actively shared to form fusion. [14] Due to the development of the fan economy, there are many changes on the internet providing opportunities for the change of spread of memes, especially the fan ramification.

With a goal of attracting more fans, the original fans are likely to form a system of fan ramification production without the impact of capital, including video cut, posters, cross-talk, and pictures. Fans tend to have a corporate sense to share information about idols to increase his or her popularity. This process creates a recycled trend providing fresh, attractive recreation, targeting in a large group of individuals, having an unconscious power that affects the marginal audiences online. There are excerpts from the interview.

The author: What is the reason why you have more incentive to create a spread a re-creation.

L: That is because "Love". With the love to my idol, I would more likely have passions to create something to express my opinions to them, telling all the people how great they are. Additionally, there are many creators around me, which stimulates to work harder.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the research validated the four original hypotheses of the similarities and differences of the spread of entertaining memes before and after the year of 2016. Through the evidence from the questionnaires as well as interviews, the work found out that all memes have applicable usages, contain fun messages, and share popular social trends. While memes before 2016 were spread mostly due to entertaining reasons, memes after 2016 had commercial motivations within them.

Aside from the research topic, one generic trend that the work can observe is that memes haven't changed that much. Perhaps only the messages containing memes change, but they are just carriers that help us to transmit necessary information. Similar to words and sentences people use every day, memes can be interpreted as another form of communication. Maybe in the future, more memes will emerge and people in every age group will use this new form.

With less than 8 weeks of doing this research, there wasn't enough time to develop deeper understandings. If more time is permitted, the work will conduct more interviews because the valuable answers came from those talks. In this study, the work only looked at memes from China, which is a large group, but the work might find more trends when evaluating memes from the entire world.

References

[1] Limor, S. (2013). *Memes in Digital Culture*. The MIT Press, London.

- [2] Ai Mei consult. (2017). Online Streaming report for China in 2016 Q3. <http://www.ebrun.com/20170104/209309.shtml>
- [3] Yu, Y. N. (2019). The cause and influence of the meme "XX dog". Youth Literator, 64: 196.
- [4] Zhao, Z. (2020). Memetics and spread mechanism of social short videos' "same type". Media Forum, 3: 30-32.
- [5] Hua, K. C. (2020). The reason for the spread and implication of meme. Southeast Communication, 17: 86-87.
- [6] Yang, J.W., Wu, X. Y. (2020). A study on the current situation of live streaming platforms in China in the context of consumer culture- a case study of DouYu TV. Digital Space, 19: 52.
- [7] Zhao, L. L. (2019). The social use and teaching idea of the meme "koi fish". Journal of Shanxi Institute of Economic Management, 21: 114-117.
- [8] Wang, H. (2019). The analysis of the spread of memes. Journal of Shandong Normal University, 64: 130-138.
- [9] Yu, Y. N. (2019). The cause and influence of the meme "XX dog". Youth Literator, 64: 196.
- [10] Li, J., He, C.Y. (2019) A study on the mode of meme's role in youth network popular culture-taking "official announcement" as an example. Southeast Communication, 16: 76-80.
- [11] Yuan, Z. (2019) The analysis of network buzzwords based on memetics. Jingchu Academy, 5: 165-168.
- [12] Yu, Q., Mo, G.Z. (2019) The analysis of "koi fish" communication phenomenon from the perspective of network meme. Research on Transmission Competence, 3: 265-267.
- [13] Yang, J.W., Wu, X. Y. (2020). A study on the current situation of live streaming platforms in China in the context of consumer culture- a case study of DouYu TV. Digital Space, 19: 52.
- [14] Song, X. M. (2019). Fan economy in idol market. Technology and Economic Guide, 5: 230.