

An Analysis of College Students' Motivations for Spreading "Strong Memes" Based on the Uses and Gratifications Theory

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Abstract: In recent years, with the widespread use of the Internet, social media platforms have become increasingly popular among college students, and the frequency of using internet buzzwords such as “emo,” “doge,” and “finger heart” has continued to rise. This study hypothesizes a correlation between the frequency of buzzword usage and college students’ willingness to spread strong memes. Using questionnaire surveys and SPSS analysis, the study explores the motivations from the perspective of the Uses and Gratifications Theory. The results show that the main motivations for college students to spread strong memes include emotional regulation, interpersonal relationships, self-affirmation, and environmental monitoring, providing a reference for understanding interpersonal communication in online communities^[1].

1. Background of the Problem

As of June 2023, China had 1.079 billion internet users, with college students and other highly educated groups being the main users. Their time spent on entertainment applications continues to increase.

"Strong memes" are widely spread and frequently replicated online cultural elements, such as “emo” and “doge,” appearing in forms like text, images, and gestures.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory focuses on audience motivations for media use and the satisfaction of their needs^[2]. As digital natives, college students actively spread internet buzzwords. This study, based on the theory, explores their motivations for spreading strong memes, aiming to expand both theoretical and practical perspectives.

2. Literature Review

(1) Uses and Gratifications Theory

This theory analyzes media usage behavior from the perspective of audience motivation. In China, it is mainly applied to explain social phenomena and user behavior^[3], but tends to be overly instrumental and shows weak variable correlation. This study builds a motivation scale based on McGuire's four types of gratifications to explore the relationship between college students’ motivations and their willingness to spread strong memes^[4].

(2) Meme Theory

A "meme" is a replicable cultural unit, first introduced by Dawkins in 1976. Strong memes have high transmissibility and align with the characteristics of internet buzzwords. Existing research mostly takes a theoretical approach and lacks quantitative analysis^[5]. This study combines the two theories to quantitatively explore college students' motivations, aiming to fill a research gap.

3. Research Subjects

This study focuses on college students, as they are the main group spreading "strong memes" and are highly active in using internet buzzwords. The questionnaire was distributed electronically via platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and QQ, using clear and accessible language.

A total of 239 responses were collected, with 209 valid responses after excluding invalid ones, resulting in an 87.45% validity rate. Among the respondents, 74.6% were female, and 88.5% lived in urban areas. Most held undergraduate or master's degrees, accounting for 87.6%. Over 90% used social media for more than two hours daily, aligning well with the study's requirements. The demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Demographic Characteristics of Survey Sample (N=209)

Variable	Options	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	53	25.4%
	Female	156	74.6%
Education Level	Junior College	13	6.2%
	Undergraduate	89	42.6%
	Master's Degree	94	45.0%
	Doctoral Degree and Above	4	1.9%
	Other	9	4.3%
Residential Area	Urban	185	88.5%
	Town	24	11.5%
Average Daily Social Media Usage Time	0–2 hours (including 2 hours)	18	8.6%
	2–4 hours (including 4 hours)	68	32.5%
	4–6 hours (including 6 hours)	65	31.1%
	6–8 hours (including 8 hours)	31	14.8%
	More than 8 hours	27	12.9%

4. Research Hypotheses

This study, based on the Uses and Gratifications Theory, proposes four motivational dimensions for college students' dissemination of strong memes. A questionnaire was designed, revised after a small-scale pilot survey, and formally distributed. Data were analyzed and hypotheses tested using SPSS.

(1) Emotional Regulation

College students face academic pressure; spreading strong memes helps relieve stress and regulate emotions.

H1: Frequency of meme dissemination is related to emotional regulation.

(2) Interpersonal Relationships

Memes help maintain virtual and real-life social connections.

H2: Frequency of meme dissemination is related to interpersonal relationships.

(3) Self-affirmation

Using memes supports self-reflection and value affirmation^[6].

H3: Frequency of meme dissemination is related to self-affirmation.

(4)Environmental Surveillance

Sharing memes aids students in adapting to social contexts and understanding their roles.

H4: Frequency of meme dissemination is related to environmental surveillance.

5. Variable Processing

(1) Dependent Variable: Frequency of Use

The dependent variable refers to how often college students spread strong memes on social platforms. Scored on a 1–4 scale: Never = 1, Occasionally = 2, Often = 3, Always = 4.

(2)Independent Variables: Motivations for Dissemination

Based on the four dimensions of the Uses and Gratifications Theory, items were designed using a Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The average score of each dimension was used for analysis.

(3)Control Variables

Demographic factors such as gender, education level, and place of residence were controlled to reduce their impact on the research results.

6. Data Analysis

(1) Reliability Test

To ensure data reliability, a reliability analysis was conducted. The Cronbach's α coefficients for all dimensions were above 0.8, exceeding the standard threshold of 0.7, indicating good internal consistency and high reliability of the scale, making it suitable for use. The reliability results for each motivational dimension are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Reliability Analysis of Measurement Dimensions

Scale	Item	Cronbach's α
Emotional Regulation Dimension Questionnaire	3	0.857
Interpersonal Relationships Dimension Questionnaire	3	0.875
Self-Affirmation Dimension Questionnaire	3	0.850
Environmental Surveillance Dimension Questionnaire	3	0.880

Validity reflects the accuracy of a measurement tool. As shown in Table 3, the KMO value is 0.917 and the p-value of Bartlett's test is close to 0.000, indicating good structural validity of the questionnaire and statistically significant results.

Table 3. KMO and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity

KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy		0.917
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approximate Chi-Square	1946.008
	Degrees of Freedom	66
	Significance	0.000

(2)ANOVA

One-way ANOVA was used to test the impact of gender and education level on the frequency of strong meme dissemination. The homogeneity of variance tests showed significance levels above 0.05, meeting the analysis requirements. As shown in Table 4, gender had a significant effect ($p = 0.008 < 0.01$), while education level showed no significant difference ($p = 0.266 > 0.05$).

Table 4. One-Way ANOVA of Gender and Education Level

		Sum Squares	of F	P
Gender	Between Groups	2.773	7.188	0.008
	Within Groups	79.859		
Education Level	Between Groups	2.073	1.313	0.266
	Within Groups	80.558		

(3)Correlation Analysis Between Dissemination Behavior and Motivation

Under the framework of the Uses and Gratifications Theory, the relationship between four types of motivation and dissemination frequency was analyzed (see Table 5). Results show that emotional regulation, interpersonal relationships, self-affirmation, and environmental surveillance all have a significant positive correlation with dissemination frequency ($p < 0.01$).

Table 5. Correlation Analysis of Strong Meme Dissemination Behavior and Motivations

		Dissemination Frequency	Emotional Regulation	Emotional Regulation	Emotional Regulation	Emotional Regulation
Dissemination Frequency	Pearson Correlation	1				
Emotional Regulation	Pearson Correlation	0.210**	1			
Interpersonal Relationships	Pearson Correlation	0.244**	0.663**	1		
Self-Affirmation	Pearson Correlation	0.254**	0.613**	0.746**	1	
Environmental Surveillance	Pearson Correlation	0.299**	0.606**	0.722**	0.795**	1

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$, n.s.=not.significant

(4)Regression Analysis

Regression results (see Table 6) show that emotional regulation ($\beta = 0.210$, $p < 0.01$) is significantly related to dissemination frequency, supporting H1. Interpersonal relationships, self-affirmation, and environmental surveillance ($\beta = 0.244$, 0.254 , 0.299 respectively; $p < 0.001$) are highly significant, supporting H2, H3, and H4. All four motivations show a strong positive correlation with dissemination frequency.

Table 6. Regression Analysis of Strong Meme Dissemination Behavior and Motivations

	R-squared	Standardized Coefficient (Beta)	Significance
Emotional Regulation	0.044	0.210	0.002**
Interpersonal Relationships	0.060	0.244	0.000***
Self-Affirmation	0.064	0.254	0.000***
Environmental Surveillance	0.089	0.299	0.000***

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$, n.s.=not.significant

(5)Multiple Regression Analysis

A multiple regression analysis was conducted on the four types of motivations (see Table 7).

Results show that emotional regulation, interpersonal relationships, self-affirmation, and environmental surveillance all have non-significant β values ($p > 0.05$), indicating limited overall predictive power. However, environmental surveillance ($p = 0.040$) is relatively more significant, suggesting stronger explanatory potential.

Table 7. Multiple Regression Analysis of Strong Meme Dissemination Behavior and Motivations

	R-squared	Standardized Coefficient (Beta)	Significance
Emotional Regulation	0.092	0.029	0.758
Interpersonal Relationships		0.040	0.720
Self-Affirmation		0.014	0.911
Environmental Surveillance		0.242	0.040

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$, n.s.=not.significant

7. Research Findings and Discussion

From the "environmental surveillance" dimension, college students' meme-spreading frequency shows a strong positive correlation with this motivation. Strong memes have a long lifespan and reflect current trends, prompting students to frequently share them to obtain information and adapt to social environments. This motivation shows greater explanatory power for dissemination frequency than the other three.

However, the multiple regression analysis reveals that the overall predictive power of the four motivations is limited. Although environmental surveillance stands out, other unaccounted variables likely exist^[7]. The sample lacks diversity, with mostly highly educated urban participants, limiting the study's generalizability. Future research should include more personal and social factors and adopt more representative sampling methods^[8].

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