

An Interpretation of Internet Curse Words from the Perspective of Memetics— Taking "Brazilian Steak", "NMSL" and " Numbly XX" as Examples

Taowen Huang

College of Foreign Languages and Literature, Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou, Gansu Province, 730000, China

Abstract: This study investigates the replication and dissemination mechanisms of internet curse words through the lens of memetics, focusing on three representative cases: "Brazilian steak," "NMSL," and "XX ma le (numbly XX)." As linguistic memes, these expressions exemplify how taboo language evolves and proliferates in digital spaces, driven by imitation, adaptation, and socio-cultural dynamics. The analysis reveals distinct transmission patterns—heteromorphic (e.g., borrowed terms and acronyms) and isomorphic heteronymous (e.g., dialectal sarcasm)—while highlighting their roles in reinforcing biases, evading censorship, or enabling group identity. Findings underscore the dual impact of such memes: facilitating creative expression yet exacerbating cyber violence. The paper calls for balanced governance strategies to mitigate harm while preserving linguistic innovation, contributing to interdisciplinary debates on internet language evolution.

Keywords: Memetics, meme, curse words

1. Introduction

Language can become a linguistic meme after undergoing processes of imitation, replication, and dissemination through memetic diffusion. Thus, as a part of language, curse words can also be analyzed using memetic theory to explore their replication, dissemination, and triggering mechanisms. However, research on curse words, an inseparable component of language, has lagged behind other linguistic studies, and research from the perspective of memetics is even scarcer. Therefore, this paper selects "Brazilian steak," "NMSL," and "XX ma le (numbly XX)" as examples for memetic interpretation. These expressions are currently active and popular online, and they align with the classification of curse words and meme manifestations, making them representative cases. In an era of information explosion, they serve as strong memes memorized and disseminated by countless individuals.

2. Memetics and Memes

Memetics is a theory that uses Darwinian evolutionary principles to explain the patterns of human cultural evolution. In the cultural realm, people imitate and spread specific ideas or concepts, which continue to circulate to this day. Memetics focuses on such cultural phenomena, revealing the underlying evolutionary mechanisms. The British biologist Richard Dawkins first proposed this concept in his book *The Selfish Gene* ^[1] to analogize the role of genes in cultural transmission.

The meme, as the core of this theory, was also introduced in this work. Dawkins ^[1] pointed out that memes are the basic units of cultural transmission, encompassing ideas, concepts, catchphrases, religious beliefs, and more. Like genes, memes possess the characteristics of self-replication and dissemination, spreading through human imitation, learning, and other means. For example, the melody and lyrics of a popular song can quickly spread and be widely replicated and imitated among people. Dawkins also proposed three criteria for successful memes in *The Selfish Gene*: fidelity, fecundity,

and longevity^[1]. Memes that outperform others in fidelity, fecundity, and longevity are considered successful. From related research, strong memes are derived from the study of meme transmission characteristics, referring to those with high dissemination efficiency and significant influence.

Since the rise of the internet in the early 21st century, scholars have attempted to use memetic theory to explore online language phenomena. In 2006, Dawkins further elaborated on the cultural transmission characteristics of memes, emphasizing their adaptability and speed in the internet environment. Today, research on online language from the perspective of memetics has matured, covering various aspects of internet language^[2]. In studying the formation mechanisms of online language, Blackmore further developed memetics, exploring the role of memes in cultural evolution and laying the foundation for research on meme transmission in online language. Shifman^[3] first applied memetics to the study of internet joke transmission, proposing the concept of "internet meme" and providing a methodological framework for memetic analysis of online language. In 2013, Shifman systematically studied the dissemination mechanisms of internet memes, analyzing their characteristics and their role in socio-cultural contexts^[4]. Weng et al. used mathematical models to study the competition mechanisms of memes in environments with limited attention, offering theoretical explanations for the rapid spread and decline of online language^[5]. Gao Bingzhong combined the characteristics of Chinese internet language to explore the application of memetics in a local context, analyzing the dissemination paths and variation mechanisms of online language^[6]. Li Jing analyzed the memetic dissemination mechanisms of the internet catchphrase "fo xi (Buddha-like)" and discussed its cultural significance and social impact^[7]. Today, scholars are attempting to integrate theories from sociolinguistics and other disciplines to explore the role of memes in the formation of online language and their interaction with socio-cultural backgrounds, demonstrating that memetic theory remains active in the study of internet catchphrases^[8]. With interdisciplinary integration and the development of the internet, this trend will continue to thrive.

However, as a part of language, research on curse words from the perspective of memetics remains limited and awaits further enrichment.

3. Curse Words and Internet Curse Words

Curse words, also known as profanity or vulgar language, are often regarded as "special" linguistic phenomena due to their taboo nature and frequent use in offensive contexts. Research on curse words is much scarcer compared to other linguistic components. Studies on curse words also involve various disciplines, including linguistics, psychology, and communication.

Allan et al. explored linguistic taboos, including swear words, insulting language, and other vocabulary prohibited by society or culture, analyzing their origins, functions, and manifestations in different cultures from linguistic, sociological, and cultural perspectives^[9]. Hughes examined the meanings and functions of curse words in different cultures, analyzing their connections with religious, gender, and class factors^[10]. Jay explored the universality and functionality of swear words while analyzing their role in emotional expression and social interaction^[11]. Synthesizing existing research on curse words, it is evident that most studies focus on their origins and classification. The majority of researchers categorize curse words as negative factors, and studies on their effects and functions often emphasize their negative aspects.

Internet curse words refer to offensive, insulting, or emotionally charged language used in online environments. With the development of internet technology, curse words, like other linguistic phenomena, have become active on screens. While the internet has brought countless people closer, it has also provided a channel for the violent and aggressive side of language to spread. Any online social platform, such as social media, forums, or chat tools, may exhibit traces of curse words. Despite their prevalence, research on internet curse words remains limited. Chen Linlin summarized seven word-formation rules for online vulgar language through the study of internet slang: Chinese pinyin abbreviations, numerical homophones, semantic shifts, extensions of old terms, borrowing from Hong Kong and Taiwan slang, English borrowings, and the use of symbols and emoticons^[12]. Wang Junjie adopted a classical linguistic perspective to explore internet curse words from multiple angles, including their structural forms, content classification, and comparisons with everyday curse words^[13]. He attributed internet curse words to the freedom of online spaces, the lack of legal constraints, and the drive to rebel against tradition and vent emotions. Li Qingyang analyzed online curse words on the "Tianya Forum" from rhetorical and pragmatic perspectives, mentioning memetics in the study^[14]. Jiang Xintong examined the formation background of Chinese curse words and borrowed classification methods from English curse words to categorize internet

curse words into seven types, including feibai (deliberate miswriting), xizi (character dissection), irony, exaggeration, and metonymy^[15]. Through real-life cases from microblog interactions, Jiang analyzed the pragmatic functions of internet curse words in online communication, such as avoidance, insult, politeness, banter, concealment, and exclamation. Li Yunfeng studied the term "ni mei (your sister)," noting its various expressive forms and discourse functions, reflecting the flexibility of internet language and the diversity of emotional expression^[16]. Bai Liying conducted empirical research to analyze the types and influencing factors of curse words in buyer comments on e-commerce platforms, revealing the impact of gender, age, and education level on the use of curse words^[17]. Wang Xiaoyan explored the social functions and cultural significance of swear words in internet language, analyzing how they reflect social emotions and group identity^[18]. Lin Hongzhi studied the variation patterns of internet curse words from the perspective of memetics, noting that censorship policies aimed at purifying the online environment actually accelerated the variation and spread of curse words^[19]. Lin called for positive guidance rather than simple censorship to address the issue of internet curse words.

In summary, research on internet curse words primarily explores their origins and functions or analyzes specific curse words from linguistic theoretical perspectives. Few studies are based on memetics, leaving significant room for further research. Therefore, this paper selects "Brazilian steak," "NMSL," and "XX ma le (numbly XX)" for memetic interpretation, as they are currently popular online expressions and align with the classification of curse words and meme manifestations.

Today, the online environment is constantly changing. With the evolution of internet buzzwords and the development of intelligent detection and censorship mechanisms, internet curse words can be divided into three categories: direct insults, implicit hints, and malicious teasing. Direct insults are straightforward and vulgar curse words that demean others' identities or status, such as "sha bi (idiot)" or "diao si (loser)," using explicit verbal attacks to embarrass or anger the target. Implicit hints are covert and community-specific, where outsiders may not easily understand their meanings, but they carry offensive and insulting connotations within certain groups. Examples include acronyms like "TMD (ta ma de, damn it)" or "NMSL," which are primarily used to evade detection and censorship. Malicious teasing includes homophonic terms like "jiao shou (a howling beast, which sounds the same as the word *professor* in Chinese)" or "zhuan jia (a master of bricks, which sounds the same as the word *expert* in Chinese)," often used to mock or satirize professors or experts perceived as having inappropriate behavior or low competence, carrying negative and playful undertones.

Blackmore proposed that meme transmission can occur in two ways: "copying the result or copying the instructions."^[2] These correspond to the phenotypic and genotypic forms of memes, respectively. According to He Ziran's classification, phenotypic memes can be further divided into homophonic transmission, homomorphic associative transmission, and isomorphic heteronymous transmission, while genotypic memes can be categorized into direct transmission of identical information and heteromorphic transmission of identical information^[20]. In the successful replication and dissemination of internet language memes, the most prominent are the heteromorphic transmission of identical information in genotypic memes and the isomorphic heteronymous transmission in phenotypic memes^[21].

3.1 Heteromorphic Transmission of Identical Information: "Brazilian Steak"

Brazilian steak restaurants often offer a variety of grilled meats in buffet-style servings, attracting widespread attention for their "all-you-can-eat" and "on-site carving" features. This has created an impression among netizens that "steak is readily available in Brazil." However, the term "Brazilian steak" is used online to refer to promiscuous women in China, originating from inappropriate remarks by foreigners. In December 2024, Ukrainian married esports player ZEUS came to China for a competition and was fervently pursued by Huang Mouting, a student at a university in Dalian. The two engaged in intimate relations. After returning to his country, ZEUS posted videos of Huang online, claiming, "Chinese women are easy to get, like buying cheap steak in Brazil." Subsequently, the derogatory and discriminatory term "Brazilian steak" was used by some foreigners to describe Chinese women engaging in intimate relations with foreign men, implying that Chinese girls are "cheap and easy." Recently, foreign male bloggers on TikTok initiated challenges to pick up 1,000 Chinese girls, using "Brazilian steak" in video titles to insult the girls they successfully approached and boasting about it on foreign platforms. This behavior not only insults Chinese women but also deepens biases and misunderstandings about them abroad.

"Brazilian steak" belongs to the heteromorphic transmission of identical information through borrowed terms and is

also an example of implicit hint curse words. Like past terms such as "dan huang pai (egg yolk pie)" and "xiang jiao ren (banana person)"—both referring to people of Asian appearance who favor white culture—it uses concrete objects to offend, demean, or mock specific groups. From a memetic perspective, this inappropriate expression has become a negative meme online, undergoing processes of assimilation, memory, expression, and transmission, negatively impacting internet culture and social perceptions.

1) Assimilation Stage: The insulting expression "Brazilian steak" originated from discriminatory and offensive remarks by foreigners about Chinese women. This negative information entered the cognitive sphere of some netizens through online platforms. Some individuals with ulterior motives and others lacking judgment were drawn to such content, beginning to understand its meaning. Despite its immoral nature, the term was "accepted" within certain circles, completing the assimilation process of meme transmission.

2) Memory Stage: Due to its provocative and controversial nature, the term left an impression on some people's memories. Foreign bloggers spreading such content used videos to reinforce the retention of this negative information in viewers' memories. The repetitive nature of online dissemination further solidified the association between "Brazilian steak" and its derogatory meaning, completing the memory stage of transmission.

3) Expression Stage: Some netizens influenced by this negative content began using "Brazilian steak" in online discussions. They employed the term in comments, social media groups, and other platforms, spreading it to those unaware of its true meaning. This expression perpetuated the insulting concept and misled more people, expanding the reach of this negative meme.

4) Transmission Stage: Online platforms facilitated the widespread transmission of "Brazilian steak." Short-video platforms like TikTok, with their massive reach, allowed the offensive content to spread rapidly across regions and age groups. The sharing and discussion features of other social media platforms further accelerated the meme's dissemination, causing it to proliferate widely online and creating harmful effects.

3.2 Heteromorphic Transmission of Identical Information: "NMSL"

"NMSL" originated from the abusive language habitually used by streamer Sun Xiaochuan during live broadcasts. It is the pinyin abbreviation of "ni ma si le (curse the other's mother to suffer misfortune)." Around 2018, Wang Sicheng and Hua Qianfang clashed on Weibo over whether English should be universally taught in China. Wang changed his profile picture to Hua's photo with the letters "NMSL," drawing widespread attention and shares. Later, during an incident where singer Cai Xukun was targeted with laser pointers at a concert, anti-fans used "NMSL" and "RIP" to attack him. Cai's fans reinterpreted "NMSL" as "Never Mind the Scandal and Libel," giving it a seemingly positive connotation. During the 2020 NBA incident involving Daryl Morey's insulting remarks about China, patriotic Chinese netizens used "NMSL" in comments targeting Morey. The term spread overseas, where it was mimicked by foreign netizens, spawning memes, merchandise, and other derivatives. However, it was also exploited by anti-China forces as a tool to attack Chinese people. On September 6, 2021, the Chinese video platform Bilibili announced a crackdown on "NMSL," banning it from interactions and video content as a form of personal attack.

"NMSL" belongs to the heteromorphic transmission of identical information through acronyms and is also an example of implicit hint curse words. Its essence is the pinyin abbreviation of a Chinese phrase, allowing near-direct curses while evading detection and censorship on social platforms. From a memetic perspective, "NMSL," as an internet curse word, has undergone processes of creation, dissemination, and negative impact, aligning with memetic mechanisms.

1) Creation of the Meme: "NMSL" was initially the pinyin abbreviation of "ni ma si le" created by some netizens to express aggression more covertly. Using acronyms instead of full phrases, it formed a concise yet highly offensive expression, laying the foundation for its subsequent meme status.

2) Assimilation Process: In early 2018, within fan culture, anti-fans misled Cai Xukun's fanbase into spreading "NMSL," bringing it into public awareness. Although many fans initially believed it had a positive meaning, its true offensive nature was later exposed, allowing this negative meme to spread online. Some individuals, upon learning its insulting meaning, incorporated it into their linguistic repertoire, completing assimilation.

3) Memory Stage: The 2019 clash between Wang Sicheng and Hua Qianfang, as well as the widespread use of "NMSL" during the NBA Morey incident, made the term highly visible. These high-profile events, coupled with its concise

and impactful nature, cemented "NMSL" in netizens' memories, facilitating its retrieval and use in online interactions.

4) Expression and Transmission Stage: "NMSL" was widely used and spread during various online controversies. For example, it appeared in discussions about Dr. Zhang Wenhong's advice, poet Bei Dao's posts, and the translation of Fang Fang's diary. This reflects the expression stage. The convenience and immediacy of online platforms like Weibo and forums accelerated its transmission, spreading it across different online communities and even overseas.

In summary, the acronym "NMSL," as a negative meme, has harmed online culture and social perceptions during its dissemination. It has contributed to uncivilized online interactions, exacerbated cyber violence, and been exploited by anti-China forces, damaging the national image and the reputation of Chinese netizens. It serves as a symbol of discrimination and prejudice, highlighting the severe consequences of negative memes.

3.3 Isomorphic Heteronymous Transmission: The "XX ma le (Numbly XX)" Pattern

"XX ma le" is a popular internet catchphrase in recent years, typically used to express extreme emotions or states, such as "lei ma le (numbly tired)" or "xiao ma le (numbly laughing)." The term "ma le" originally employs synesthesia, a rhetorical device where descriptive language transfers sensations, blending auditory, visual, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile senses to create vivid and novel imagery. Synesthesia is not uncommon in internet slang, such as "gan huo (dried goods)" blending visual and auditory senses or "ke yan ke tian chuan da (salty-sweet outfits)" blending visual and gustatory senses. However, when used as curse words, this pattern primarily appears in "nao ma le (numbly noisy)" and "xiao ma le (numbly filial)."

"Nao ma le" was originally a dialect term from the Sichuan-Chongqing region, meaning "incessantly loud and noisy," used to describe chaotic and clamorous scenes. In online contexts, particularly in esports circles, commentators imbued it with a sarcastic tone, evolving it to mean "stop yelling, that's enough." For example, when fans of a team that had boasted excessively were defeated, opposing fans would use "nao ma le" to mock them, implying, "After all that bragging, you still lost—pathetic." Later, it was widely applied to mock rival teams, sports clubs, or even anime fanbases, expressing disdain for excessive boasting or noise. Although "nao ma le" has long existed as a dialect term, its rise as an internet buzzword occurred in 2024 during the League of Legends MSI tournament, after which it spread rapidly.

"Xiao ma le" is derived from the internet term "xiao (filial piety)," a derogatory term for brainless fans of streamers or celebrities, such as "Xuan xiao zi (Xuan's filial sons)" referring to fans of streamer Xuan Shen. "xiao ma le" exaggerates this mockery, ridiculing those who blindly defend certain positions or figures, conveying a sense of "so filial it's ridiculous." The exact origin of this expression is unclear, but "xiao" was already common online by at least 2022. For example, in July 2022, explanations of internet terms like "dian ji xiao ying beng ma (classic, urgent, filial, win, stiff, numb)" appeared, suggesting "xiao ma le" likely emerged and gained popularity between 2022 and 2024.

From a memetic perspective, "nao ma le" and "xiao ma le," as internet catchphrases, have undergone processes of replication, dissemination, and variation in online cultural transmission.

1) Meme Formation: "nao ma le" originated as a dialect term, with its original meaning serving as the core content of the meme. In specific online environments, particularly esports circles, it acquired a new sarcastic meaning, giving it the potential to become an internet meme. Its association with high-profile events like the 2024 League of Legends MSI tournament and widespread use among fans solidified its status as a culturally significant online meme. "Xiao ma le" is a variation based on the structure of "nao ma le," retaining its sarcastic tone and style while replacing "nao (noisy)" with "xiao (filial)" to create a new form of mockery targeting excessive sycophancy or blind loyalty online.

2) Assimilation Process: In the context of esports, fans of different teams encountered "nao ma le" with its new meaning. When LPL fans used it to mock LCK supporters, other fanbases adopted it to express their stance, integrating it into their online vocabulary and completing assimilation. Similarly, when "xiao ma le" appeared online, netizens familiar with "nao ma le" quickly grasped its meaning and usage, adopting it for their own online interactions.

3) Memory Stage: The high visibility of esports events and frequent use of "nao ma le" in online discussions made it memorable. Its concise and impactful nature, combined with intense fan debates, left a lasting impression, facilitating its recall in future interactions. "Xiao ma le," as a novel and teasing expression, attracted attention and was easily remembered. Its alignment with common sarcastic scenarios online created memorable moments, enabling netizens to recall it quickly in similar contexts.

4) Expression and Transmission: As "nao ma le" gained popularity in esports, it began appearing on various online platforms. Fans used it extensively on social media, gaming forums, and live-stream chats, broadening its reach. Its usage expanded beyond esports to mock rival sports teams, anime fanbases, and other online disputes, reaching wider audiences. "xiao ma le" spread through online platforms and interactions, appearing in comments, group chats, and other spaces where netizens used it to mock certain behaviors. Its dissemination grew as more people adopted it, evolving from a niche term to a widely recognized sarcastic expression.

The spread of "nao ma le" and "xiao ma le" has enriched online language expression, reflecting the emotions and attitudes of online communities. However, their sarcastic nature can also fuel conflicts and spread negativity. Additionally, their transmission exemplifies the rapid evolution and dissemination of internet culture, showcasing netizens' creativity and tendency to follow trends.

4. Conclusion

Internet curse words, as a form of linguistic memes, rapidly spread through imitation, replication, and dissemination in online spaces, forming unique cultural phenomena. From the perspective of memetics, this paper analyzed the replication, dissemination, and triggering mechanisms of three internet curse words: "Brazilian steak," "NMSL," and "XX ma le (numbly XX)." The study found that their dissemination relies not only on the memetic properties of language but also on the internet environment, socio-cultural contexts, and user psychology. Specifically, "Brazilian steak" spreads through borrowed terms and implicit hints, reflecting cultural biases and discrimination in online language. "NMSL," as an acronym, demonstrates how internet language evades censorship while conveying strong negative emotions concisely. "XX ma le" showcases the sarcastic and teasing functions of online language within specific groups through isomorphic heteronymous transmission.

Although these curse words serve certain expressive functions in internet culture, their negative impacts cannot be ignored. They exacerbate cyber violence and may harm social perceptions and cultural atmospheres. Future research should explore how positive guidance and effective online governance mechanisms can mitigate these effects, fostering healthier online language environments. Memetics provides a new perspective for understanding the dissemination mechanisms of internet language. Future studies could integrate theories from other disciplines to delve deeper into the evolution of online language and its socio-cultural significance.

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