

# An Analysis of Semantic Generalization of Chinese Internet Buzzwords from the Perspective of Cognitive Metaphor

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## Abstract

With the widespread development of Internet, Internet buzzwords have attracted much attention in the field of linguistics. This paper aims to analyze both terminology-specific and framework-based Chinese Internet buzzwords in terms of the processes of semantic generalization, influence mechanisms and outcomes. Drawing on cognitive metaphor theory and meme theory, the analysis focuses on three stages of semantic generalization of Chinese Internet buzzwords: semantic metaphor, semantic abstraction, and semantic blending. It is found that terminology-specific and framework-based Internet buzzwords have some differences in the third stage of semantic blending, and that changes in social, linguistic, cultural, and psychological factors influence their semantic generalization process. This potentially leads to such outcomes as the emergence of new words, the decline in popularity, and changes in semantics and pragmatics. It is hoped that studying the semantic generalization of Chinese Internet buzzwords from the perspective of semantic metaphor can reveal the patterns behind the emergence of linguistic phenomena of buzzwords and people's cognitive models toward new buzzwords.

## Keywords

Cognitive Metaphor, Chinese Internet Buzzwords, Semantic Generalization, Terminology-Specific Internet Buzzwords, Framework-Based Internet Buzzwords

## 1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of widespread Internet usage, Internet buzzwords, also known as Internet slang, have become an integral part of people's daily lives and

an important object of study in the field of linguistics. According to Collins COBUILD Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary, a buzzword is defined as a word or expression that has become fashionable in a particular field and is being used a lot by the media (HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 2017).

Internet buzzwords represent a constantly evolving system of linguistic symbols, intricately tied to the changing societal and cultural contexts as well as the psychological shifts of individuals. And the use of Internet buzzwords often leads to changes in their original meaning or structure, resulting in semantic generalization. These buzzwords can be categorized into two main types: terminology-specific Internet buzzwords and framework-based Internet buzzwords.

Currently, research on Internet buzzwords mainly focuses on individual cases, with insufficient exploration of the semantic generalization process and mechanisms of terminology-specific and framework-based Internet buzzwords. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by analyzing and discussing the semantic generalization processes and the mechanisms of influence associated with these two types of Internet buzzwords from the perspective of a cognitive metaphor. Based on the use of Case studies, Secondary data analysis and Corpus-assisted studies, this paper will analyze cases of Internet buzzwords so as to conclude the semantic generalization rules of framework-based and terminology-specific Internet buzzwords from the perspective of metaphor mechanism.

The study of Internet buzzwords from the perspective of cognitive metaphor has theoretical and practical significance. It can further enrich the application of cognitive metaphor in the context of lexicology and help achieve a deeper understanding of Internet buzzwords. Moreover, Internet buzzwords represent a constantly evolving system of linguistic symbols, intricately tied to the changing societal and cultural contexts as well as the psychological shifts of individuals. Metaphorical objects with ontological and metaphorical characteristics form new meanings and usages through the mapping from the source domain to the target domain. Observing and researching languages from how people perceive the objective world from the perspective of cognitive metaphor can reflect the laws of language phenomenon generation and people's cognitive patterns towards new things.

This paper first integrates the research of domestic and international scholars on the semantic generalization and metaphors of Internet buzzwords, highlighting the importance of studying the semantic generalization of Internet buzzwords from the perspective of cognitive metaphor. It then classified that Internet buzzwords can be divided into two types based on their structure—terminology-specific Internet buzzwords and framework-based Internet buzzwords. It also analyses and compares the semantic generalization processes of these two structural types of Internet buzzwords by combining three stages of semantic generalization. Finally, it discusses the factors affecting the semantic generalization of Internet buzzwords and the consequences of such semantic generalization.

Based on analysis of the relevant researches and cases, this paper will conclude

the semantic generalization rules of framework-based and terminology-specific Internet buzzwords from the perspective of metaphor mechanism.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Current Study of Internet Buzzwords

According to Collins COBUILD Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary, a buzzword is defined as a word or expression that has become fashionable in a particular field and is being used a lot by the media (HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 2017). The emergence and popularity of the Internet buzzwords are closely related to the widespread use of the Internet characterized by the interactivity and timeliness of users' communication. So the analysis of the Internet buzzwords can reflect the changes in people's psychology and social culture under the background of the Internet era from a unique perspective. The etymology of Internet buzzwords mainly includes existing words with new meanings, foreign words, and new words. Existing words with new meanings refer to original words that undergo semantic generalization in specific contexts, where the words themselves do not change but their meanings and usages change, such as “躺平” (lie flat) and “山寨” (copycat). Foreign words refer to the use of foreign languages such as Japanese and English through transliteration or directly maintaining the original form as new words, such as “哈基米” (hakim/cute cat) from a Japanese word “はちみ” and “引擎” (engine). New words are newly created by people in order to satisfy their needs to express new things or concepts in the rapidly changing society, such as “枫桥经验” (Fengqiao Model), “共享单车” (shared bikes), and “5G”.

The structure of Internet buzzwords can be mainly divided into terminology-specific and framework-based styles (Xin, 2010). Terminology-specific Internet buzzwords represent existing words with new meanings, with form remaining unchanged but new meanings and usages generated during the process of semantic generalization. Examples include “摸鱼” (slack off), “内卷” (excessive competition), “划水” (wasting time), “山寨” (copycat), “破防” (overwhelm), “秒杀” (sec-killing), “躺平” (lie flat), “爸爸” (father), “太太” (Mrs.) and “宝宝” (baby/darling). Terminology-specific Internet buzzwords undergo changes in semantics during the process of generalization, but the form and usage remain similar. Unlike Terminology-specific Internet buzzwords acquiring new meanings without forms changing, Framework-based Internet buzzwords follow a template-like structure with similar formats but different contents. For example, “X 精” (spirit of XX) can be “柠檬精” (sour grapes) or “杠精” (argumentative person). “一把子 XX 住了” (suddenly feel XX) can be “一把子期待住了” (I can't wait to see it) or “一把子无语住了” (suddenly feel completely stunned and speechless). “XX 刺客” (assassin of XX, seemingly cheap but actually unexpectedly expensive) can be “雪糕刺客” (ice cream assassin), “水果刺客” (fruit assassin), or “文具刺客” (stationery assassin).

Current research on Internet buzzwords examines its popular dissemination mechanisms from various perspectives and theories, such as metaphor mechanism

(Liu, 1997), meme theory (He & He, 2022), ecological linguistics theory (Jiang, 2012), sociolinguistics theory (Miao & Wu, 2021), psycholinguistics theory (Wang & Song, 2023), and so on. This paper aims to analyze and discuss the process of semantic generalization and dissemination mechanisms of terminology-specific and framework-based Internet buzzwords from the cognitive metaphor perspective.

## 2.2. Maintaining the Integrity of the Specifications

With the popularity of the Internet and social media, domestic scholars have been conducting in-depth research on the semantic generalization process of Internet buzzwords. Liu (1997) proposed three stages of semantic generalization: the first stage characterized by semantic metaphor, the second stage characterized by semantic abstraction, and the third stage characterized by semantic blending. And Shu (2000) believed that the research on metaphor can be divided into three stages: the rhetorical research stage, the semantic research stage, and the cognitive and interdisciplinary stage.

Based on the perspective of cognitive metaphor, a large number of scholars have conducted case studies on the semantic generalization process of Internet buzzwords by analyzing their source domain, target domain, and pragmatics. Miao (2009) analyzed the word “山寨” (copycat) and found that the process of its semantic generalization is closely related to social changes, and people have mixed feelings about it. Yang (2010) found that after “雷” (thunder) undergoes semantic abstraction and generalization, its referents and scope become broader. In addition, scholars have also conducted analyses based on the perspective of cognitive metaphor on Internet buzzwords such as “店小二” (waiter), “爸爸” (father), “宝宝” (baby), “种草” (recommend), “秒杀” (sec-killing), “出圈” (go viral), “摸鱼” (slack off), “内卷” (involution), “XX 精” (spirit of XX), “XX 刺客” (assassin of XX), and “吃瓜群众” (bystander), and found that metaphor not only adds new pragmatics and semantics to Internet buzzwords but also enhances their emotional connotations and linguistic expressiveness.

Some scholars have also analyzed the structure of Internet buzzwords. Wu (2009) proposed three ways to construct Internet buzzwords: semantic deviation: “打酱油” (passerby; having nothing to do with oneself), grammatical deviation: “雷 (倒/人)” (astonishing), “山寨” (copycat), and assigning new meanings based on forms: “口-囧” (mouth-embarrassed). Xin (2010) proposed that the diffusion of buzzwords goes through three stages: direct usage, semantic generalization, and filling in a format box. Wu and Yin (2023) believed that Internet buzzwords can be divided into five basic types based on linguistic elements and construction methods: sound transformation type: “蓝瘦香菇” (heart broken, wanna cry), “雨女无瓜” (none of your business), “亚历山大” (stressed out); vocabulary reconstruction type: “高大上” (high-end), “C 位” (central position); semantic generalization type: “奇葩” (weirdo; oddball), “油腻” (greasy); popular construction type: “X 精” (spirit of XX); and Internet slang type: “秋天的第一杯奶茶” (The first cup

of bubble tea in autumn).

### 2.3. Studies on Metaphor and Cognitive Metaphor

Metaphor is not only a rhetorical device, but also a mode of thinking that has influenced daily expression and enriched the Internet slang. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) proposed that a metaphorical object must simultaneously possess the characteristics of both the ontology and the metaphor, involving two different semantic domains which they defined as the target domain and the source domain. The essence of metaphor is to understand, perceive, experience, and project objects of type B (the target domain) by understanding the features of objects of type A (the source domain). In other words, metaphor involves using familiar objects of type A, like concepts and structure, to understand relatively unfamiliar or newly emerging objects of type B. The defining feature of metaphor is its capacity to establish a dynamic interplay between the target domain and the source domain (see Figure 1).

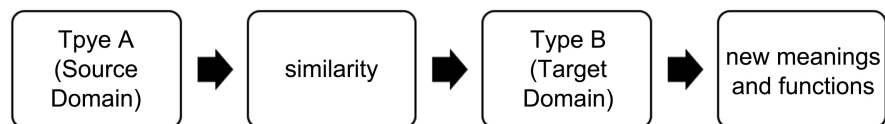


Figure 1. Metaphor.

In summary, many scholars have proposed theories and conducted case studies on the metaphorical generalization process of Internet buzzwords. However, there is still insufficient research on the structure of Internet buzzwords under the metaphorical mechanism. Therefore, this paper intends to explore the semantic generalization process and publicity mechanism of both terminology-specific and framework-based Internet buzzwords from the cognitive metaphor perspective.

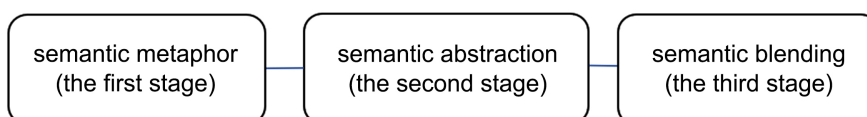
Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) illustrate that metaphor is not only a linguistic phenomenon, but also a cognitive way and thinking activity of human beings, guiding practices.

Studying Internet buzzwords from the perspective of cognitive metaphor has the following advantages: Firstly, it conforms to the generation rules of language phenomena and people's cognitive rules of new things. Secondly, by applying cognitive theories and studying Internet buzzwords from the perspective of cognitive processes, we can have a deeper understanding of its essence. More importantly, research conducted from the cognitive metaphor perspective can reveal important rules in the expression of abstract scientific and technological concepts in everyday language in the high-tech information age.

### 3. Metaphor and the Semantic Generalization Process of Internet Buzzwords

To meet people's social needs, the Internet buzzwords undergo the semantic generalization to expand its semantic and pragmatic usages. Liu (1997) proposed that

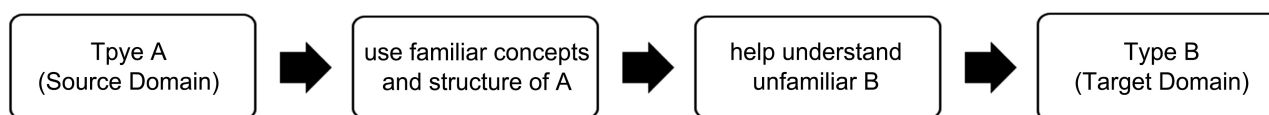
semantic generalization is a dynamic process with degrees of generalization ranging from low to high. Based on this, he divided semantic generalization into three stages: the first stage characterized by semantic metaphor, the second stage characterized by semantic abstraction, and the third stage characterized by semantic blending (see **Figure 2**). He also suggested that some words may go through these three stages in sequence, while others may stop at a certain stage or skip a stage and directly enter the next stage.



**Figure 2.** The three semantic generalization processes of Internet buzzwords.

### 3.1. The First Stage Characterized by Semantic Metaphor

When people encounter unfamiliar things A, they can use familiar things B that have certain similarities to help understand them (see **Figure 3**). Metaphor involves using familiar objects of type A, like concepts and structure, to understand relatively unfamiliar or newly emerging objects of type B (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).



**Figure 3.** The first stage characterized by semantic metaphor.

Initially, Internet buzzwords are popular within a small scope, with limited meanings and usages. But with the aid of metaphor, Internet buzzwords achieve semantic diffusion across boundaries in order to expand their pragmatic usages and semantic range.

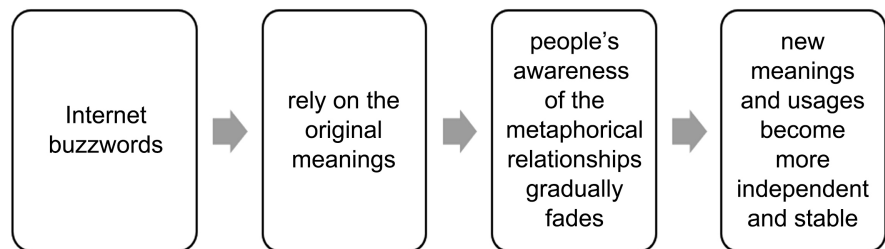
Taking “包装” (packaging) as an example, its original meaning refers to the process of wrapping and packaging goods for the purpose of protection and beautification. Due to the characteristic of “beautifying wrapped items”, people draw analogies between various external features of humans and goods, and the packaging materials of goods. As a result, besides promoting goods at higher prices, “packaging” is extended to raise a person’s price, such as the fame of a star at higher prices through beautification (see **Figure 4**).



**Figure 4.** The first stage characterized by semantic metaphor.

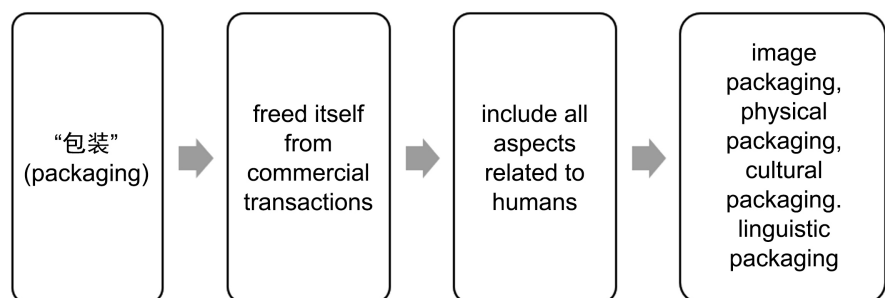
### 3.2. The Second Stage Characterized by Semantic Abstraction

With the excessive use of metaphor, people's awareness of the metaphorical relationships of Internet buzzwords gradually fades. As a result, new meanings and usages that used to rely on the original meanings of Internet buzzwords now become more independent and stable (Figure 5). It is obvious that people no longer pay attention to the differences in distinctive features between each meaning unit but instead focus on the shared features-similarity (Liu, 1997).



**Figure 5.** The second stage characterized by semantic abstraction.

Before this stage, “包装” (packaging) gradually freed itself from the metaphorical dependence on commercial transactions (see Figure 6). In other words, in the stage of semantic abstraction, people can include all aspects related to humans in the concept of “包装” (packaging), such as image design (image packaging), dress (physical packaging), knowledge and skills (cultural packaging), and language proficiency (linguistic packaging). Their common characteristic is the beautification of external appearances. For example, “专家提醒, 求职切勿华丽包装, 突出个人优势即可, 简历以精简为好, 以便人力资源部门筛选。 (2010\报刊\人民日报)” (Experts remind job seekers not to overly package themselves, but to highlight their personal strengths on their resumes, which should be concise for the convenience of screening by human resources departments).



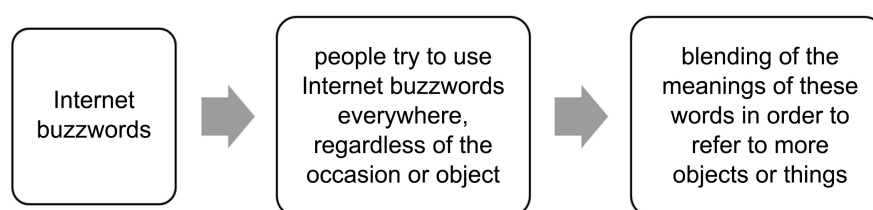
**Figure 6.** Semantic Abstraction of “包装” (packaging) in the second stage.

Similarly, it is difficult for people to realize that “桌腿” (table legs) “瓶口” (bottle mouths) and “含金量” (gold content) were originally metaphors or terms. After semantic generalization, Internet buzzwords have expanded their scope and usage by achieving semantic abstraction. In other words, the new meanings and usages of Internet buzzwords have been widely accepted and used by people.



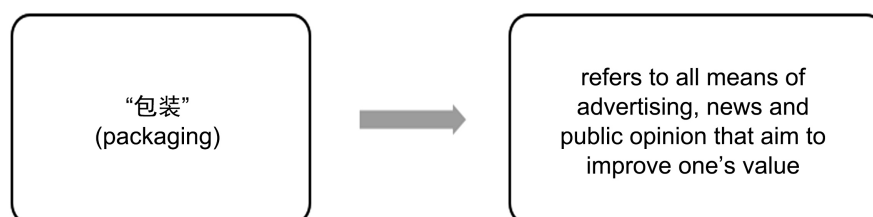
### 3.3. The Third Stage Characterized by Semantic Blending

Semantic blending is the most vigorous stage of Internet buzzwords (see **Figure 7**). When people encounter choices of semantically similar expressions, they will use the Internet buzzwords without hesitation. And at this stage, people try to use Internet buzzwords everywhere, regardless of the occasion or object, just like using catchphrases. Even with the slightest connection, they will seize the opportunity to use these Internet buzzwords. This inevitably leads to the blending of the meanings of these words in order to refer to more objects or things. After this stage, Internet buzzwords seem to be exhausted from frequent and extensive usage by people and gradually lose its original popularity. Even if they are fortunate enough to be retained and incorporated into everyday language, they no longer enjoy the same popularity and wide usage frequency as before (Liu, 1997).



**Figure 7.** The third stage characterized by semantic blending.

In the stage of semantic blending, the interpretation of “包装” (packaging) expands once again. It refers to all means of advertising, news and public opinion that aim to improve one’s value, regardless of the person or thing involved (see **Figure 8**). For example, “对此，边发吉和李恩杰一致呼吁：不仅要打造高端节目，包装品牌，还需加大版权保护，让人无从模仿，不敢侵权。(2010\报刊\人民日报)” (In response to this, Bian and Li jointly insisted that we need not only creating more high-end programs and improving brand packaging, but also increasing copyright protection to prevent imitation and infringement).



**Figure 8.** Semantic Blending of “包装” (packaging) in the third stage.

In summary, the Internet buzzwords undergo the semantic generalization to expand its semantic and pragmatic usages: the first stage characterized by semantic metaphor, the second stage characterized by semantic abstraction, and the third stage characterized by semantic blending. However, there still exists a puzzle about whether the terminology-specific and framework-based Internet buzzwords functioning similarly or differently in these three stages. So this paper intends to



explore the semantic generalization process and publicity mechanism of these two types of Internet buzzwords from the cognitive metaphor perspective.

## 4. Analysis of Semantic Generalization of Internet Buzzwords

### 4.1. Types of Internet Buzzwords

Internet buzzwords can be mainly divided into terminology-specific and framework-based styles according to its structure (Xin, 2010). This paper selects typical Internet buzzwords mainly from CCL Corpus and the “quibble” magazine.

#### 4.1.1. Terminology-Specific Internet Buzzwords

Terminology-specific Internet buzzwords represent existing words with new meanings, with form remaining unchanged but new meanings and usages generated during the process of semantic generalization. Examples include “摸鱼” (slack off), “内卷” (excessive competition), “划水” (wasting time), “山寨” (copycat), “破防” (overwhelm), “秒杀” (defeat someone quickly and easily), “躺平” (lie flat), “爸爸” (father), “太太” (Mrs.) and “宝宝” (baby/darling). Terminology-specific Internet buzzwords undergo changes in semantics during the process of generalization, but the form and usage remain similar.

#### 4.1.2. Framework-Based Internet Buzzwords

Unlike Terminology-specific Internet buzzwords acquiring new meanings without forms changing, Framework-based Internet buzzwords follow a template-like structure with similar formats but different contents. For example, “X 精” (spirit of XX) can be “柠檬精” (sour grapes) or “杠精” (argumentative person). “一把子 XX 住了” (suddenly feel XX) can be “一把子期待住了” (I cannot wait to see it) or “一把子无语住了” (suddenly feel completely stunned and speechless). “XX 刺客” (assassin of XX, seemingly cheap but actually unexpectedly expensive) can be “雪糕刺客” (ice cream assassin), “水果刺客” (fruit assassin), or “文具刺客” (stationery assassin).

### 4.2. Semantic Generalization Process

#### 4.2.1. Semantic Generalization Process of Terminology-Specific Internet Buzzwords

The semantic generalization process of specific Internet buzzwords follows the three-process proposed by Liu (1997). With the relationship between the source domain and the target domain, the target word undergoes a process of semantic metaphor, semantic abstraction, and semantic blending. After these three stages, the pragmatic function and meaning of the word are extremely expanded, allowing it to become more popular within a broader context. The pragmatic change process is similar to giving original words new meanings, endowing them with fresh semantic usages as well as meanings, thereby making them more popular.

Taking the semantic generalization process of “躺平” (lying flat) as an example, people initially perceived “躺平” (lying flat) as a physical state of lying down. However, during the metaphorical mapping of “躺平” (lying flat), this physical

state became the source domain, while the mental state of inaction faced with challenges became the target domain. The similarity between the source domain and the target domain is that people lose their desire, give up initiative, and crave short breaks. Thus, in the semantic metaphor phase, “躺平” (lying flat) took on new usages and semantics based on the physical state of lying down, an attitude of inaction when confronted with difficulties.

Subsequently, “躺平” (lying flat) gradually evolved from the passive attitude of “inaction” to an optimistic attitude of “low desire and contentment with one’s lot, representing a mindset of actively giving up and going with the flow when encountering life pressures or difficulties.”

It can also be used for self-mockery to relieve external pressure as a kind of self-adjusting attitude. This semantic shift spreads with the users’ preference, becoming a manifestation of the cognitive agent’s passive resistance and desireless mindset when facing external pressures. In the semantic abstraction phase, “躺平” (lying flat) added the mentality of “confronted with an increasingly competitive social environment, people lower their aspirations, reduce desires, and no longer pursue fame and success, choosing instead to be ordinary.”

#### 4.2.2. Semantic Generalization Process Analysis of Framework-Based Internet Buzzwords

Compared to the three stages of semantic generalization of specific Internet buzzwords, framework-based Internet buzzwords differ in the third stage, semantic blending. In the stage of semantic blending, specific Internet buzzwords have rich semantic usages and meanings. However, framework-based Internet buzzwords cannot meet people’s social needs with their limited meanings and usages. Therefore, people retain the framework of these buzzwords, incorporate them into other words or phrases, create new words by imitation, and form a series of framework-based network buzzwords with similar structures and usage but different meanings.

Driven by the goal of making communication more efficient, people prefer to using short and distinctive phrases to describe certain types of people. Because these kind of framework-based Internet buzzwords are concise and easy to imitate, they become popular. For example, the framework-based Internet buzzword “X 精” (the spirit of X) is a result of the “vacancy” phenomenon that users encounter when describing people with certain characteristics. It originates from “妖精” (the spirit of animal or plant), and then has been further developed by “杠精” (argumentative person) and “柠檬精” (sour grape). The “X 精” (the spirit of X) character originally referred to a type of creature in ancient Chinese supernatural stories called “妖精” (the spirit of animal or plant), which refers to spirits that have practiced for thousands of years and can transform into human form and interact with humans, such as “兔子精” (rabbit spirit) and “白骨精” (white bone spirit). In modern times, “精” (the spirit) is used to refer to a person who possesses certain characteristics or is good at something, with “学人精” (copycat) referring to a kind of the framework-based Internet buzzword “X 精” (the spirit of X) is a

result of the “vacancy” phenomenon that users encounter when describing people with certain characteristics, originating from “妖精” (the spirit of animal or plant), and then further developed by “杠精” (argumentative person) and “柠檬精” (sour grape), irritating person who always imitate others’ behaviors.

In 2017, the term “杠精” (argumentative person) emerged and became popular on the Internet, focusing on the meaning of “杠” (find fault), which carries a sense of ridicule and irony. It refers to a type of person who finds fault with others without considering the truth, constantly opposing for the sake of argument. Since then, a series of words composed of “精” as the central morpheme has emerged, such as the popular “柠檬精” (sour grape) in 2019, which indicates envy and jealousy towards others. Therefore, in the framework-based network buzzword “X精” (the spirit of X), the character “精” can be interpreted as “people with characteristics of X”, emphasizing that a certain characteristic has become the most prominent feature of individuals or groups, expressing praise, envy, criticism, ridicule, and other emotional attitudes.

### 4.3. Reasons for the Generalization of Internet Buzzwords

In the Internet era, changes in social factors, language factors, cultural factors, and psychological factors lead to people’s increased social needs. The original vocabulary cannot meet people’s social needs, so Internet buzzwords undergo semantic generalization to develop more uses and meanings to meet people’s social needs. The following section will explain the reasons for the semantic generalization of Internet buzzwords.

#### 4.3.1. Social Factors

With the development of society and the improvement of people’s living standards, the number of Chinese netizens has greatly increased. At the same time, the widespread use of the Internet and the application of smartphones provide netizens with extensive participation and interactivity.

In *The Selfish Gene* written by Dawkins (2006), a meme is a cultural unit of information that spreads from person to person, such as a joke, fashion trend, or idea. Just as genes propagate themselves through reproduction and natural selection, memes propagate themselves through imitation and social transmission.

In terms of meme theory, the Internet provides a channel for communication and social interaction to a large number of netizens. Through social media, netizen can engage in discussions and exchanges with others, which allows Internet buzzwords to be constantly replicated, spread, and popularized. As mentioned by Dawkins, communication and interaction are important ways for memes to spread. The process of language communication is also the process of language selection and usage, which means it is the process of meme transmission. However, during communication, different users have different understandings of the corresponding Internet buzzwords. Just as Blackmore (1999) illustrates an example in *The Meme Machine*, when a fable story is passed from the first person to

the sixth person, each person may make some changes to the protagonist, background, and even the plot of the story. This also applies to the process of semantic generalization of Internet buzzwords. In the process of replicating Internet buzzwords as memes, people have different understandings, which leads to the emergence of new meanings and usages of internet buzzwords to some extent, promoting the process of semantic generalization.

#### 4.3.2. Linguistic Factors

In the current Internet era, people use input methods to type and communicate, which requires faster typing speed. Compared to formal and time-consuming written language, people prefer to use concise and humorous Internet language for online communication. People have social inertia or a principle of minimizing effort, meaning they hope to communicate in the most efficient way possible. Therefore, short but semantically rich Internet buzzwords have become efficient communication tools. This in turn promotes the semantic generalization of Internet buzzwords to expand their semantics and pragmatics.

Blackmore (1999) argues that only a few memes can successfully replicate from one brain to another, from brains to text, from text to other texts, or from sound to CDs. In other words, only a few memes, including Internet buzzwords, are widely accepted and popular. For a meme to survive in the competitive internet era and be chosen rather than eliminated, it needs to possess three characteristics: fidelity, fecundity, and longevity (Dawkins, 2006). In other words, a good replicator must accurately replicate, replicate many copies, and last for a long time, although there may be trade-offs among these three factors. Internet buzzwords strive to be replicated many times, widely spread, and popular by continuously undergoing semantic generalization to meet people's social needs.

#### 4.3.3. Cultural Factors

The emergence and popularity of Internet buzzwords are closely related to the corresponding cultural background. Internet buzzwords may originate from the traditional culture of the country, such as slang, proverbs, and idioms, or come from modern popular culture and foreign cultures, like subcultures, movies, TV shows, and short videos. Internet buzzwords enter people's lives due to certain opportunities, perhaps because they are interesting, popular, or resonate with people's current moods, and thus are widely accepted. The vitality of these culturally related internet buzzwords depends on the culture behind them. In other words, whether they can remain popular for a long time relies on whether the cultural core they carry conforms to the current social changes or people's psychology.

For example, the popularity of the Internet buzzword “摸鱼” (slack off) is influenced by the traditional Chinese idiom “浑水摸鱼”, which means “to catch fish in muddy water” and has the metaphorical meaning of “make a profit in troubled situation”. On the one hand, the popularity of the Internet buzzword “摸鱼” (slack off) inherits the original meaning of “浑水摸鱼”. On the other hand, it meets the modern people's desire to relax and take a break from their increasingly busy

work, study, and life. Therefore, the Internet buzzword “摸鱼” (slack off) adds new semantics and usages on the basis of the traditional idiom, which promotes the process of semantic generalization of the Internet buzzword.

Besides from adding new meanings to existing words, it can create new words. For example, framework-based Internet buzzword “X 精” (the spirit of X) is influenced by traditional Chinese term “妖精” (the spirit of animal or plant). Originally, this word was used to refer to mythical creatures in Chinese fantastical novels that transform from plants or animals into human form through cultivation, such as the “白骨精” (White Bone Spirit), “蜘蛛精” (Spider Spirit), and “猪精” (Pig Spirit) in *Journey to the West*. Then people find this type of word “X 精” (the spirit of X) can describe a person with certain characteristics precisely. So new words are created, like “杠精” (argumentative person) and “柠檬精” (sour grape).

#### 4.3.4. Psychological Factors

Internet buzzwords reflect the latest social trends and cultural phenomena. In other words, in the Internet era, where social media is widely used, using the latest Internet buzzwords is trendy, especially for young netizens. By using these words closely associated with specific communities or cultural phenomena, individuals can express a sense of belonging to a particular group and gain a sense of identity. The emergence of Internet buzzwords is often related to specific social events, movies, TV shows, or public figures. The humour, wit or trendy meanings contained in these buzzwords resonate with people, leading to emotional identification and popularity. When the original Internet buzzwords cannot meet social needs, people artificially add other meanings to the words themselves or create a series of framework-based Internet buzzwords to satisfy their social needs.

Humans, as social beings, often use certain behaviors or phrases to express their sense of identity and to better integrate into a group. This is what we commonly refer to as the bandwagon effect.

Online buzzwords frequently emerge alongside social issues or popular culture. When the event or cultural impact behind the word is significant and widely known, these buzzwords will appear frequently on various social media platforms. People find them amusing, they use them to express their own thoughts, or perhaps due to the bandwagon effect.

For example, in 2024, a line from a Chinese TV series “北京到底有谁在?” (Who exactly is in Beijing?), originally spoken by a character expressing jealousy, became a popular Internet buzzword. As the show gained popularity, this line evolved into a framework-based Internet buzzwords “XX 到底有谁在?” (Who exactly is in XX place?).

“这个世界是一个巨大的草台班子” (the world is a huge makeshift theatre troupe) was also a highly discussed Internet buzzword in 2024. The term “草台班子” (makeshift theatre troupe) originally referred to traditional Chinese opera troupes that perform in rural towns and markets. It’s also used metaphorically to describe assembled groups with low standards. Some users shared their experi-

ences to reassure those who are anxious about interviews or new challenges, recounting how they participated in seemingly well-organized institutions or events that were actually hastily organized without proper planning. The person in charge might even be a novice in the field. This significantly eased people's anxiety and stress. Later, it was used to convey the idea that people realize the world doesn't operate as precisely as we think; instead, it's filled with chaotic order. Various organizations may look impressive on the surface, but each has its own problems.

#### 4.4. Consequences of Generalization of Internet Buzzwords

##### 4.4.1. Semantic and Usage Changes

To meet people's social needs, Internet buzzwords undergo a series of semantic generalization processes that expand their semantics and pragmatics. New meanings are added to existing words and new words are created. This enriches the vocabulary but may also lead to semantic ambiguity in the short-term. In the long-term, with their new meanings and functions be widely accepted, Internet buzzwords become daily vocabulary. Internet buzzwords may shape cultural values by reflecting people's values and attitudes towards the society and social changes, like events, high technology and so on. So they can also be used as a form of social identification, allowing people to show their belonging to a particular group.

Terminology-specific Internet buzzwords undergo the transformation of old words with new meanings, keeping the words themselves unchanged while their semantics and usages change, and their meanings and applicability are broadened. Take “躺平” (lying flat) as an example. Its original meaning is just an action or a physical state, someone is lying flat. Some newspapers then use “躺平” (lying flat) to criticize decadent people, especially young people, which adds it with new passive meaning “inaction”. And then its new meanings were widely accepted. In this period, people's attitude towards work is praising hard work and criticizing inaction. But with society changing, people find they felt very tired in such a fast-paced society and “lying flat”, which means work-life balance, is their dreamt lifestyle. So people prefer to use this word to describe their attitude towards work, resulting in high frequency of “躺平” (lying flat). And during this period, people use “躺平” (lying flat) as a way to show their social-identification, feeling tired of high-paced society and pursuing work-life balance. So “躺平” (lying flat) gradually evolved from the passive attitude of inaction to an optimistic attitude of work-life balance with low desire, and became daily language.

Framework-based network buzzwords, on the other hand, have stronger target referents in the process of semantic generalization. They cannot meet people's needs to refer to more target objects with their original meanings. Therefore, based on the original buzzwords, people retain the basic framework and fill it with new words, forming a series of framework-based network buzzwords with similar usage but different referential meanings. For example, the original meaning of “味” means taste or smell of something. With the development of Internet culture, people use “土味文化” (unfashionable culture) to describe finding fun in mock-

ery. At the beginning, it was attacked and ridiculed, because it was generally considered to be vulgar and boring. And during that period, the society promoted positive culture. However, with the development of the society, people have a higher tolerance for Internet culture, and their attitude towards “土味文化” (unfashionable culture) has changed from initial criticism to acceptance, giving birth to “土味情话” (cheesy pick-up lines), which have a neutral or even commendatory meaning, referring to the embarrassing but deadly romantic words with a strong unfashionable flavor. Then people tend to use “土味 XX” (unfashionable XX) to describe something embarrassing but deadly romantic. Also during the semantic generalization, framework-based network buzzwords “X 味” (have a feeling of X) are used to refer to people with specific characteristic, like “爹味” (mansplain), “班味” (smell of toil), which have already become people’s daily vocabulary.

#### **4.4.2. Emergence of New Words**

In the Internet era, popular phenomena and trends change rapidly. The original vocabulary cannot describe new things or phenomena, so people create new words by linking similarities, resulting in framework-based network buzzwords. Taking the framework-based Internet buzzword “X 奴” (slave of X) as an example, it originates from the word “奴隶” (slave), originally referring to people who labored for slave owners without personal freedom. By extending the similar concept of “laboring for XX person/object and losing freedom,” derivatives such as “房奴” (mortgage slaves, workers burdened with housing loans), “车奴” (car slaves, workers burdened with car loans), and “孩奴” (child slaves, workers striving to raise children) have emerged. Since the 21st century, housing loans, car loans, and the high costs of child-rearing have consistently been hot topics of discussion. The Internet has provided a platform for people with similar experiences to communicate, and consequently, new terms like “房奴”, “车奴”, and “孩奴” have come into being to describe these shared life pressures and sentiments.

#### **4.4.3. Decrease or Increase in Popularity**

Internet buzzwords reach the stage of semantic ambiguity, which is the stage where they are most popular, after undergoing the process of semantic generalization. At this stage, people frequently use these Internet buzzwords. However, after this stage, the popularity of Internet buzzwords gradually fades and they may even become unused. Even if they are lucky enough to be retained and enter everyday language, they may not have such a high usage frequency and be spread in a broad scope. In some way, we can say the relationship between these Internet buzzwords and people’s daily lives contributes to the high frequency, resulting in their longevity.

The decline in popularity of Internet buzzwords ultimately depends on the timeliness of the social phenomena or events associated with the Internet buzzwords. When the heat of corresponding social phenomena or events fades, the Internet buzzwords associated with them also gradually lose their popularity.



For instance, in the era when smartphones were first introduced, young people became immersed in using these devices, and the term “低头族” (phubber) quickly gained popularity due to extensive media coverage. However, in the current society where smartphones are widely prevalent, this Internet buzzword has lost its original critical purpose, as people’s daily lives have become closely related to smartphones—in other words, smartphones have become indispensable in people’s daily lives. Similarly, the Internet buzzword “啃老” (boomerang generation) was initially coined to criticize and satirize those youths who failed to be self-reliant and instead relied on their families’ support without contributing. However, as times have changed and young people find it increasingly difficult to afford housing and transportation, or even sustain themselves, relying on economic support from family has become a commonplace reality. Consequently, the term “啃老” (boomerang generation) has receded from popular Internet buzzwords.

But Internet buzzwords that originate from people’s daily lives or have close ties to their daily lives will still have a relatively high usage frequency, such as “躺平” (lying flat) and “摸鱼” (slacking off). Also, those that can adapt to changing social contexts and continue to express relevant social emotions or concepts are more likely to last. Buzzwords that become part of a long-term cultural or social trend, rather than being tied to a short-lived event, have a better chance of longevity.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the popularity of Internet buzzwords relies on social media and the Internet as communication channels, as well as people’s conformity psychology and the principle of efficient communication. Internet buzzwords can be divided into framework-based and terminology-specific Internet buzzwords based on their structure. To meet people’s social needs, Internet buzzwords undergo a three-stage process of semantic generalization: semantic metaphor, semantic abstraction, and semantic blending, expanding their pragmatics and semantics. Framework-based and specific network buzzwords differ in the third stage of semantic generalization, the stage of semantic blending. In the Internet era, changes in social factors, language factors, cultural factors, and psychological factors attribute to the semantic generalization process of such two types of Internet buzzwords. With the semantic generalization of Internet buzzwords, it will result in emergence of new words, decrease of popularity and semantic and usage changes. This study has certain limitations. The research object of this study is Chinese Internet buzzwords, and it is assumed that the users of Internet buzzwords are native Chinese speakers. In subsequent studies, it is necessary to explore whether this semantic generalization mechanism is applicable to Internet buzzwords in other languages.

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The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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