

Semiotic Analysis of Internet Buzzwords (2022-2025)

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of the post-pandemic era featuring the release of social emotions, the penetration of short-video platforms, and the dominance of online discourse by Generation Z from 2022 to 2025, Internet buzzwords have exhibited distinctive characteristics in production and dissemination. Taking Peirce's triadic sign theory as the core analytical framework, this paper conducts a systematic semiotic study of Internet buzzwords in this period. According to the nature of the relationship between signs and their objects, Internet buzzwords are classified into three categories: iconic signs, indexical signs, and symbolic signs, with a detailed analysis of the transformation and blending among these three types. On this basis, this paper dissects the semiotic functions of Internet buzzwords from three dimensions: emotional expression, social reflection, and identity construction. It finds that Internet buzzwords transform individual private emotions into public signs, serving as a "pressure valve" for social emotions; they complete a leap from direct objects to dynamic objects, acting as a "barometer" reflecting social reality; relying on the communal sharing and differentiation of interpretants, they become an "identity card" for young people to construct identity and demarcate group boundaries. This study reveals the inherent semiotic logic and cultural connotations of Internet buzzwords in this period, expands the application of semiotic theory in the field of online popular culture, and also provides a semiotic tool for public opinion analysis, understanding contemporary social mentality and youth culture.

Keywords

Internet Buzzwords; Semiotics; Triadic Sign Theory.

1. Introduction

The four years from 2022 to 2025 constitute a special period. As a critical phase of the post-pandemic era, public attention to various social issues has continued to rise, and the demand for collective emotional expression and reflection of social mentality has become increasingly intense. Consequently, the short-video industry has flourished, and during this period, Internet buzzwords have evolved from mere variants of online language into social linguistic symbols that reflect contemporary life and embody the spiritual characteristics of the public. As stated by Chen Yanxia (2011), Internet buzzwords serve as a "barometer" of social culture, possessing strong value in reflecting the times, and have thus attracted extensive attention from multiple disciplines such as linguistics, sociology, and communication studies.^[1]

Existing research on Internet buzzwords mainly focuses on three dimensions. In terms of conceptual definition, Wang Shiyong (2014) laid the basic research framework for Internet buzzwords, while Xie Shijian et al. (2025) took "XX dazi" (partners) as an example to deeply analyze the linguistic structure and derivative characteristics of new Internet buzzwords^[2,3]. From the perspective of social psychology, Chen Yanxia (2011) and Hu Yu et al. (2019) focused on the reflective function of buzzwords on collective psychology and youth mentality^[4], and Xie Shijian et al. (2025) further revealed the logic of transformation in interpersonal relationships

among young people behind these buzzwords. Concerning discursive power, Zou Jun (2013) and Li Tiechui (2015) explored the value of buzzwords in public opinion expression and social supervision, and Tao Dongfeng (2021) critically reflected on the limitations and shortcomings of existing research paradigms.^[5,6,7]

Compared with traditional linguistic and communication perspectives, semiotics provides solid theoretical support for interpreting the dynamic evolution and multi-layered connotations of Internet buzzwords. Among semiotic theories, Peirce's triadic sign theory breaks through the limitations of Saussure's dualistic sign view and can accurately capture the complete process of Internet buzzwords from generation, dissemination, semantic alienation to unlimited semiosis. Taking Peircean semiotics as the core perspective, this study expands the application boundary of this theory in Internet buzzword research, constructs an integrated analytical framework to respond to the new characteristics of meaning production of linguistic signs in the digital era, and deeply reveals the semiotic operation mechanism of Internet buzzwords. It provides a theoretical tool for public opinion analysis and youth culture interpretation, helping to accurately grasp the changing laws of contemporary social mentality and group identity.

2. Theoretical Foundation

Charles Sanders Peirce is the founder of pragmatist philosophy and a core pioneer of modern semiotics. His triadic sign model, different from Saussure's static dualistic structure of signifier and signified, is more dynamic and open. It has irreplaceable explanatory power for analyzing linguistic signs such as Internet buzzwords, which rely on community negotiation and continuous meaning change. Peirce defined a sign as "something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity". It consists of three core categories: representamen, object, and interpretant, which interact to complete the generation and transmission of sign meaning.^[8]

2.1. The Triadic Structure of the Sign

The realization of sign meaning relies on the coordinated operation of representamen, object, and interpretant (Wan Quan, 2020), each performing its own function and being indispensable. First, the representamen is the perceptible form of the sign, namely the sign itself, including various sensory media such as words, sounds, images, and actions. For Internet buzzwords, the representamen includes not only the written characters but also matching emoticons, short-video frames, vocal rhythms and other multimodal forms. For example, the representamen of "Tui Tui Tui" (Go away) is not only three Chinese characters but also the corresponding short-video actions and rhythms. "Shuan Q" is a homophonic transformation of the English word "thank you", whose form itself carries a teasing nature.

Second, the object is the core content referred to by the sign. Peirce divided it into the "immediate object" and the "dynamic object". The immediate object is the superficial meaning intuitively presented within the sign, what the sign "claims" to refer to. For instance, the immediate object of "Tangping" (lying flat) is the physical posture of lying down and a superficial lifestyle of non-participation in competition. The dynamic object is the external reality of the sign, the deep social connotation that the sign can never fully exhaust but always points to. For example, the dynamic object of "lying flat" implies young people's complex attitudes toward intense social competition, class solidification, and anxiety about existential meaning. The depth of the dynamic object is the key source of the rich connotations of Internet buzzwords.

Third, the interpretant is the cognitive and emotional effect produced by the sign in the mind of the interpreter. It is the most original concept in Peircean semiotics and the real carrier of sign meaning. The core difference from the dualistic sign view is that meaning is not a fixed

correspondence between sign and object, but generated in the dynamic cognition of the interpreter. The interpretant is further divided into immediate interpretant, dynamic interpretant, and final interpretant. The immediate interpretant is the possible interpretation presupposed by the sign itself; for example, the reduplicative form of “Juejuezi” (awesome) carries an exaggerated tone. The dynamic interpretant is the actual interpretation effect in specific contexts; the same buzzword may be interpreted differently across scenarios and groups, such as “emo” used for emotional catharsis or daily teasing. The final interpretant is the stable interpretation reached by the community, the normalized expression of sign meaning. For example, “Shekong” (social anxiety) has evolved from a niche expression to a socially recognized label for social anxiety.^[9]

2.2. Unlimited Semiosis

The triadic sign structure derives a key inference: “unlimited semiosis”, meaning that the interpretant itself can be transformed into a new representamen, pointing to a new object and generating a new interpretant, forming a continuous chain of meaning production. Peirce proposed that “the interpretant of a sign is itself a sign”, which determines that sign meaning is always in a state of flow and generation, with three core characteristics: dynamism, openness, and continuity. Dynamism means meaning is continuously updated rather than fixed; openness means the signification process has no ultimate end and can continuously derive new connotations; continuity means the semiosis process is internally coherent rather than fragmented and disorderly.

Unlimited semiosis perfectly explains the evolution and derivation of Internet buzzwords. For example, “PUA” originally stood for “Pick-up Artist”, later derived into a general symbol for emotional manipulation, and further spawned homophonic derivatives such as “CPU” and “KTV”. The core meaning continues while forms keep innovating, which is a typical manifestation of unlimited semiosis.

2.3. The Trichotomy of Signs

Based on the relationship between the representamen and the object, Peirce divided signs into three categories: “icons, indexes, and symbols”, forming a logically rigorous classification system that has become a universal standard in semiotic research and provides a clear approach for classifying Internet buzzwords. The three types of signs are not completely separate but can transform and coexist with each other, and the same buzzword often has multiple semiotic attributes.

An icon refers through an objective similarity between the sign and its object, requiring no conventional agreement and being understandable through sensory perception, with the core features of formal, phonetic, or semantic resemblance, including onomatopoeia, images, and metaphors.

An index refers through a factual connection such as causality or contiguity between the sign and its object, with a necessary link but no intuitive similarity; for example, smoke points to fire, and symptoms point to disease.

A symbol refers through social convention, with no natural connection between the sign and its object; meaning is entirely endowed by communal consensus. Most daily language belongs to this category, which is also the dominant type of Internet buzzwords.

3. Semiotic Classification of Internet Buzzwords (2022–2025)

Based on Peirce’s trichotomy of signs and combined with the generation logic and signification characteristics of Internet buzzwords from 2022 to 2025, this study classifies them into three categories: iconic signs, indexical signs, and symbolic signs, with further subdivisions to clarify their signification mechanisms.

3.1. Iconic Signs

Iconic signs convey meaning through similarity to their objects, mainly divided into phonetic icons, diagrammatic icons, and metaphorical icons.

Phonetic icons are generated by phonetic similarity, mostly homophonic transformations, relying on auditory perception without additional social conventions, such as “Shuan Q” and “Tui Tui Tui”.

Diagrammatic icons form cognitive schemas through fixed syntactic frames with fillable and reproducible structures, such as “XX assassin” and “the ancient Greek god of XX”.

Metaphorical icons associate new social experiences through existing cultural images and analogical thinking, such as “Kong Yiji literature” using the long gown to metaphorize educational burden, and “Banwei” (work smell) using odor to metaphorize workplace fatigue.

3.2. Indexical Signs

Indexical signs are generated based on factual connections between the sign and its object; the meaning vanishes if the object disappears. They are divided into event indexes, community indexes, and contextual indexes.

Event indexes originate from specific public events or social phenomena and serve as symbolic anchors of collective memory, such as “Group Leader/Tuan” related to community group-buying during the pandemic, and “Small Town Test Taker” related to educational class issues.

Community indexes derive from specific subcultures and act as identity markers, such as “Fu le ni ge lao liu” from the gaming circle, “i-person/e-person” from the MBTI community, and “X-men” from fan culture.

Contextual indexes are highly dependent on immediate social scenarios; their meaning becomes vague without context, such as “You’re really something” which can express sincere praise or irony, and “Princess/Prince, please XX” which relies on specific performative contexts.

3.3. Symbolic Signs

Symbolic signs are generated based on communal consensus with no natural connection to their objects, representing the core type of Internet buzzwords. They are divided into identity symbols and modal symbols.

Identity symbols refer to specific groups with meanings fixed by communal convention, such as “Xianyan Bao” (attention seeker), “Small Town Test Taker”, and “i-person/e-person”.

Modal symbols express fixed emotions, attitudes, and states whose affective meanings are formed through communal usage, such as “Shuan Q” for helplessness, “Duoba’an XX” (dopamine XX) for pleasure, and “Banwei” for workplace exhaustion.

4. Semiotic Functions of Internet Buzzwords

From the perspective of Peircean semiotics, Internet buzzwords are not only linguistic signs but also fulfill three core social functions: emotional expression, social reflection, and identity construction, completing the upgrade from linguistic phenomena to cultural symbols.

4.1. Emotional Expression Function

The core of the emotional expression function is transforming individual private emotions into communicable and shareable public signs, completing the whole process of “naming–sharing–standardization” through the triadic sign structure. First, buzzwords name vague emotions and anchor intangible feelings into tangible signs. Second, they form shared interpretants in community communication to achieve emotional resonance. Finally, they solidify into universal tools for emotional expression. For example, “Po Fang Le” (my defense is broken) evolved from a gaming term to an emotional label for psychological collapse, and “emo” became a general

expression for low mood. Such buzzwords serve as safety valves for individual emotional catharsis and form emotional communities, transforming scattered individual emotions into collective resonance, practicing Peirce's core view that "the life of a sign lies in being interpreted".^[10]

4.2. Social Reflection Function

As a social mirror, Internet buzzwords accurately reflect social changes and public mentality. Relying on the dual structure of immediate object and dynamic object, they achieve semiotic condensation from superficial events to deep social problems. On the one hand, buzzwords condense public events; for example, "Rat head and duck neck" directly points to food safety and credibility issues, acting as a carrier of social supervision. On the other hand, buzzwords project collective anxiety; "Neijuan" (involution) and "Tangping" (lying flat) point to deep-seated problems such as excessive competition and dilemmas in class mobility. The infinite extensibility of the dynamic object makes buzzwords diagnostic expressions of contemporary emotions, comprehensively reflecting the social structure and public mentality in the post-pandemic era.

4.3. Identity Construction Function

The identity construction function is realized through communal sharing and differentiation of interpretants, making buzzwords core identity cards for group recognition and self-identification. Individuals use specific buzzwords to perform identity and declare group belonging; for example, calling oneself an "i-person" marks introversion, and using "Gao Chouxiang" (doing abstract stuff) demonstrates the cultural stance of Generation Z. Shared interpretants within the group strengthen a sense of "us", while interpretive barriers outside the group create semiotic boundaries between "us" and "them". Such semiotic identity construction precisely meets the dual needs of contemporary youth for self-cognition and group belonging, making Internet buzzwords important carriers of identity in the digital age.

5. Conclusion

Internet buzzwords from 2022 to 2025 are core representations of popular culture in the post-pandemic era. They are not only products of linguistic evolution but also concentrated reflections of contemporary emotions, social demands, and group identity. Taking Peirce's triadic sign theory as the core perspective, this study divides Internet buzzwords in this period into iconic signs, indexical signs, and symbolic signs, subdivides them into phonetic, event, identity and other specific forms, systematically sorts out their generation logic and signification mechanisms, and summarizes three core semiotic functions: emotional expression, social reflection, and identity construction.^[11]

Among them, the emotional expression function builds a bridge between individual emotion and collective resonance, serving as a "pressure valve" for social emotions; the social reflection function directly reflects the pain points and realities of the times, acting as a "barometer" of social culture; the identity construction function helps young people with self-positioning and group belonging, becoming a "digital identity card" for group identification. This study not only verifies the strong explanatory power of Peircean semiotics for online linguistic phenomena but also provides theoretical references for the standardized guidance of Internet buzzwords, public opinion governance, and youth culture research. It fully demonstrates that Internet buzzwords are by no means fragmented online language, but important cultural symbols carrying deep social connotations, whose semiotic logic and cultural value deserve continuous and in-depth exploration.

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