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The Instant Generation: Chinese Internet Language and Identity Trends

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Asian Studies

by

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September 2019

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The Instant Generation: Chinese Internet Language and Identity Trends

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by

Annette Sarinthorn La

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ABSTRACT

The Instant Generation: Chinese Internet Language and Identity Trends

by

Annette Sarinthorn La

The interrelationship between the Internet and society has made significant contribution to the development of language—specifically, the rise of Chinese Internet language. In this thesis, I analyze search frequencies and familiarity trends among Chinese words and phrases in order to highlight their association to social change and identity aspects.

This study uses *Baidu Index* as the main reference for data collection of trending Chinese words from 2011-2018. This website keeps track of how frequently words and phrases are looked up on the Chinese search engine, *Baidu*. The basis of my research compares online data from *Baidu Index* with ten ethnographic interviews and Chinese lexica surveys to recognize patterns found in the application and interpretation of words. A total of 50 Chinese words and phrases were compiled and used in the complete survey to evaluate different familiarity features. I conducted these interviews and surveys with undergraduate Chinese international students who attended or graduated from the University of California, Santa Barbara in 2018. This process aimed to gain insight on their attitude towards Chinese identity-associated lexica, their Internet habits and societal standards. In the data analysis

portion, the focus is on 15 of the 50 words due to their relations to language and identity patterns.

The results of the study have shown how newly created words in Chinese Internet language parallels with changes in society—such as current events, social media usage and social pressures—that in turn reflect the individual’s and community’s perspective towards these topics. This is evident in the number of trending words that follow developments in topics of family structure, gender stereotypes and social attitudes. The familiarity and spread of these words are influenced by the prominence of social media, the convenience of how information circulates over the Internet, and the pressure to stay current with society. These general social changes implied in Chinese internet lexica and are further observed in participants’ interviews to offer a more in-depth understanding of internet users and their language usage. Through the interviews, it is seen how keeping up with language and social trends is important for self-expression and integrating oneself into different communities. It is also observed how self-identity and the community influences language development and vice versa.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Literature Review	7
2.1 Internet as a Medium: Online Communication.....	7
2.2 Chinese Internet Society	8
2.3 Language and Identity Expression.....	10
3. Methodology.....	12
3.1 Research Materials.....	13
Survey	14
Interviews.....	15
Participants and Site	15
3.2 Procedures.....	16
4. Data, Results and Analysis	20
4.1 Language and Society	20
Family Structure	20
Gender Bending Equality.....	25
Changing Standards of Society.....	30
4.2 Keeping up with Internet Users	33
4.3 Community and Identity through Language	40
5. Conclusion.....	44
References.....	46
Appendices	51

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1. Family structure and Generation-related Chinese words/phrases.....	23
Figure 1. Baidu Index Chart Age Statistics: "孩奴" <i>hai nu</i>	24
Table 2. Gender-related Chinese words/phrases.....	27
Figure 2. Baidu Index Chart Age and Gender Statistics: "剩女" <i>shengnü</i> , "女強人" <i>nü qiangren</i> , "女汉子" <i>nü hanzi</i> , "萌妹子" <i>meng meizi</i>	29
Table 3. Social standards of society-related Chinese words/phrases.....	31

1. Introduction

The Internet—as a medium for information exchange, communication, and creation—has become a ubiquitous and almost inseparable part of modern technology and society. Its prominent role in digital discourse has led to the development of Internet language, which refers to ‘netspeak’ or ‘computer-mediated communication’ (CMC) that is practiced and popularized online, but not restricted solely to online use.¹ Language that is used among a community is strongly related to self-expression and identity formation. This is seen in the case of lexica in the Chinese Internet language that is associated with technological and ideological developments within a society.² Language changes provide identity markers that capture snippets of historical, social, cultural events and beliefs that are shared and experienced by a group of people.

Studies in Internet language started gaining attention with David Crystal’s introduction to the field in the early 21st century.³ New areas within Internet language studies explored the diverse linguistic and social features of language and technology. For example, scholars have noted the different styles and forms of Internet slang used in online communities and exchanges. Interest in Internet language studies continued paving its way to the area of Chinese Internet language. Linguists have analyzed social and language

¹ Crystal, David. *Language and the Internet*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 17.

² Yang, Guobin. "Technology and Its Contents: Issues in the Study of the Chinese Internet." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 70, no. 4 (2011): 1043-050. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41349982>.

³ Crystal, David. *Language and the Internet*.

practices in Chinese online bulletin board systems and microblogging.⁴ However, little attention is given to the trends and patterns found in Chinese Internet lexica familiarity and Internet users' identity formation. In my research, I focus on these aspects to offer a close study on Internet users' social media habits and language practices. This project analyzes the meaning of lexica to observe patterns in Chinese words and phrases that are either coined or popularized over the Internet. Language surveys and interviews are conducted to show how newly-created and trending words represent the era of its prime use, moreover, how they describe users who integrate them in their everyday speech. This is to gain a deeper understanding of participants' attitudes toward language and social change.

The goal of this research is to study how the meaning and familiarity of Chinese Internet language is related to personal-community identity and cultural ideologies. New words are being created on need-based terms to describe new expressions and events, in addition to noting new social and cultural trends. In this thesis, I explore how a group of Internet users—Chinese international undergraduate students attending the University of California, Santa Barbara—use the Internet and Internet language in their identity expression. In the case of Chinese international students attending American universities, external environment plays a huge role in one's language use and social standards. The Internet specifically, allows for easier access to global information, in which these students can continue to connect to the 'Chinese Internet' society through the convenience of their electronic devices. Through personal interviews and language observations, the study shows

⁴ Yuan, Elaine. Language as social practice on the Chinese internet. *Computer-Mediated Communication across Cultures: International Interactions in Online Environments*, 2011; Yuan, Zhou-min. Exploring Chinese college students' construction of online identity on the Sina Microblog. *Discourse, Context & Media*. 2018, 26. 10.1016/j.dcm.2018.02.001.

how participants use social media and Internet language to enter and maintain multiple community ties.

Previous studies have addressed how the Internet as a medium for communication has expedited the rate of discourse and linguistic exchange between users. The rise of social media has also allowed for new and creative platforms for socializing with multiple people online. This study explores how these factors have extended their influence in Chinese lexica and the social habits of users. Chinese Internet lexica are emerging and growing rapidly alongside trends—establishing their own rules and standards as a new form, or extension of language. The spoken and written aspects of language are combined in Internet language⁵, which means that Internet language contributes in a unique way to the online-offline identities of its users and the society that continues to change around them. My thesis analysis focuses on a group of words that are categorized in identity aspects of family, gender, and social attitudes. I analyze keyword search trends on *Baidu Index* to compare general data given online to the participants' responses in the survey. Through interview responses we see how participants (Internet users) use and receive these words, and how they utilize Internet language in their identity expression.

Scholars have pointed out that the boundless space of the Internet incorporates creative and unique “network of networks” that are balanced by basic rules and regulations that connect them.⁶ This includes technological advancements that allows for innovative means of communication, such as microblogging, looking up information on search engines, and sharing pictures and online videos. There are restrictions along with this, such as terms

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Jones, Steve. *Doing Internet Research: Critical Issues and Methods for Examining the Net*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publ., 1998. (xviii)

of agreement that issues rules of the website, what content can be presented, how it is presented and what is socially acceptable for online behavior. This is especially significant in the content that is displayed on social medium platforms, in which popular or trending items are heavily prioritized on main pages. In addition, some websites can follow algorithms to make content customizable to the users' interests and frequently viewed or searched topics, which is a significant component in the information they are initially exposed to. Internet users tend to follow trending keywords that are related to current events or interests of the individual, community, and society.

Through this study, we see how Internet language is used for self-expression over the web. Online expression is regulated through the individual, audience, and platform—where the individual either displays a modified image of themselves and their content based on their own and the audience's expectations—both acquainted and/or anonymous users can in turn, receive and respond to their posts. When they become socially aware to a general community, these items begin to “trend”, which is similar to how new language is created, accepted and used based on its relevancy, recognition and acceptance. Through participant interviews, we see how some of these Chinese Internet lexica extend to sharing social pressures, developments in society, current events in the world, popular culture and entertainment, etc. Thus, keywords and their popularity act as a representation of the public's needs, interests, and identity.

In this thesis, I address the following questions: What does language change reveal about changes in society? How has the Internet, as a medium of media, influence changes in linguistic online practices? How does Internet language and social media affect the formation of identity and community? In vice versa, how does identity and community influence language formation? I demonstrate how social and identity trends can be

understood through language. By using an ethnographic approach of personal interviews and surveys about the familiarity of Chinese Internet language, I distinguish a connection between social media usage, online language and identity. I aim to investigate the role of the Internet as a creative medium for linguistic innovation and social practices. By analyzing identity from an individual perspective to a collective group, the study of Chinese Internet usage reveals relationships between digital technologies and language and their role in self-expression and identity formation. This thesis attempts to show the multiple core structures of identity through Internet language trends within the Chinese society, in which this is valuable for understanding how social media and language enables one to adapt and merge into these communities. By doing so, the research will explore how the relationship between Chinese Internet language and societal change is influenced by the other.

The thesis consists of five chapters: chapter 1 is the introduction, followed by chapter 2, the literature review; chapters 3 and 4 go over the methodology, data, results and analysis, and lastly, chapter 5 is the conclusion.

Chapter 2 gives an overview of the field of Internet studies and emphasizes how this medium contributes to changes in linguistic behavior through online communication. It addresses how Internet language studies need to explore both the technological properties of the medium and the cultural ideologies as well. This is seen in Chinese Internet language, in which scholars bring attention to the issues in studying the Chinese Internet and the methods to overcome these restrictions.⁷ These methods follow examples by new media sociolinguistics and using Herring's 'Computer-mediated discourse analysis' (CMDA) to see

⁷ Yang, Guobin. "Technology and Its Contents," 1043-050.

how Chinese Internet language meaning classification is used for understanding social and behavioral trends in the Chinese society.⁸

Chapter 3 goes into detail on the methodology for my research. This includes taking an ethnographic approach in addition to analyzing online language data trends from *Baidu Index*. Ethnographic interviews are accompanied by language-familiarity surveys to compare to online data. Interviews also give insight on everyday usage and online expression on social media, in addition to perspectives towards social issues. All 10 participants are undergraduate or recently graduated from the University of California, Santa Barbara. Moreover, the interviews were taken place on the UCSB campus. I conclude this chapter by going over my methods of analysis that carry onto the next chapter—the discussion.

In Chapter 4, I discuss how Internet language related to gender, family, and group characteristics of identity, draws attention to the value of language beyond communication. Language plays a role in creating and expressing the individual and their society. For gender, the One-child policy allowed women to move upward in society both socially and economically. It also greatly impacted family structure, in which traditional Confucian ideals are replaced by socio-political and economic concerns and prioritization. Identity construction among communities share their voices on the Internet—where they express their concerns, struggles and reaction to societal and individual pressures. This paper brings greater awareness towards the formation of community identity through Internet language by focusing on a group of individuals who experienced similar cultural events. This is explored through their familiarity of these words. Familiarity plays a major role in language

⁸ Herring, S. C. “Computer-mediated discourse analysis: An approach to researching online behavior.” In: *Designing for Virtual Communities in the Service of Learning*, 338-

development by indicating the different or shared exposure of word in trending topics across social media platforms. This is significant in terms of the major growth of the Internet and social media usage that amplifies a progression of socio-linguistic developments in Internet language.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Internet as a Medium: Online Communication

According to the linguist, David Crystal, the rise of ‘new communications technology,’ from printing to telephones and television, has brought great debate on matters of political distress and social order. The Internet is even more so, as it allows its users to access massive amounts of information from across the web. Previous communication technologies have also created new language varieties and usages. With the evolution of the Internet, this ‘third medium’ for communication contributes to linguistic behaviors different from preceding technologies. In contrast to how ‘global’ the Internet is presumed to be, a great amount of computer-mediated communication is centered around smaller-scale communities, groups, and individuals. Howard Rheingold explains that the Internet contains an ‘ecosystem of subcultures’, which is similar to the development of language characteristics used in certain communities. Existing research in the field of Internet studies observe online discourse through different forms of social media to demonstrate how language captures the everyday lives of individuals.

The Internet continues to collect and store information not only on online chats, updates and website searches, but on user behavior and language usage. As a medium, it is a

376. Edited by Sasha A. Barab, Rob Kling & James H. Gray. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

tool and space for innovation, interaction, and expression. If we picture the Internet as a series of social networks, its features resemble something similar to an intangible world. Humans on earth are like Internet users on the web, where they form smaller communities that are connected through those networks. Internet language is no exception, where it reflects language usage and behaviors of a specific group of people. But, the great thing about the Internet as a medium, is that language and communication is simultaneously saved as data and stored online when a written text is sent. By studying online language and behavioral trends, the connection between the Internet and its many social and individual networks can be accessed and changes can be observed.

A concern in Internet studies is the “deterministic view of technology”⁹ that draws concerns where people assume that the convenience of technology is making society incompetent. However, this also is a misconception of the creativity of users as seen through their linguistic creations. Instead of focusing solely on the technological aspects of Internet language, the cultural ideologies of the society need to be understood as well. In other words, Internet language is the product of the technology and the personal creativity of Internet users. This is seen in Chinese Internet language and how Internet users overcome technological barriers in online discourse.

2.2 Chinese Internet Society

The linguistic variety of online communication proves that the creativity of users can surpass technological restrictions of the Internet. Crystal’s definition of ‘netspeak’ emphasizes how it incorporates characteristics of writing and speech.¹⁰ This is seen through the creation of Internet slang that utilizes ‘abbreviations, acronyms, shortenings, and meme

⁹ Ibid. 1044

formation'¹¹ to adapt and quicken the speed of online conversations. In Guobin Yang's survey of issues in studying the Chinese Internet, he acknowledges how online content is filtered through political control.¹² However, this does not deter the creativity of Chinese Internet language. Instead, this becomes a significant component that adds to the linguistic variety of it. Linguistic variety in Chinese Internet language is also seen in patterns of 'borrowing, compounding, analogy' in lexical creation.¹³ Even with issues of Internet censorship in studying the Chinese Internet, users adapt to these restrictions to become even more creative in their online expression.

In recent studies of Chinese Internet language, researchers have examined online texts on bulletin board systems to draw conclusions on online communities.¹⁴ This practice of analyzing online discourse is common for observing linguistic practices and social behaviors. Surveys and ethnographic studies conducted in both English and Chinese have narrowed their focus to specific media platforms. They have analyzed online communication and linguistic patterns in environments that range from private chatrooms to public microblogging. My research does not observe users on a specific platform, instead, I explore individuals' simultaneous usage of different social media applications. Through interviews, I intended to get an overview of their social behaviors and expressions on their most-used social media, which usually involved multiple apps. In other fields of Chinese Internet

¹⁰ Crystal, *Language and the Internet*, 47.

¹¹ Zobotnova, Myroslava. "Internet Slang as Key means of Interaction in Cyberspace." *Development of Philological Sciences in Countries of the European Union taking into Account the Challenges of XXI Century*, 2018, 146-64.

¹² Yang, "Technology and Its Contents."

¹³ Gao, Liwei. "Synchronic Variation or Diachronic Change: A Sociolinguistic Study of Chinese Internet language," in Liu Jin and Hongyin Tao (eds) *Chinese under Globalization: Emerging Trends in Language Use in China*, 12 Singapore: World Scientific, 2012.

¹⁴ Ibid.

language, Gao Liwei has taken into consideration theoretical methods of ‘the apparent time construct’ to describe language change as a process of age-grading.¹⁵ The researcher states that “when the society changes, language as a sign that mirrors the reality of society will also undergo transformation.”¹⁶ In other words, changes within society are commonly present in linguistic changes in lexicon, grammar, and discourse.¹⁷ Lexicon is the most unstable of the three linguistic properties, so it is assumed to be the most receptive to change. As previous research in Internet language studies primarily focus on multiple linguistic aspects of the language, my study will provide a close observation on lexical meaning and familiarity trends. By doing so, it will show how change in language reflects social changes in society.

2.3 Language and Identity Expression

Crispin Thurlow lays out the major concepts of new media sociolinguistics as ‘discourse, technology, multimodality, and ideology’.¹⁸ In doing so, Thurlow emphasizes how it is as important to understand the ideology of language is as the Internet medium that supports it.¹⁹ This is also supported by Xing Lu and Guo-Ming Chen who discuss the important ties between culture and language.²⁰ Therefore, in order to understand the language used by a community, one must understand the community’s system of cultural, social and political beliefs.

¹⁵ Gao, “Synchronic Variation,” 9-10.

¹⁶ Gao, “Synchronic Variation,” 21.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Thurlow, Crispin, and Kristine Mroczeck, “Introduction: Fresh Perspectives on New Media Sociolinguistics,” in *Digital Discourse: Language in the New Media*, xviii-xxxiii. Oxford University Press, 2011.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Lu, Xing and Guo-Ming Chen. “Language change and value orientations in Chinese culture”. China Media Research, vol. 7, no. 3, 2011, pp. 56-63.

<http://www.wwdw.chinamediaresearch.net/index.php/back-issues?id=51>

In studying online communities, Susan Herring defines ‘computer-mediated discourse analysis’ (CMDA) as a method of inquiring “online behavior through the lens of language... and language use.”²¹ The properties of CMDA analyzes the ‘structure, meaning, interaction, and social behavior’ of language.²² My research focuses on the meaning level of Chinese Internet language in order to understand language use for self-expression and social behavioral trends among the Chinese society. Researchers in the field of sociolinguistics often recommend focusing on the ideology of everyday language.²³ This is seen in studying the role of online communities in linguistic change through their discourse practices. The fluidity of online and offline language represents how everyday language synthesizes conversations on different mediums and formalities. Although it is sometimes awkward to use Internet language or slang in person, such words have made their way on occasion into colloquial speech.

Online communities and social identities can be studied through online interactions and the use of language.²⁴ Jin Liu and Hongyin Tao describe language as a ‘social phenomenon’ that embeds “social and cultural identities.”²⁵ Linguistic identity is the product of a community’s and individual’s identity. Language and identity are both flexible and adaptive to change, and on the basis of CMDA, online and offline behavior seeps through language. Language trends, like social trends, can vary in their longevity. But even so, their timeline and association with similar words mark a periodic significance that can be tied to societal changes, especially when a collection of socially-related words are created to

²¹ Herring, “Computer-mediated discourse analysis”

²² *Ibid.*, 3

²³ Thurlow et al., “Introduction: Fresh Perspectives on New Media Sociolinguistics.”

²⁴ Yuan, Elaine. Language as social practice on the Chinese internet.

describe a rising phenomenon. Language creation can become a form of expression to represent society's reaction to these events. Using CDMA to find patterns in lexical meaning has deepened my understanding of pressures and concerns within the Chinese society.

The statistics of Internet users can range from children playing game apps on their tablets, to adults and the elderly. Though Internet language is not exclusive to young people, Gao and Zabolnova have highlighted the youth's major impact in linguistic change and language variety.²⁶ Therefore, in addition to using quantitative data from *Baidu Index* to represent the overall population of Internet users, I have sought out the perspectives of young college undergraduates. The main components of my research involve following language trends from online and offline quantitative data. I collect data from language familiarity surveys with my sample and also conducting ethnographic interviews. These interviews aim to represent the youth's perspectives on the Chinese society and their individual identities. I compare the general data to my participants' responses to show similarities and differences in the community perspectives compared to the individual perspective.

3. Methodology

The data used in the project consist of distributing Chinese Internet language surveys and conducting semi-structured interviews with Chinese international students attending or who have recently graduated from the University of California, Santa Barbara. The research process is approved through the Office of Research Application for the use of Human Subjects (ORahs). In addition to this ethnographic study, I used online data of trending

²⁵ Liu, Jin and Hongyin Tao (eds) (2012) *Chinese under Globalization: Emerging Trends in Language Use in China*, Singapore: World Scientific, 204.

²⁶ Gao, "Synchronic Variation," 11. Zabolnova et al., "Internet Slang as a Key Means of Interaction in Cyberspace." 146-64.

keyword statistics in the creation of the survey and in the data analysis in my discussion. The online data provides a basis of general trend knowledge that I compare my language survey results to. Meanwhile, the interviews give a closer study on how active Internet users use specific trending words in their identity formation and expression. They also provide different perspectives toward social topics and society development.

3.1 Research Materials

I used both online and ethnographic data in order to avoid the limitations and unpredictable circumstances inherent to Chinese Internet studies. Some of these barriers concern online censorship, unknown motives behind online searches, and the anonymity of Internet users. Language is constantly changing over time, so the connection between language and the individual identity is best observed through the everyday lives and language practices of people.²⁷ Therefore, I used online data in the preliminary stages for the creation of the interview and survey, while the actual procedures were administered in-person and direct face-to-face interactions.

Before conducting the ethnographic work, I used *Baidu Index* as a main reference for recording online trending keywords/phrases data collection.²⁸ This website keeps track of how frequently words and phrases are looked up on the Chinese search engine, *Baidu*. *Baidu Index* has several features to show the relationships and statistics of its keyword reserve. It shows the frequency of how often this word is searched over the timespan of 2011-2019. This time frame also proves valuable as the participants, who were born in the mid and later

²⁷ Thurlow and Mroczek (2011) focused on the everyday exchanges between their participants to analyze their texting practices with a systematic and ethnographic take.

²⁸ *Baidu zhishu* 百度指数. [Baidu Index] Accessed February, 2019. <http://index.baidu.com/v2/index.html#/>.

1990s, are in their late teens and early twenties, and are highly active Internet users.²⁹ By accounting the timeline of keyword frequencies based on searches, different social changes or cultural events that sparked interest in a given word or caused it to emerge can be recognized. Other features that are included are the statistics of Internet users who look up this word. For example, *Baidu Index* collects data on the region, age, and gender groups of Internet users who frequently search a given word. Regional statistics are important for analyzing dialect words, while age groups reveal information about Internet users and periodic generational groups who may use these words. Lastly, being able to view gender statistics is important for discussing gender-associated words. *Baidu Index* also gives further statistics on the differences between mobile and PC searches, but this project only focuses on the other features mentioned above.

Chinese Internet familiarity surveys are used in the addition to interviews with participants. The combination of these materials provide insight on trends within language and lexica groups, moreover, opinions toward ongoing trends in the Chinese society and the community level of Chinese international students attending UCSB.

Survey

The survey evaluates an individual's familiarity with a list of Chinese terms either was created, trended, or popularized on the Internet.³⁰ An original list of 73 items was reduced to 50 items for closer study.³¹ The list is arranged by highest to lowest familiarity and alphabetically. The original 73 items were found in multiple editions of *Hanyu xin*

²⁹ "China: Internet User Breakdown by Age 2018." Statista. Accessed August 01, 2019. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/265150/internet-users-in-china-by-age/>.

³⁰ See Appendix A for an example of the Language-familiarity survey.

³¹ See Appendix B for the list of 50 items used in the survey.

*ciyu*³², *Baidu Index* and websites listing popularly used Chinese slang and Internet words.³³

The final list was selected based on lexic meaning patterns and divided into the three categories: family/generation, gender and social attitude terms. The sections are organized alphabetically. The information acquired provides a basis of understanding for commonly used trending words among the participants. Moreover, it is used for cross-referencing the popularity of the word list with online data from *Baidu Index* and ethnographic data of my participation pool.

Interviews

Interviews consisted of questions that focused on social media usage, Internet language, and identity-related aspects of the individual's life. These queries evaluated how involved the individual is with the Internet and social media and the role they play in their everyday lives.³⁴ The participants were asked about their sources for learning new Chinese Internet words and how they kept up with language changes in China. In the connection between Internet and language, the participants assessed how their identity is influenced by different factors and perspectives, such as societal expectations and expectations on themselves. Moreover, they weigh the importance of Internet language in reflecting identity-related attributes. In understanding how my participants interact with digital technologies, which apps they receive and exchange information on, and how they accept and incorporate

³² Hou, Min, and Yu Zou. 2013 *Hanyu xinciyu*. Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2014; and idem, 2014 *Hanyu xinciyu*. Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2015.

³³ Liu, Mandy. "The Explosion of Popular New Chinese Words on the Internet." Your Guide To The Chinese Learning Jungle. May 22, 2018. Accessed February, 2019. <https://www.digmandarin.com/popular-chinese-words-internet.html>. "*Changjian zhongguo liyu daquan*" 常见中国俚语大全 [Common Chinese Sayings]. *Liyu daquan* 俚语大全. <https://www.liyuslang.com/changjianzhongguoyudaquan/> (accessed February 2019).

³⁴ See Appendix C for the list of interview questions.

new words in their daily conversation, I explore the formation of individual and generational identity through language and self-expression practices.

Participants and Site

For the pool of participants, Chinese international students who are currently attending or recently graduated from the University of California, Santa Barbara were recruited. The ten students who participated were born between 1996 and 1999; they came to the United States during middle, high school or college; they are from different cities in China; and they are all active Internet users. Because this project focuses on a small group of participants, I was able to closely observe their social media/Internet habits, their familiarity with trending Internet words, and their individual identity characteristics.

All interviews were conducted at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Interviews were conducted in either English, Mandarin Chinese, or both, depending on the interviewee's preference. They were asked to use the language they felt the most comfortable to express themselves. Some interviews used both languages in order to clarify the meaning of certain Chinese slang words or in other case scenarios. All interviews were conducted face-to-face and recorded for qualitative data-collection purposes. The extent of the interviews lasted around 20-30 minutes each, depending on the participants' answer length.

3.2 Procedures

I have combined statistical data on trending words and Internet users from *Baidu Index* with ethnographic interviews and surveys to compare perspectives from Internet searches and personal experiences shared by individuals. The initial process of online data collection gives a broader sense of my expectations and predictability for the words that I use in my survey. However, due to censorship on the Chinese Internet, personal perspectives verify these trends among the group of participants and analyze words that reflect their own

community's identity. Rather than disregarding online data due to Chinese Internet regulations, I have looked for patterns between qualitative and quantitative data sources to support findings in the interviews.

The interviews were transcribed or translated into English and categorized based on the questions asked. Common answers and patterns were noted to distinguish social trends. The interviews draw from Herring's computer-mediated discourse analysis approach³⁵ that interacts with the data received from the word-familiarity survey. The purpose of conducting semi-structured interviews is to gain insight into how the individuals describe themselves and their society. This includes observing their social media habits and inquiring about their opinions toward social issues.

The surveys based on word-familiarity were condensed from 50 to 15 words, in order to emphasize certain categories that related to the community and the individual's identity formation. These words are further divided based on their familiarity among the survey, where they ranged from receiving majority 'familiar' and above, fifty-fifty, or majority 'not so familiar' and below. The full list of 50 words can be found in the Appendix, organized in a manner based on most to least familiar words and in alphabetical order. The final 15 words selected are analyzed in the discussion chapter. The participants' responses to the survey, in which they provide additional descriptions and preferences of the words, are taken into account when connecting their answers in the interview questions. Through this process, relationships are drawn between language, expression, and social changes.

In addition to online data and ethnographic work, textual sources are referenced to provide a better picture of how previous researchers recorded society views and social

³⁵ Herring, Susan. "Computer-mediated discourse analysis," 2.

issues. Such sources cover the phenomenon of the One-child policy's impact in different aspects of society, including economic and social concerns. General viewpoints from online sources will be compared to the participants' answers to showcase similar and different perspectives toward social topics.

Justification

The participants of this study are Chinese international students who were born after the 1990s. Their generation are active Internet users, and based on their interviews, we can see how they use Internet language to describe their generation, community, and self-identities. *Baidu Index* keyword trends are compared with participants' responses in language familiarity surveys. The addition of interview questions gave greater insight on the Internet user and their perspectives toward language and identity.

The interview questions focused on social media usage, Internet language, individual and community identity-related questions. These questions provided greater insight on how often my participants interact with digital technologies, which apps they receive high amounts of information from, and what kind of information do they receive. Questions related to Internet language include where they learn new trending new words from, how they incorporate it into their own daily conversations, and why they choose to accept incoming new words. Identity questions related to generation explore their perspectives towards their own generation and community, how they believe society views them, and in what ways the Internet and language play a role in self-expression practices.

This project takes on an ethnographic approach with the addition of referring to online data for trending keyword statistics. Due to limitations endemic to Chinese Internet studies, such as online censorship and unknown motives behind online searches, moving beyond the technological properties of language is important to consider. Semi-structured

interviews are paired with a survey that focuses on familiarity and use of Chinese Internet language to juxtapose online data. Overall, the data collected will draw connections between language and society by comparing multiple sources. The close study on internet users' social media habits and language usage will demonstrate how the influence between language change and identity formation is a mutual relationship.

Limitations

While Baidu Index does have its limits, it gives a general idea of which keywords are trending in quantitative measures. The statistics on region, age, and gender are important factors to consider. Although the region feature may be skewed by mainly ranking most searches by the areas with the greatest population, it is still valuable when searching trending words that emerge from dialects and later becomes popularized. The age factor relates to population size, which is affected by the population rates of the One-child policy, but it also gives information on who are the main Internet users. As for gender, the combination of the population policy and traditional beliefs can potentially reflect a gender ratio imbalance in China, however, it is interesting to investigate why one certain gender group search words more frequently than the opposite gender. For example, having a majority of male Internet users look up a word that is mainly associated with females could be related to how that word is commonly used or perceived. Lastly, the time frame of data that *Baidu Index* displays, 2011-2019, may seem limiting, but this time period suits my data and the age of my participants in terms of Internet usage. So, although *Baidu Index* may have some flaws in its data display, this is also reflecting the issues within society. In which, the data may favor different qualities based on the population size, gender, and therefore, the frequency of searches also reveals extra cultural factors that contribute to changes in society.

In the following chapter, the data collected from *Baidu Index* word frequency charts, the familiarity language survey, and personal interviews are used and compared to draw connections between language and cultural ideologies within society.

4. Data, Analysis and Results

This chapter analyzes features of language trends based on the data collected on *Baidu Index* and the contribution by participants in interviews and surveys. The first part of this chapter analyzes how language reflects change in society. It focuses on family structure, gender roles and changes in social standards. The second part gives an overview of how the Internet as a medium has led to new levels in communication, such as innovation in linguistic practices and online expression. The last part explores how Internet language and social media play major roles in the formation of community and identity. By examining lexica patterns, language familiarity trends and Internet search frequencies, the relationship between Internet language and society plays a prominent role in understanding self-identity. In addition, interview responses provide a clearer overview of different perspectives towards Internet usage, society beliefs and attitudes.

4.1 Language and Society

Scholars have pointed out that language expands simultaneously with developments in society. This section covers several cultural phenomena that influence language creation within social communities and groups. Words associated with family structure, gender, and public attitudes are categorized to demonstrate changes in society standards and beliefs.

Family Structure: The New Center of the Family Circle and Household Roles

The One-Child policy, first instituted in 1979, has had a major impact on the conventional number of family members, altering the power hierarchy within the family

structure. Unintended consequences from this population policy continued to bring several changes to the upbringing and future of this generation of only-child individuals. Although later exceptions of allowing a second child under specific circumstances were made, by the 1990s, “the percentage of all births that were one child births has exceeded 90 percent.”³⁶ The children of this entire era, are associated with the One-Child policy, whether the individual grew up as an only-child or with siblings. The effects of this policy resulted in direct and indirect impacts to the upbringing, environment and expectations of children in that era.

The traditional ideal family structure among Chinese families integrated power relationships that reflected ideas of filial piety.³⁷ In Confucian teachings of human relationships, they describe the five cardinal relationships as: “ruler and subordinate, father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger brother, and friend and friend.”³⁸ Distinct separation of the roles and duties of individuals established social order between individuals, the family, and society. The family hierarchy takes account age and gender, where older members were held in high regard and males held a higher status than females.³⁹ As mentioned above, children were expected to be filial towards their parents. Furthermore,

³⁶ Feng, Xiaotian, Dudley L. Poston, Jr., and Xiaotao Wang. “China’s One-child Policy and the Changing Family.” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 45, no. 1 (2014): 17.

³⁷ Jacobsen, R. Brooke. “Changes in the Chinese Family.” *Social Science* 51, no. 1 (1976): 26-31. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41886039>.

³⁸ Herbert H. P. Ma, *The Legalization of Confucianism and its Impact on Family Relationships*, 65 *Wash. U. L. Q.* 667 (1987): 668.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

women were expected to perform household chores and considered inferior to the men in the family.⁴⁰

However, with the One-Child policy, the core of the family system shifted to the only child. Given the responsibility of continuing the family's lineage, all of the family's attention and resources are directed to the sole heir. The simplification of the three-member family and the relationships within the family has led to more open perceptions of gender.⁴¹ Regardless of the child's gender, they are expected to succeed in their education, careers, and produce a future family. And so, if the only child of the family is a daughter, she will be given the same attention and support as she is now the new center of the family. Participant 3 acknowledged that females are gaining more opportunities in today's society, but her grandparents' generation still tend to hold on to the traditional perspective that having a male child is preferred. She comments that her parents do not share this thinking, as both of their generations are becoming more open to social changes and gender equality.

⁴⁰ Gao, Xiongya. "Women Existing for Men: Confucianism and Social Injustice against Women in China." *Race, Gender & Class* 10, no. 3 (2003): 114-25. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41675091>.

⁴¹ Feng et al., "China's One-child Policy and the Changing Family," 17.

In Table 1, words associated with the One-child policy, family values and structure changes are listed.

Table 1 Family structure and generation-related Chinese words/phrases

Chinese Slang Word/Phrase	Definition ⁴²	Baidu Keyword Search Frequency Notes ⁴³	Participant Familiarity Ratio ⁴⁴
单二代 <i>dan er dai</i>	An only child whose parents are also an only child in the family	A lot of participants did not know this word. Word not found on <i>Baidu Index</i> .	1:9
单身贵族 <i>danshen guizu</i>	People who choose to be single	Multiple peaks from 2014 to 2017. Still relevant.	6:4
妈宝 <i>ma bao</i>	Mama's boy	Not found on <i>Baidu Index</i>	8:2
孩奴 <i>hai nu</i>	Parents who do whatever their child wants (usually an only child)	Peak only in Sept-Oct 2013	1:9
家务骰子 <i>jia wu tou zi</i>	Roll a dice to decide on who does house chores	Multiple scattered peaks, slowly dying out	0:10

The words listed above reflect the transition of values and beliefs toward family, marriage, and household responsibilities. The words 单二代 *dan er dai*, lit. ‘second generation only child’, referring to an only child whose parents are also from single-child families, 妈宝 *ma bao* ‘mama’s boy’, and 孩奴 *hai nu*, lit. ‘slave to one’s child’, or a parent who always gives into their child, describe family relationships between parent and child after the One-Child policy. With all the attention and resources gathered to promote the only child’s upbringing, the traditional power hierarchy is disrupted. These words are created to

⁴² Definitions are created by referencing participants’ survey answers, *Baidu*, and *Pleco* Dictionary app explanations

⁴³ Frequencies are observed from *Baidu Index* data from 2011-2018. For exact graphs and comparisons, please refer to the Appendix.

⁴⁴ The ratio represents (Familiar : Unfamiliar)

show the awareness of social changes impacted, and new patterns arising. The words 妈宝 *ma bao* ‘mama’s boy’ and 孩奴 *hai nu* ‘slave to one’s child’ both share somewhat negative connotations in their descriptions of ‘spoiled’ children and a type of parent who pamper their child excessively. The participants shared greater familiarity of the word “妈宝” *ma bao* compared to “孩奴” *hai nu*. Seen in Figure 1, “孩奴” *hai nu* peaked in keyword searches on *Baidu Index* by Internet users of the ages 30-39. The reasoning behind this could be that “孩奴” *hai nu* is more commonly used to describe parents, so the participants’ age group would not likely use this word as often.

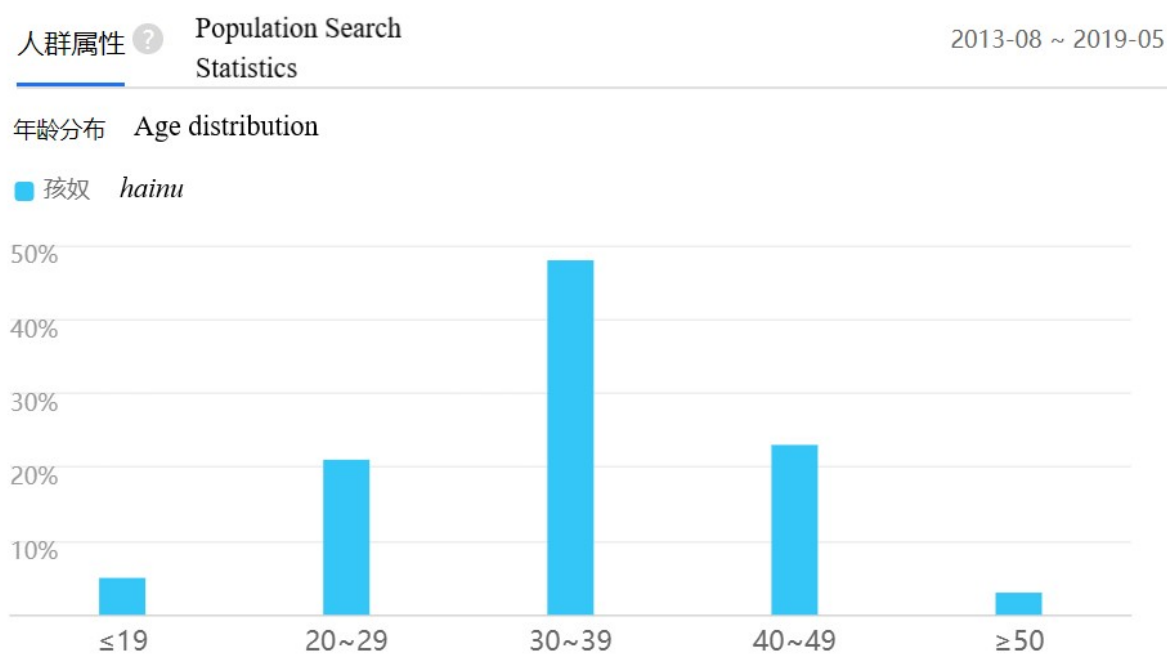


Figure 1. A chart provided by *Baidu Index*, depicting age statistics among Internet users who searched for the keyword 孩奴 *hai nu* ‘servant to one’s child’.

The next set of words 单身贵族 *danshen guizu*, lit. ‘single aristocrat’, referring to people who choose to be single (relationship-wise) and 家务骰子 *jiawu touzi*, lit. ‘housework dice’, meaning to determine household chores by rolling a dice, are related to changing patterns of marriage beliefs and household responsibilities. Marriage in China was

traditionally thought as a “fulfillment of one’s duty in preserving the family line” and so it was considered an obligation rather than a personal choice.⁴⁵ The first phrase is used to describe people who choose to remain single instead of following conventional marriage traditions. This shows a great shift in society’s attitudes towards marriage, as it would be considered an unthinkable act to not get married in the past. Moreover, in traditional Chinese society, they followed Confucian beliefs of “男主外，女主内” *nan zhu wai, nü zhu nei*, lit. ‘males work outside, female stay inside’, which refer to the idea that men handled outer affairs of financial makings, while women handled inner affairs of household work.⁴⁶ The second phrase promotes a method of choosing household chores that divides the responsibility to both parties of the marriage. These words represent changing opinions towards marriage, where some are choosing to value independence over relationships, and even within the relationship, traditional roles are headed towards a more equal standing. Overall, the progression of society’s beliefs and attitudes can be captured in the language created to reflect these new lifestyles.

Gender bending equality

Within the Chinese language, gender radicals embedded in characters demonstrate gender stereotypes and society’s view towards them. Dali Tan speculates that “characters embodying a sexist ideology inevitably affects and influences those people who are daily exposed to this language system.”⁴⁷ For example, sexist implications can be seen in

⁴⁵ Baber, Ray Erwin. “Marriage in Ancient China.” *The Journal of Educational Sociology* 8, no. 3 (1934): 133. doi:10.2307/2961796.

⁴⁶ Ebrey, Patricia Buckley. *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period*. Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1993, 24. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctv1wxthm>.

⁴⁷ Tan, Dali. “Sexism in the Chinese Language.” *NWSA Journal* 2, no. 4 (1990): 638. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4316075>

“Chinese characters, vocabulary, idioms and proverbs,” which reflect conventional beliefs and behavior.⁴⁸ The Chinese language system is still heavily gendered, but new words bring awareness to shifting gender patterns. This section analyzes different gender-associated lexica that challenge and/or reinforce gender stereotypes. It is seen how language influences society standards and vice versa in gender-related aspects.

When participants were asked about gender equality progression within the Chinese society, they generally responded with positive answers. Participant 7 acknowledged that with the implementation of the One-Child policy, the gender of the child and their treatment had little to no correlation. The expectation of the child remains the same regardless of their gender, which implies a more equal status. While other participants did agree with a rise of social status among women—with their greater amount of opportunities—the gap between gender inequality is still present in the society’s ideology. But, the progression of stronger, independent females climbing the ranks in society is a phenomenon that is reflected in language created to describe these powerful women.

In Table 2, phrases such as 女汉子 *nü hanzi*, lit. ‘masculine woman’, but meaning a ‘strong, independent woman’ and 女强人 *nü qiangren*, lit. ‘strong woman’, referring to a ‘highly educated career-woman’ describe characteristics of capable and self-sufficient females. In addition, there are also words created to characterize men who depict traits that go against the traditional masculine norms. 暖男 *nuan nan*, lit. ‘warm guy’, referring to a guy with a warm and caring personality, is an example that describe males that have a more ‘cute’ or warm personality/presence towards women.

⁴⁸ Moser, David, “Covert Sexism in Mandarin Chinese”, *Sino-Platonic Papers*, 74 (January 1997). http://sino-platonic.org/complete/spp074_chinese_sexism.pdf

Shown in Table 2, there are several words that replicate shifting patterns of new gender attitudes.

Table 2 Gender-related Chinese words/phrases

Chinese Slang Word/Phrase	Definition	Baidu Keyword Search Frequency Notes	Participant Familiarity Ratio
剩女 <i>sheng nü</i>	"Leftover women" Women who are of marrying age and older, but are not married yet	Consistently popular	10:0
女强人 <i>nü qiangren</i>	A career-woman who is highly educated	Consistently popular	9:1
女汉子 <i>nü hanzi</i>	A strong, independent woman	Peaked in 2013 then consistent, but dying out	9:1
奶爸 <i>nai ba</i>	A father who takes care of the children (a stay at home dad)	Consistently popular, with some peaks	5:5
暖男 <i>nuan nan</i>	A guy with a warm personality	Peak 2014-2015, then dying out but consistent	9:1
萌妹子 <i>meng meizi</i>	A cute girl	Consistent, then peaked 2017	9:1

Although words like 女汉子 *nü hanzi* ‘strong woman’ and 女强人 *nü qiangren* ‘career woman’ depict independent and capable women rising in society, words associated with negative connotations are also present. The term 剩女 *shengnü*, lit. ‘leftover women’, is used to refer to women who are of or over ‘marrying age’ (around 27 and older), but are still not married. Instead of chasing marriage, these women are pursuing higher education and economic independence—which is seen as a conflict of interest in the traditional viewpoint.⁴⁹ This derogatory word reinforces traditional beliefs of the gender system and the clashing of society values of marriage and career. The participants’ familiarity of these

⁴⁹ To, Sandy. “Understanding Sheng Nu (‘Leftover Women’): The Phenomenon of Late Marriage among Chinese Professional Women.” *Symbolic Interaction* 36, no. 1 (2013): 1-20. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/symbinte.36.1.1>.

words correlates with their interviews of how women are receiving greater opportunities to rise in their careers and social status. The Chinese language system is highly gendered, but this wave of lexica demonstrates how changes in gender roles can be seen and influenced through the language people use.

Likewise, males are also projecting characteristics that differ from traditional gender stereotypes and expectations. The phrases 暖男 *nuan nan* ‘kind guy’ and 奶爸 *nai ba* ‘stay-at-home dad’, depict men who display a ‘warmer personality’ and take on the household responsibilities as the family caretaker. The creation and familiarity of these words reflect the society’s reception towards these social topics. In this case, a changing attitude towards types of masculinity and the role of a father can be seen. Men are traditionally seen as the head and financial support for the family, but there is greater diversity in roles, with 奶爸 *nai ba* taking the part of a stay-at-home father. The relationship between language and gender in the Chinese language continues to influence each other—both progressing as new social patterns develop.

Although the number of powerful women in society is growing, the image of 萌妹子 *meng meizi*, or a ‘cute’ and ‘naïve’ girl is still popular. The character ‘萌’ *meng*, lit. ‘sprout’ is a borrowing from the Japanese slang ‘萌え’ (*moe*)⁵⁰ which also relates to the adoration of cute personalities. This word portrays a more traditional idea of the ‘female image,’ highly contrasting with the newer image of 女汉子 *nü hanzi* ‘strong woman’ and 女强人 *nü*

⁵⁰ Galbraith, Patrick W. “Moe and the Potential of Fantasy in Post-Millennial Japan.” *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies*, October 31, 2009. <http://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/articles/2009/Galbraith.html>. Yu, Hsiao-jung. “Chinese 26: New Phenomena in 21st Century Chinese.” Class lecture, University of California, Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA, 2018.

qiangren ‘career woman’. But rather than comparing traditional and unconventional ideals, the ‘female image’ is expanding to accept a diverse range of qualities.

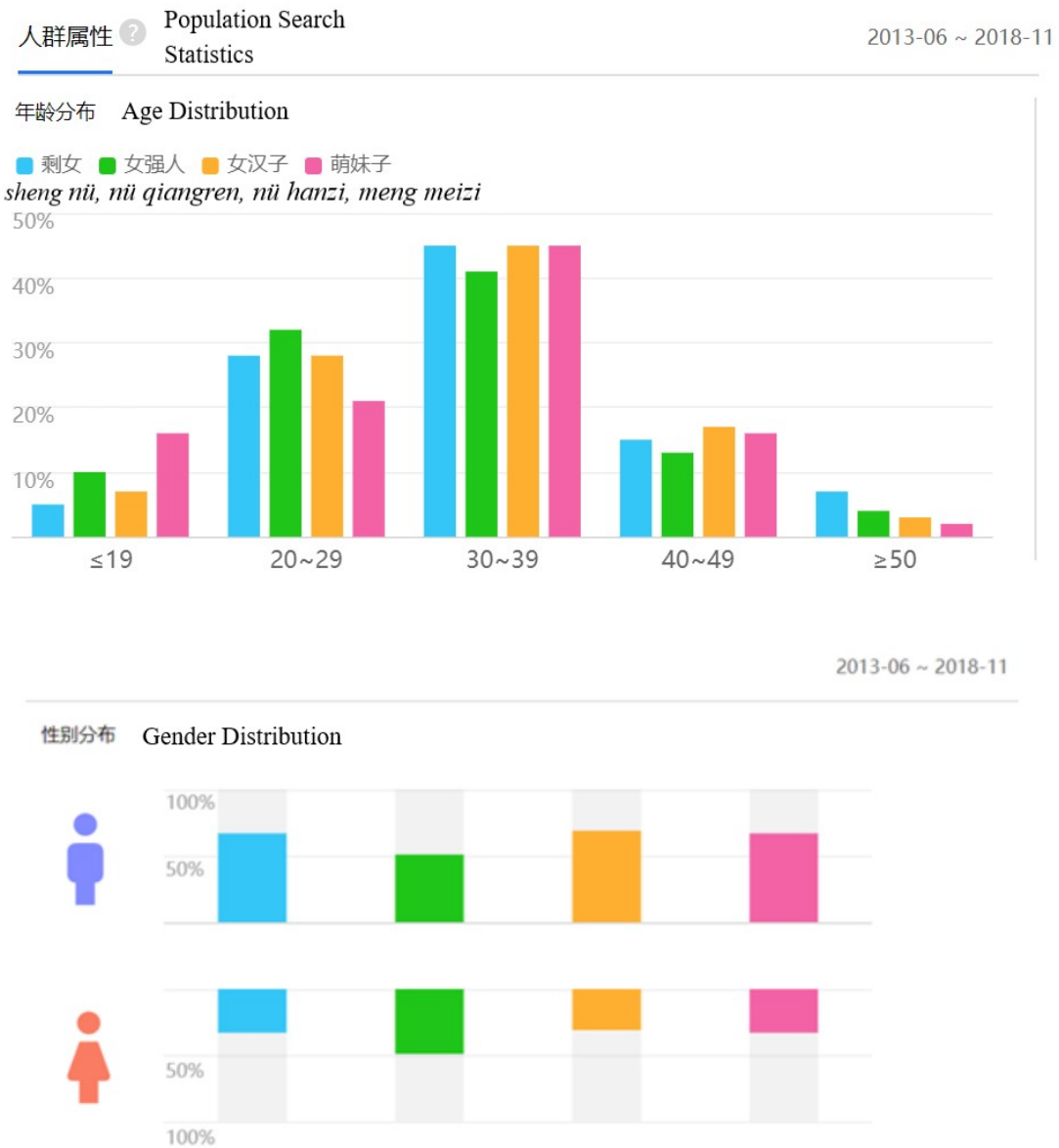


Figure 2. The above charts provided by *Baidu Index* compare the frequency of searches by age group and gender. The chart displays the following words related to the female gender: “剩女 *sheng nü* ‘leftover women’, 女强人 *nü qiangren* ‘career woman’, 女汉子 *nü hanzi* ‘strong woman’, 萌妹子 *meng meizi* ‘cute girl’.”⁵¹

⁵¹ Ibid

As seen by the participants' high ratio of familiarity of words related to the female gender, there can be a correlation to a greater awareness of changing gender roles in the Chinese society. In Figure 2, the *Baidu Index* statistics on the words “剩女 *sheng nü* ‘leftover women’, 女强人 *nü qiangren* ‘career woman’, 女汉子 *nü hanzi* ‘strong woman’, 萌妹子 *mei mengzi* ‘cute girl’” show how these lexica trends are more commonly searched by people in their early to middle adulthood.⁵² These female-related words are significantly searched more by male Internet users than female users. This could be due to the increase social consciousness of gender issues and changes, and so people may look up these words after hearing it from a friend or seeing it online. Participants stated that they learn a majority of new Chinese slang words from social media sites like *Weibo* (a popular microblogging application) and *Douyin* (a video streaming application) or by talking with friends and watching TV shows. As these words are becoming more popularly used, it is understandable how the social topics they are related to are also trending.

Changing Standards of Society

In terms of describing the ‘ideal’ or ‘attractive’ individual, society calculates a series of lookism, educational, and financial qualities. The extent of qualities goes beyond this list, but these traits are commonly found in trending words used online and offline. There are phrases that are associated with appearance, spending habits, behaviors of individuals, which are all examples of social standards of the general public or community who uses these words.

⁵² “*Sheng nü, nü qiangren, nü hanzi, meng meizi*” Comparison Chart “剩女，女强人，女汉子，萌妹子’ Comparison Chart.” Baidu Index.

Table 3 Social standards of society-related Chinese words/phrases

Chinese Slang Word/Phrase	Definition	Baidu Keyword Search Frequency Notes	Participant Familiarity Ratio
反差萌 <i>fancha meng</i>	When a person's appearance and personality doesn't match	Peak: mid 2014-2016	9:1
土豪 <i>tuhao</i>	Rich people who don't spend money wisely	Only popular at the latter half of 2013, then quickly dropped	10:0
奇葩 <i>qipa</i>	Weirdo	Consistent with some peaks, major peak in 2014	9:1
照骗 <i>zhao pian</i>	A picture that is photoshopped	Not found on <i>Baidu Index</i>	10:0
颜值 <i>yan zhi</i>	A person's face-score (attractiveness)	Rose to popularity in 2015 then slowly decreased, but still in use	10:0
高大上 <i>gaoda shang</i>	Tall, handsome, and luxurious	Peaked 2014, but gradually decreased	7:3
凤凰男 <i>fenghuang nan</i>	Describe a man who became successful without a good economic background (started from the bottom)	Random peaks, still relevant	1:9
屌丝 <i>diaosi</i>	Usually used to describe a man who is not good looking, does not have a good job or background	Peak April-May, 2012, then dying down	9:1

In Table 3, several words are created to describe a person's appearance, characteristics and behavior. 颜值 *yanzhi*, lit. a person's 'face-score', or 'attractiveness' places an emphasis on appearance and how it is valued and judged by society. The peer pressure from society's idea of physical attractiveness can affect the individual perspective as well. The depiction of beauty in media influences fashion, hairstyles, and other trends to

<http://index.baidu.com/v2/main/index.html#/crowd/剩女?words=剩女,女强人,女汉子,萌妹>

obtain the ‘ideal look.’ The word 照骗 *zhao pian* lit. ‘fake picture’, referring to a photo that is edited, reflects the attempt to conform to beauty standards by digitally photoshopping or editing to enhance a photo. It is a homophone of the word 照片 *zhao pian* lit. ‘picture’, in which the last character is replaced with the word of similar pronunciation, ‘骗’ *pian* that means ‘to fool’ or ‘deceive.’ Posting photos of one’s life online is a form of self-depiction, in which people craft their online profile to display to an audience. The action of editing photos is commonly done and encouraged by social media and camera apps that add filters and other options to enhance the photo. Whether these edits are drastic or minor, it reinforces the Internet community’s strong emphasis placed on appearances.

In terms of describing personalities, 高大上 *gao da shang* describing someone who is ‘tall, handsome, and luxurious’ and 屌丝 *diao si*, Internet slang for ‘loser’, can be used to represent the two extremes of what the Chinese society considers as ‘successful.’ Such qualities are imbedded in the individual characters and their definitions. 高大上 *gao da shang* is an acronym of the words, “高端 *gaoduan* ‘high-end’、大气 *daqi* ‘stylish’、上档次 *shang dangci* ‘top-grade’.”⁵³ Meanwhile 屌丝 *diao si* ‘loser’ is at the opposite end, describing someone without a good job, background or looks. However, this word goes beyond describing the material characteristics of success. Kan notes that this term can be used to “vent their dissatisfaction with inequality and lack of opportunity.”⁵⁴ This word

子. (accessed July 28, 2019)

⁵³ “*Gaoduan daqi shang dangci*” “高端大气上档次.” Baidu Encyclopedia. <https://baike.baidu.com/item/高端大气上档次/8717044?fromtitle=高大上&fromid=12008243>. (accessed July 26, 2019)

⁵⁴ Kan, Karita. “The New ‘Lost Generation’: Inequality and Discontent among Chinese Youth.” *China Perspectives* 2, no. 94 (2013): 68. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24055557>.

criticizes how social mobility relies heavily on the parents' influence and connections.⁵⁵ Self-ridiculing one's self as a “屌丝” *diaosi* 'loser', indirectly provides social criticism towards those who came from good family backgrounds and was 'born into success.'

As individuals strive to rise economically and socially in the Chinese society, there are new sub-groups that continue to emphasize how one's wealth is obtained. 凤凰男 *fenghuang nan*, lit. 'male phoenix' is used to describe a man (usually from the countryside) who became successful without a good family or financial background. This word is also considered derogatory as these individuals are associated with poor or self-centered personalities. 土豪 *tuhao* lit. 'local magnate', is used to criticize rich people who spend carelessly on brand names and showing off their wealth, but do not have a good sense of style. This attack those who are newly rich, like 凤凰男 *fenghuang nan*. The creation of these words show how language reflect new trends in social mobility and new groups forming in society.

4.2 Keeping up with Internet Users: Social Media and Online-Offline Profiles

Internet language is the construct of digital media advancements, technological limits, and the development of an Internet culture that establishes its own unspoken rules of online communication. From the interviews conducted, the participants commented on how the Internet and social media strongly influence their community ties in social circles, moreover, as a place for learning new Chinese slang words. With new Internet language manifesting, keeping up with these new words is a way of keeping up with the online community. Language, social and cultural trends are accessed in an instant on multiple

⁵⁵ Ibid.

media platforms. This information overload represents the massive capabilities of the Internet as a medium of immediate global exchange. Moreover, the creation of new lexica online is society's way of describing this constant change through online communication and linguistic practices. This section explores the prominence of the Internet, how and why participants utilize it for online expression, social and language practices.

Internet Users: Social Media Usage and Linguistic Practices

With the prominent rise of mobile and computer-mediated technologies, the number of phone applications being created have increased as well.⁵⁶ These apps provide a variety of functions such as online communication, mobile gaming, online shopping, organizing calendars, posting pictures, news, blogging, watching videos, etc. Specifically, social media apps facilitate the interaction between multiple social networks, allowing users to access and create content catered to their own interests. The capability of a smartphone goes above and beyond to make an individual's life 'easier' and 'convenient,' but the amount of information being exchanged between the user and their screen is astounding. Moreover, the amount of time consumed on these digital apps is equally as impressive.⁵⁷ This has a significant impact on the digital world, which attempts to project information from reality and mimic it into a digital 'reality'. The aspects of online-presence and self-expression are intertwined in these multiple levels of depicted reality. This is seen through online social networks and the pressure to display one's 'profile' as their ideal self and abide by online social norms to gain a following—equivalent to an acceptance into the community.

⁵⁶ "25 Mobile App Usage Statistics to Know In 2019." *MindSea Development*. November 26, 2018. <https://mindsea.com/app-stats/>.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

According to Zhou-min Yuan, “online identity is not created from scratch but is rooted in real life and shaped by users, displayed friends and distant audiences.”⁵⁸ The use of social media in expressing one’s reality online, even if it is drastically different from real life, derives from some aspects of reality. Social media places a huge importance on not only displaying of one’s self, but in maintaining relationships through the online medium. It is also a social environment that influences one’s perception of identity. People tend to identify themselves with like-minded individuals, so they try to mimic behaviors that are seemingly socially appropriate. Following trends is a way of ‘staying in the loop’ and feeling connected to a community that is ‘relevant’ and ‘cool.’

With the prodigious number of apps being created, a few become well-recognized among their category. Prominent social media apps used in the United States, such as *Instagram*, *Facebook* and *Twitter* represent the popularity placed on micro-blogging and sharing photos and other content online.⁵⁹ These apps have their foreign counterparts that provide similar functions on different platforms. In the interviews conducted, *WeChat* and *Weibo* were mentioned by every individual as their most used mobile apps.⁶⁰ *WeChat* is a Chinese messaging app that allows users to easily connect with friends and family members, and like *Facebook*, you can share pictures and leave ‘likes’ and comments on different posts. *Weibo* is compared to *Twitter*, where microblogging is used to “express yourself to the world,” (Participant 1) follow celebrities, and reach out to others. The popularity of certain

⁵⁸ Yuan, Zhou-min. Exploring Chinese college students.

⁵⁹ Bell, Karissa, and Karissa Bell. “Apple Reveals the Most Popular iPhone Apps of 2018.” Mashable. December 04, 2018. <https://mashable.com/article/apple-most-popular-iphone-apps-2018/>.

⁶⁰ Team, CIW. “Top Mobile Apps in China in Q2 2018.” China Internet Watch. September 27, 2018. <https://www.chinainternetwatch.com/26542/mobile-apps-q2-2018/>.

apps over others can be accounted based on needs, but also social pressure, in which individuals tend to download similar apps that are commonly used by their social circle and community. This is seen by Participant 8, who originally used the messaging app *QQ* in middle school, but eventually switched to *WeChat* because their social circle transitioned to a new app. The pattern continues to be seen, as a majority of the participants claim to have downloaded foreign apps, such as *Instagram* and *Facebook*, in order to connect to their local peers (UCSB American students) or access foreign content (Korean celebrity posts). The former demonstrates the need of downloading and using apps to appeal to a certain community and the latter is to meet the need of the individual's interests. And thus, social media apps play a major role in one's self of belonging in social networks. It is a way for people to connect with friends without the need of face to face interaction. In addition, it is easier to keep up with friends' activities and life updates, especially if they are long-distance or distant in friend circles. But information received online depends on what content is uploaded, as social media profiles are sometimes a filtered representation of one's identity.

Through interviews, it is seen how the outstanding open-access to information across the web has placed a large social obligation to keep up with social media, but also puts pressure to update on one's life events. Participants estimated their time spent on the apps as an approximate of 5-6 hours a day at average. They consume information from their social circle—friends and family—as well as from online communities. Curating a profile and an online image is not necessarily a fragmented reality or façade. According to the participants, their online profile and online expression is similar to how they are in-person. However, they do admit that there are sometimes differences, but these are not considered to be exaggerated. Some differences are reflected in the materials that people post online—updates on activities or events that usually reflect positive aspects rather than negativity in

their lives. For example, Participant 9 and Participant 3 both state that they only post on social media if there's something worth posting, such as travelling or an exciting event. Participant 1 uses his social media account to post about his film and production work, showing the people around him his projects—his way of expressing his life to others. The frequency of posting depends on the user and the events that are going on their lives. Participant 4 explains that when she communicates with people through online messaging, she is able to express herself more and talk about deeper topics rather than in-person. She credits how online messaging removes the awkwardness of face-to-face interaction, easing the pressure of conversation.

It has become normal for this generation to connect with each other through social media by keeping a public profile. Participant 8 mentioned that she switched from using the messaging app, *QQ*, to *WeChat* as her friends switched over as well. The online sphere for communication is regulated based on the needs and interests of the user and their social circles. People tend to imitate or repost trendy topics and pictures that are likely to be accepted by their peers, moreover, create a higher credibility of their profile. By credibility, I mean the positive display of one's life. Although one's online and offline personalities can be similar, the content that is posted online is ultimately selected. The participants mutually agreed that they were more likely to post content that were more positive, rather than displaying their negative feelings. But overall, they are all conscious or indirectly aware that their posts will be received by the audience, and so they adjust their expression based on their own, the audience's, and public's expectations.

Social circles and social media platforms influence language through the physical limits of the digital medium, such as, the convenience of colloquial language use in SMS (short message service). Compared to past technologies and other forms of communication,

computer-mediated communication combines characteristics of both speech and writing.⁶¹ With the absence of face-to-face interaction, there is also an absence of body language and facial expression cues that aid the display and reception of language. However, Internet language has adapted to this through their own visual cues of emoticons, memes, connotations associated with language, etc.⁶² Digital devices and online mediums allow for creativity and convenience, different variations of Internet slang such as abbreviations, acronyms, shortenings, and meme formation for online discourse and verbalization.⁶³ Stickers and gifs are examples of visual expression to aid online communication. Some of these stickers includes trending slang words that are associated with pictures. They express relevant and sometimes comedic trends that people use to communicate with friends. The linguistic properties of Internet language demonstrate multiple forms of expression and communication that are significant to the common practices and uses of online language.

Social identities and relationships are influenced by the institution they are formed in. Social media has penetrated the virtual sphere—their institution that continues to grow and be shaped by users and creators. This institution is present in multiple digital devices, such as the convenience of a cellphone and the keyboard of a laptop. Interactions within the Internet brings in the concept of the anonymous author, or user in this case. Exchanges between users can develop relationships between friends or strangers that represent real human interaction/communication. Content that is being posted online can range from private to public access, and this multiplies the different levels of communication that

⁶¹ Crystal, *Language and the Internet*

⁶² Zabolnova et al., “Internet Slang as a Key Means of Interaction in Cyberspace.” 146-64.

⁶³ Ibid.

creates an infinite number of dimensions and paths for information to be spread across the web.

There is a constant, sometimes unintended desire to use social media regularly—to stay updated and relevant. Participant 8 explains that she would sometimes open a social media app minutes after closing it and start scrolling through the material again even when there aren't any updates. Whether this is out of boredom or habit, this idea of staying in the loop is significant in one's sense of belonging in a group. Participant 8 continued by giving an example of how she was off social media for a week, and after returning, she had no idea what everyone was talking about. Even within this short duration of time, trends are constantly coming and going, so it is sometimes hard to catch up once you remove yourself from the Internet. Online expression and popular content are so vast, that new information is continuously replacing old news quickly. This is similar to the constant updates in Internet language, with trending words rising and descending in popularity. The language used within a community, such as slang words or colloquial language, is important for “staying in the trend, fashion” and understanding what people your age are talking about (Participant 1). If your knowledge of slang words is lacking, there are feelings of being out of date or that you don't belong with the group. Multiple participants mentioned this as a consequence of not keeping up with their social circles, and overall, the online community. Internet as a medium has formed a bridge between physical distances, in which Chinese international students do not feel left out from their overseas community, for the Internet allows them to keep updated with new terms, trends, and events that are popular in China. However, Participant 9 mentioned that when she returned to China and met with other friends studying abroad in other countries, they would sometimes use new slang words incorrectly.

Keeping up to date on language used within the community is a desire to seek and gain acceptance. This is seen how language and social media plays a large role in understanding one's role in society.

4.3 Community and Identity through Language

In regard to identity construction through language, Yuan introduces “identity work” by Tracy and Robbles as “talk performs identity work, and identity shapes talk.”⁶⁴ Who we are influences the way we speak. This section describes different cultural, environmental, and social aspects that have influenced the participants' identities as a Chinese international student at the University of California, Santa Barbara. The participants discuss the role of language in forming and maintain their communities. In many cases, it is seen how the audience we are addressing, also influences the way we speak.

There are several conditions where speech is adjusted to fit the occasion, such as formal and informal settings. Some participants have noted that they express themselves differently online compared to in-person. Over the Internet, conversations are carried on with diverse audiences that vary from direct messages to public reception. The line between public and private is sometimes blurred as friend circles continue to grow online. The habit of adding people on social media becomes a basic formality for connecting. Through interviews, we see that the participants' environment and social media practices affects their speech.

One's identity formation and the way one talks mutually influence one another. It is important to see how language is used to express one's identity. Communication over the Internet necessarily lacks certain social cues that are significant in face-to-face

⁶⁴ Yuan, Zhou-min. Exploring Chinese college students.

communication. This absence is made up for through the development of new Internet language and different ways of expression. From emoticons to stickers, gifs, and memes, instant messaging has expanded its linguistic practices to more creative forms of delivery.

There is an immediate connection when someone is ‘speaking your language’, and this connection is formed from a collective allure. The influence between language and society change is reciprocal, so, language is a powerful identifier of what community you are from and how you adapt to different and multiple groups.

In between two worlds, two cultures: Chinese International Students

The number of Chinese students studying abroad in the United States has been increasing gradually over the years.⁶⁵ Whether this decision was made to avoid taking the rigorous college entrance exam, otherwise known as the 高考 *gaokao*, or to prepare for working abroad, it is undeniable that this generation is active in pursuing more opportunities. Participant 10 describes their generation as having a better education background, more advanced technology, and living in a more rapidly developing society, which pushes their generation to be more creative.

With the globalization of technology, international students can stay updated with trending news in their home country while abroad. New content uploaded on social media everyday can be accessed at an instant. The Internet provides a convenience for participants to stay in contact with the current events and new language updates in Chinese society. From the interview responses, it is clear that technology is a significant medium for bringing cultures together and easing the barriers of communication. It allows internet users to expand their social circles and environment, which is a vital influencer of one’s identity.

Changing environments is not always a smooth transition, and identity struggles can increase while adapting to a new culture and lifestyle. For the participants who came to the United States since the beginning of college, they explain that it is sometimes hard for Chinese students to adapt to local culture. Different cultural backgrounds can cause barriers, and usually surface interactions and relationships are made. This may discourage the effort for local-international student interactions, as there is an ease to communicating with people with similar cultural and language background. Situational circumstances such as orientation for international students and classes specific to international students also lower the chances of meeting.

Within a university institution, there are several sub-group factors that separate and unite the identity of the community. First and foremost, students attending classes are pursuing higher education and are usually of similar age groups depending on what year and degree they are in progress of completing. This environment has created several potential interaction possibilities to meet people and create relationships. People tend to group themselves with others that have similar interests, cultural backgrounds, majors, etc. and this is evident in the situational circumstances that create higher chances of interaction between these individuals. But as similarities may unite people, differences could lead to separating groups. Participant 9 describes her identity as a Chinese international student as a complicated matter, as she does not necessary 'identify' herself with a certain group. She does describe international students as a collective, similar to living in a bubble, where they "look at each other to try to fit in the group." This is because it is difficult for international students to adapt to local culture, and they find more commonalities with Chinese people.

⁶⁵ "2018-2019 Campus Profile: University of California-Santa Barbara," January 2019.

There are discrepancies among the participants who came to study in the United States before college and those who came for college. For example, Participant 1, who came to the United States to study before college, describes his interactions with local and foreign students as a practice of adaption. He uses his language, actions and behaviors to adapt to different social norms to fit in with both the international and local community. Although he admits that he sacrifices part of Chinese identity to do this, he does it to adapt to both cultures. “My identity is divided in half, with American friends I tend to become more American, with Chinese friends, I’m more Chinese” (Participant 1). The participant shows how following language trends and social attitudes that are used by the community is necessary to feel accepted.

According to Lu and Chen, “culture is shaped and transmitted through language”⁶⁶—this is present in the change in constant creation of new lexicon used in cultural expression. They connect lexical change to cultural change based on Trudgill’s observation of “(1) the physical environment, (2) the social environment, and (3) the values of society” as main factors for shaping lexicon.⁶⁷ Based on the participants’ responses, it is clear that these identity qualities influence their language use and familiarity. The Internet has diminished barriers between physical environments, connecting international students to both their home country and country of stay. Social media, messaging apps, and video calling have taken over as prominent methods for communication and the exchange of information. Content that is posted online reflect ‘values of society’ in trending topics, interests and keeping up

<http://bap.ucsb.edu/institutional.research/campus.profiles/campus.profiles.2018.19.pdf>.

⁶⁶ Lu, Xing and Guo-Ming Chen. “Language change and value orientations in Chinese culture.”

⁶⁷ Ibid.

with peoples' lives. The Internet has become a major part in the daily life and function of society, which in turn influences the language used to express these events.

5. Conclusion

The research demonstrated how the progress of change in Chinese Internet language is influenced by pressure from societal changes. A close study on a group of Internet users was conducted to observe Chinese Internet lexica trends and to understand their perspectives toward their self, community, and generational standards. From the data collected, it is clear that new words are created in order to meet the demands of new developments, whether that be technological, social or cultural. Interviews with the participants emphasized how following language and social trends are valuable in their identity formation and generational identity.

This study included conducting a language familiarity survey on trending Chinese Internet language and ethnographic interviews relating to Internet slang, social media habits and personal identity. By focusing on the meaning and potential origins for these Chinese words, we can see how language plays a role in the formation of community and individual perspectives. This can be related to identity changes and public reception to social topics. Participants demonstrated their familiarity and understanding of Chinese Internet words and explained how social media and the Internet played a big role in their language development, social circles, and beliefs. Their online behavior and practices were self-analyzed, and they commented on how they expressed themselves differently online than in person. In addition, participants gave greater insight on how their identity and thoughts compares to their community's expectations toward 'success'.

The data showed how language reflected changes to family relationships, generational differences, and social standards. Such examples saw how the influence of the One-child policy has changed socioeconomic upbringings and expectations for only-child families. Moreover, parenting techniques and strictness has changed as well. Within the household, roles and responsibilities are gradually becoming more equally distributed among both males and females. Language emergence of gender-related words shows overall shifts in gender stereotypes. It is shown how society expectations for males and females are changing, where women are rising in social status and career standing. Some males are also gradually taking on more household roles. There are also changes to society's attitudes and the public's standards for success. Overall, this research supports how language reflects social changes and uses the Chinese Internet language and society as an example.

There may be varying search frequencies differing from the data collected from *Baidu Index* and familiarity of words depending on a series of identity factors by participants, such as their age group, family background, gender, and social environment. However, it is evident that new, emerging, and popular lexica are strongly tied to the changing society and the community's social attitudes.

Further research can explore the exact origins of these Internet words and if they were sparked by a specific event or person(s). It will also be interesting to see how language familiarity trends span across different generations or through a longitudinal study. A larger sample comparing different age groups and their socio-cultural perspective and attitudes will be fascinating to observe pivotal moments in language and society changes.

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Appendices

Appendix A Example of Chinese language survey questions and format

Survey questions

Participant Name: _____

Chinese Slang Word/phrase	Familiarity: 1. Very Familiar 2. Familiar 3. Not too familiar 4. Not familiar at all	Define:	Origin: When did it become popular? Why was it created?	Preference: Do you like this word? (Y/N) Do you use this word?	Adjectives/ words associated with the word/phrase: (中文 /English)
Ex. LOL	Very Familiar	Laugh out loud	~2007, To show that you think something is funny through texting/SMS	No. No, I do not use this word.	Haha 555 哈哈 LMAO
海龟					
单二代					
女汉子					

Appendix B List of all 50 Chinese words used in the language survey, organized by highest to lowest familiarity.

1	吃土	chī tǔ	26	吃鸡	chī jī
2	小姐姐	xiǎo jiějie	27	暖男	nuǎn nán
3	怼	duì	28	真香	zhēnxiāng
4	海龟	hǎiguī	29	套路	tàolù
5	颜值	yán zhí	30	皮一下	pí yīxià
6	佛系	fú xì	31	SKR	SKR
7	女汉子	nǚ hànzi	32	富二代	fù èr dài
8	凉凉	liáng liáng	33	冲鸭	chōng yā
9	土味情话	tǔ wèi qínghuà	34	剁手	duò shǒu
10	土豪	tǔháo	35	反差萌	fǎnchā méng
11	小鲜肉	xiǎo xiān ròu	36	高大上	gāodà shàng
12	沙雕	shādiāo	37	单身贵族	dānshēn guìzú
13	照騙	zhào piàn	38	官宣	guān xuān
14	不造	bù zào	39	三八	sānbā
15	奇葩	qípā	40	盘他	pán tā
16	女强人	nǚ qiáng rén	41	忒	tè
17	屌丝	diǎosī	42	撸挑子	lùtiāozi
18	萌妹子	méng mèizi	43	奔现	bēn xiàn
19	方了	fāngle	44	奶爸	nǎi bà
20	妈宝	mā bǎo	45	贫民窟姐妹	pínmínkū jiěmèi
21	剩女	shèngnǚ	46	孩奴	hái nú
22	官二代	guān èr dài	47	凤凰男	fènghuáng nán
23	尬聊	gà liáo	48	单二代	dān èr dài
24	油腻	yóuni	49	家务骰子	jiāwù shǎizi
25	萌萌哒	méng méng dá	50	隐形贫困人口	yǐnxíng pínkùn rénkǒu

Appendix C Interview Questions used as a guide and reference for the semi-structured interviews.

General background information:

1. Name (Chinese, English):
2. Birthplace (City, Country):
3. Ethnicity/Nationality:
4. Age (Year they were born):
5. Gender:
6. Major/Year in school:
7. Language Background:
8. Places lived:
9. Language speaks at home:
 - a. Do you speak any dialects?
10. When did you first come to the U.S.?:
11. How often do you go back to China? (About how long do you stay per visit?)
12. What language do you use most in the U.S.? (On Campus, at home)

Social Media usage:

1. What Chinese social media/messaging apps do you use?
 - a. Do you use these apps on a daily basis?
 - i. If so, how much time do you spend on these apps daily?
 - b. How do you interact with the app/what do you use it for?
 - i. What kind of information do you inquire from the app?
 - ii. What kind of information do you present/put out on the app?
 - c. Why do you continue to use these apps?
 - d. What other social media apps do you use often (non-Chinese)?
2. In your opinion, what role does the Internet and social media play in your life?
3. How do you think social media/the Internet affects your personal identity? How do you express your identity on the Internet/social media?
 - a. Describe your 'real life' identity.
 - b. Describe your 'online' identity.
 - i. Is your 'online' identity different from your 'real life' identity?
 - ii. To what degree is it different?
4. Do you watch Chinese programs (電視劇, Internet streaming sites, entertaining programs 相親節目, 唱歌節目)?

Internet Language/New Words:

1. Where do you usually learn new Chinese (slang) words from?
 - a. Do you use these new words/phrases in your everyday conversations?
2. How do you keep up with new terms created in China? (ex. From the Internet, social media, talking to other friends, going back home, tv programs)
 - a. Do you use them more in China than America?
3. What are some Chinese (Internet) slang words that you use often?
 - a. Please explain their origin (to your best knowledge) and explain a situation where you would use this word/phrase.
 - b. Do you use these words in oral speech and/or text messaging?
 - c. Who (what age group) uses these slang words?
4. How do you think the slang words you use relate to your personal identity?
5. How do you think slang words/Internet language relate to your generational identity?
 - a. What do you think the creation of new Internet language/slang says about your generation group?
 - b. What cultural relation do these new words have?
6. When you go back to China, do you find new words unfamiliar to you?
 - a. If yes, do you try to learn these new words?

Family/Individual/Generational Background:

1. Are you an only child?
 - a. If not, how many siblings do you have?
 - i. How old are they?
2. Do you consider yourself to be a part of the One Child Policy generation?
 - a. How does being an only child affect your use of the Internet and social media?
 - b. What expectations do your parents have for you as the only child?
 - i. What are your own expectations that you set for yourself?
 - c. How would you describe your generation's identity? (How do you view your generation, how do other people view your generation; i.e. the older generation)
 - d. How does social media mold your identity? (Online vs. Real life identity)
3. What is one word/phrase that you would use to describe your generation?
4. How would you compare your generation to your parent's generation?