

# An Analysis of Lettered Words in Chinese Internet Language: A Case Study of “Emo” and “Yyds”

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Internationalization fosters cultural integration, making language integration a common phenomenon in modern society. Social platform buzzwords “emo” and “yyds” arise heated discussion among academics for their unique word-building as well as popularity among netizens. This is a case study on “emo” and “yyds” whose purpose is to summarize the definition, explore the rules of word-building as well as pronunciation, and analyze the dissemination process of Chinese internet lettered words from the perspectives of subculture theory as well as memetic theory.

*Keywords:* lettered words, internet language, emo, yyds

## Introduction

The words “emo” and “yyds” have been widely used in Chinese social platforms and even been recognized as the Word of the Year by many influential journals including *China Newsweek* and *Language Weekly*. Discussions on these words have been around since last century when Sino-foreign exchanges become frequent as China started reform and opening up.

There are two explanations for “emo”. One is the abbreviation of “emotional”, commonly describing negative feelings, such as depression, decadence, loss, and sadness. The other is the abbreviation of “Emotional Hardcore”, also known as “emocore”, which originally referred to a style of rock music developed from punk rock, characterized by the more complex arrangement and the richer emotions. Music fans who fancy this style are called “emo” music fans, who are often characterized by impulsivity, sensitivity, and melancholy. Therefore, the word “emo” is gradually associated to expressing negative feelings.

The word “yyds” refers to the phrase “永远滴神”, which is created by an LPL player called “Shan Niruo”, while he was watching an e-sports event to praise the wonderful performance of player Uzi. “Yyds”, the combination of the its syllables’ initials, has been widely used by netizen to praise people, events, affairs, etc.

Taking “emo” and “yyds” as examples, this article discusses the definition, composition, and pronunciation of lettered words, and analyzes their process of dissemination from the perspectives of subculture and memetic theory.

## Definition

As early as the 1990s, words containing Western letters have already come into China, fostering Chinese scholars to discuss how to define and categorize those words in the complicated Chinese language system. Luo

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Yuyan (2000) indicated that using words from other languages to refer to things, thoughts, etc., is “borrowing words”, and he divided such words into “new and old loanwords”. The “old loanwords” refer to words borrowed from Japan, while the “new loanwords” refer to words borrowed from outside Japan and in their original form, which are widely applied in daily communication. However, Luo also pointed out that if a word containing foreign letters refers to something inherent in China, then this word could only be regarded as a Chinese inherent word. Zhou Jian, Zhang Shujuan, and Liu Lining (2001) disagreed with Luo’s definition, and stated that the phrase “letter-words” would be more accurate, concise, and understandable. Hu Mingyang (2002) adopted the phrase “words with foreign letters” to describe words containing foreign letters, while calling words whose writing, pronunciation, and meaning completely follow the rules of foreign language the “English abbreviations in written and spoken Chinese”, and words composed of initial letters of pinyin syllables the “Chinese lettered words”.

The more generally recognized definition was developed by Liu Yongquan, who indicated words in Chinese with foreign letters (mainly Latin letters) or composed entirely of foreign letters as “lettered words”, and stated that lettered words are also Chinese and should be normalized and further developed. In 2002, Liu perfected his definition to include words composed of Latin letters (including initial letters of “pinyin”) or Greek letters, and those mixed with symbols, numbers, or Chinese characters.

The author, however, believes that detailed division of words containing letters in form, semantics, or writing brings great challenge to the accuracy and understandability of definition. Therefore, words composed of letters or mixed with symbols, numbers, Chinese characters, etc., should be defined as “lettered words”, which is concise and accurate. Moreover, “emo” and “yyds” are mostly used on the internet social platforms, but rarely in paper media, workplaces, or speaking communication, which is different from other lettered words (such as GDP, PPT, etc.). Considering this, it is more precise to define them as “internet lettered words”, indicating their usage limits.

### **Word-Building and Pronunciation**

Almost all lettered words are abbreviations, and they are divided into two categories: those originated from Chinese, represented by “yyds”, and those composed of Western letters, like “emo” (Liu, 2002). As mentioned earlier, “emo” is the abbreviation of “emotional” or “Emotional Hardcore”, while “yyds” is composed of the Chinese syllables’ initials of the expression “永远滴神”. Both words are composed of pure Latin letters, and their forms are not fixed as both upper and lower cases are acceptable. For example, there is no actual difference between “emo”, “EMO”, or “Emo”.

The pronunciation of lettered words also triggered heated discussion. Some scholars proposed that for the purpose of sinicizing, standardized lettered words should be read in pinyin (Jia, 2000; Cao, 2000). Some suggested that since these words are composed of foreign letters rather than Chinese characters, they should be read in accordance with the pronunciation rules of foreign languages, though none of them have come up with exact pronunciation rules to follow (Shen, 2001; Liu, 2002). In 2017, Zhu Junxuan stated that whether originating in home or abroad, these words should be pronounced according to the original sound of the letters. That is to say, the Latin lettered should be read in Latin, while the Greek lettered should be read in Greek. Zhu (2017) also pointed out that lettered words containing both initial sound (consonants) and final sound (vowels) with the need for simplification should be read in pinyin, like “APEC” and “Ted”, though the pronunciation may be affected by various factors including consonant-vowel collocation and reading habits.

Though reading lettered words in “pinyin” can indeed achieve the purpose of sinicization, the actual pronouncing situation could be more complicated, posing great challenge for establishing complete and universal rules to follow. Lettered words concerned in this article all have conventional pronunciation that have been well known to the public, for example “emo” is read as [ɪ'məʊ] or [ɪ'məʊ], following English pronunciation rules. While “yyds” is pronounced as [waɪ waɪ 'di: , es], following the pronunciation of the English alphabet. Changing the conventional pronunciation into new pronunciation developed in accordance with new rules will only be counterproductive, greatly reducing the efficiency and effectiveness of language use. Due to the usage limits of internet lettered words, there are occasions that pronunciation is not required, such as “u1s1” (有一说一), “dbq” (对不起), “xswl” (笑死我了), and “zqsg” (真情实感), which are only used on online social platforms.

### **Analysis of the Dissemination Process**

The using of the simplified, engaging internet lettered words represented by “emo” and “yyds” has been an irreversible trend. To trace back the origin as well as the process of its dissemination, we could study from the perspectives of subculture and memetic theory.

#### **From a Subculture Perspective**

“Subculture”, first proposed by the Chicago School and further developed by the Birmingham School, refers to a style as well as a cultural group and challenges dominant culture through gentle resistance (mainly in aesthetics, recreation, consumption, etc.) when class conflicts arise (Hu, 2007). Resistance, style, and incorporation are the three key words of subculture.

Subcultural groups develop unique styles to resist the society, such as establishing special ways of talking, behaving, and dressing, which they regard as a way to seek identity and may lead to a social trend (Hall, Whannel, & Dyer, 1964). Both originating in social media platforms, “emo” and “yyds” are jargon among platform users who created them for communication, and also a form of resistance to the dominant culture. Since internet was officially accessed to China to its rapid development, netizens have been called “networms” and other negative titles, as the elders regard internet as nonsense while the dominant culture keeps criticizing it. As a result, social platform users have grown a spirit of rebellion to establish a cultural style characterized by minority, exclusiveness, and secrecy. The internet lettered words they created had become a symbol among the group to distinguish between “insiders” and “outsiders”, thereby gaining a sense of identity.

Dick Hebdige (1999) indicated that the resistance was not exerted directly to the dominant culture, but indirectly manifested in “style”, through symbols. “Emo”, “yyds”, and other internet lettered words, to some extent, are used as language symbols to represent this group. Difficult to understand while easy to write, these words were jargons created by social platform users to distinguish groups, gain a sense of identity, and help communicate within the group.

When subcultures are spread and sought after, they will definitely catch the eyes of dominant culture groups, resulting in culture incorporation. Dick Hebdige (1999) summarized two ways in which the dominant culture incorporates subcultures: One is to “label” and redefine the unique styles and abnormal behavior of subcultures through ideology, interests, and culture-dominating groups, creating moral panic, public opinion, and social pressure on subcultures; the other is to commercialize subcultural symbols (language, clothing, etc.), so as to obliterate the uniqueness and resistance delivered through subcultural styles. After “emo” and “yyds” set off an internet boom, the *People's Daily* published an article “Are You the Type of People That Only Use ‘Yyds’ and

‘Boom’ to Praise?’ on September 6, 2021, which criticized the popularity of internet lettered words represented by “yyds” as a manifestation of “text aphasia”, persuading the public not to follow suit. The National Language Resource Monitoring and Research Center released the “Top Ten Internet Idioms of 2021” on December 6 to include “yyds”. Meanwhile, dominant media reports began to frequently use “emo” and “yyds”, turning them from “slang” to symbols familiar to the general public. Through these operations, dominant culture has completed the ideological incorporation and commercial incorporation of internet lettered words, eliminating their resistance while expanding the applying scope.

Tracing the dissemination process of internet lettered words represented by “emo” and “yyds” from the perspective of subculture, we can find that these words are a special symbol created by social platform user groups to resist the negative public opinion pressure exerted from the dominant culture. They are quickly sought after within the group for unique styles including resistance and exclusivity, but it is culture incorporation from the dominant culture that spread them to a wider range.

### **From the Perspective of Memetic Theory**

Memetic theory explains cultural evolution from Darwin’s theory of biological evolution. The core term “meme”, like the “gene” of Darwin’s theory of evolution, represents the basic unit of culture in memetic theory, transmitted through republication. He Ziran (2005) likened memes to “viruses”, which would change the behavior of infected people and guide them to promote this behavior. The Neo-Darwinist Blackmore (1999) pointed out that the information can only be called a meme if it is copied and transmitted through the process of imitation.

The internet lettered words, such as “emo” and “yyds” are also memes for they are transmitted and widely used immediately after they are created, and they are also spread through imitation. The first lettered words that appeared on social platforms were abbreviations of pinyin syllable initials, originating in the abbreviation culture created by netizens to avoid being retrieved by fans when discussing artists. Since then, the simplicity of lettered words catered to the public’s needs of receiving information, and more and more pinyin abbreviations were created, such as “szd” (是真的), “dbq” (对不起), and “xswl” (笑死我了). Though not understanding the exact reason, seeing that everyone is using and discussing internet lettered words, people automatically produce imitation behavior, further expanding the spreading range of those words.

Another feature of internet lettered words is that they can be mutated. Just as genes mutate in the process of inheritance, internet lettered words (memes) also mutate in the process of transmission. Mutation may result from people associating it with a new understanding, or the dominant culture redefining it. “Yyds” originally refers to “永远滴神” and is used to express praise, but due to decoding errors in the dissemination process, a series of other meanings have been derived, such as “永远单身” and “有一点帅”. “Emo” was originally used to express negative feelings, such as decadence and depression. Because of its pronunciation, however, many netizens jokingly called the famous Chinese director Zhang Yimou (张艺谋) “Zhang emo”. The mutation of internet lettered words started a guessing interaction between words and communicators, adding interest and generating strong vitality in the dissemination.

Not all the internet lettered words could go viral to the public; the dissemination is optional. Meanwhile, internet buzzwords updated quickly. If a certain lettered word fails to adapt to hot news and “go out of the circle” within a period of time, it will soon be replaced by new words.

To trace the disseminating process of internet lettered words represented by “emo” and “yyds” from the perspective of memetic theory, we could find that internet lettered words are transmitted through replication and

imitation as memes. The mutation that occurs during the dissemination process obfuscates semantic meaning as well as expands the application scenario. If the word, however, fails to break the wall and spread to the larger area within a period of time, it would be eliminated by the internet.

### Conclusions

Social platform buzzwords “emo” and “yyds” have long prevailed among netizens. Considering the word-building as well as the applying scenarios, these words shall better be defined as “internet lettered words”. Since most internet lettered words are not used in spoken language, there is no need to standardize their pronunciation. For those with pronouncing demands, there are two ways: Generally, they shall be read as the pronunciation of their constituent letters; when the lettered words have both vowels and consonants, they should be read in pinyin, with concerns over various factors, such as habitual pronouncing methods and vowel-consonant collocation.

To analyse the dissemination process of internet lettered words, from the perspective of subculture, we could find that they emerged as a means for social user groups to resist the dominant culture. As a symbol created within the group, internet lettered words have the characteristics of concealment, exclusivity, resistance, etc. After they had been widely spread, internet lettered words were incorporated by the dominant culture through ideology and commercialization, through which their resistance was obviated but applying scenario was extended. From the perspective of memetic theory, internet lettered words are a kind of meme. When social platform users start to imitate and replicate internet lettered words, they actually help the words spread to a wider range. Since internet lettered words could be mutated, they could generate multiple meanings, interacting with the communicators in a guessing manner, which adds interest in the communication process. However, it should be noted that words that have not been effectively disseminated will soon fade away in the internet.

We also need to pay attention to the fact that internet lettered words, as an integral part of the language of social platforms, have their progressiveness and limitations. The lettered words are highly generalized and easy to read, which greatly improves the communication efficiency within the group. But it is undeniable that for outsiders, the words are difficult to understand, which greatly hinders communication between groups. Secondly, although the internet lettered words are updated quickly, they will never work as basic vocabulary such as “cattle”, “sheep”, and “horses”, and will not impose impact on the Chinese language system. However, its frequency of use has gradually increased, indicating that the expression system of some groups is monopolized by such words. There is a concern that in the long run, people will not be able to conduct profound and rational discussions on topics, and lose subjectivity gradually. Therefore, in the face of internet lettered words, we shall not exclude or rely too much on them, but use them rationally.

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