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Meme Culture & Mixed Media: The Art of Virality and Human Connections

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saiprasad.shetty@jaihindcollege.edu.in**Abstract**

We are living in a world in transition. The experiences that shape our collective memory are highly influenced by media projection. But that influence is not shaped by conventional media alone anymore. It is a mix of many media forms including rather unconventional platforms which I'd rather term as short-attention-span (SAS) platforms like Instagram Reels or YouTube Shorts. These platforms remind us that experience is a factor of memories created, not just attention grab. Popular imagination and the building of pop culture is not shaped by news media or general entertainment channels insofar. In fact, the SAS platforms enable and enhance the reach of content driven from the conventional media. Which brings us to memes. Memes easily transcend languages and timelines. They are driven by any and many sources. It can be a scene from a movie which would be intuitively funny, deeply tragic, explicitly poignant or plain ironic. That scene screenshot becomes a template for a meme and thereby reaches people across the spectrum. All things said, memes do have boundaries too sometimes. Many can have a regional appeal while others may enjoy a pan-India appeal. You can never predict where they will arise from and when they might go viral (one of the most efficient words in recent times). Lastly, memes are a unique form of communication. It has become an effective form of expression on private chat windows (WhatsApp, Instagram DM, FB messenger) or public social media handles (Twitter/X, Instagram, Snapchat). This research paper aims to explore this evolving form of communication and make an attempt at understanding what makes all of us humane – with or without the internet.

Keywords: Language, Memes, New Media, Collective memory, Social Media

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1. INTRODUCTION

While the media landscape is ever-changing, one constant phenomenon that remains in flux is attention. It is no accident that the decline in attention spans has become a highly discussed and contested issue in contemporary discourse. However, as the saying goes, adversity breeds opportunity. We can either lament the loss of attention among readers, viewers, and listeners—along with the resulting risk to attention to detail—or the media industry can adapt to this shift by curating content tailored to the shortened attention spans of the emerging audience. Various social media platforms, for example, have responded by creating and curating short-duration content. This content is featured on short-attention-span (SAS) platforms such as Instagram Reels or YouTube Shorts, which are inherently audiovisual in nature.

While these are largely enabled by selecting nano-scale byproducts from longer-form content, they stand as a successful example of curated material designed to cater to the evolving nature of the audience. Among SAS platforms, a new form of communication has emerged, largely driven by the reach of new media, which is primarily visual and textual. Although there is potential for incorporating audio-visual elements to enhance the experience, it is important to note that they are not a mandatory requirement for success. This flexible approach has proven effective, as demonstrated by the seamless integration of memes into the conversation, which adds a layer of humor and relatability without necessarily requiring additional media elements.

Conversations are enriched by this seemingly non-verbal form of communication, as it adds depth and nuance beyond just spoken or written words. However, its impact on the end consumer is significant, as it leverages the power of both visuals and text. This interplay transforms it into a verbal form of communication in its own right, despite its initial perception as non-verbal. The resulting juxtaposition of imagery and language creates a dynamic and engaging experience that enhances understanding, retention, and emotional connection.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Memes are essentially screenshots, often presented as stickers or even classic GIFs, sourced from a wide range of entertainment and other media content. These screenshots are frequently enhanced with additional elements. They could be taken from movies or television series, whether popular or obscure. The scope of meme culture is not confined to contemporary pop culture alone. While many memes are built on current trends and viral moments, they can just as easily draw inspiration from older content, whether it be classic films, historical events, vintage advertisements, or nostalgic references. This demonstrates that the appeal and relevance of memes are not solely tied to what is trending today. Instead, they thrive on a mix of the old and new, reshaping past content in ways that resonate with modern audiences while also giving new life to forgotten cultural moments.

More unconventional sources might include images from a cricket or football game, or even pictures of politicians from public rallies, press conferences, or other publicly available private interactions. So, like emoticons/emojis, internet memes are used for humorous purposes. Humor here is merely used synonymously with jokes and witticism ranging from farcical, and

light-hearted humor to satirical and even political humor (Ahmed Ali, n.d.). It is evident that the sky's the limit for memes—or is it? Given the many memes that circulated around the Mangalyaan's (Tribune Web Desk, 2019) landing on Mars, one might wonder: is there any limit to the breadth of content the meme world—or perhaps the 'meme universe'—can encompass? While memes have a unique ability to capture and comment on almost any aspect of human life, could this vastness also imply that, in some way, there are boundaries we have yet to explore, or have we truly reached a point where everything is fair game for meme culture? Also, more popular culture forms congregate in more congested areas of the map, while less popular cultural forms are outliers. Such a large, multidirectional map may be a more flexible, multidimensional, and inclusive way of imagining how culture works (Campbell et al., 2016). As the language of media evolves in response to these trends, it's shaping a new collective memory, where information is consumed and processed in bite-sized, attention-friendly formats.

These factors contribute to shaping the emerging popular culture. As mentioned, change is constant—and so is popular culture. Many cultural aspects of society disappear over time: clothing trends, current events, slang, types of humor, popular sentiment (Smith, 2022). In the contemporary era, memes continue to shape the evolving landscape of popular culture. The fact that we still have memes referencing a movie from 1993 (*Addams Family Values*) in 2025 speaks to the longevity and enduring appeal of memes. It wouldn't be surprising if many people who use the meme featuring actress Anjelica Huston as Morticia Addams, a subtle-dramatic character from the film, don't recognize the movie reference or its context or even the actor for that matter. This context is often missing from the opinion of the end consumer, even though the meme is widely shared. Similarly, the context behind the scene featuring Akshay Kumar, such as the popular meme screenshot from *Phir Hera Pheri* (2006) with the line '*Zor zor se bolke scheme bata de*' (which roughly translates to 'announce the scheme out loud'), may not be familiar to everyone. However, the meme itself is widely recognised and remains relatable, regardless of this limitation, with no dent to its popularity. The above two examples illustrate how pop culture is constantly evolving, responding to the ever-changing dynamics of content, whether old or new, created for mass consumption. This evolution remains relevant, even as nostalgic calls to return to the 'good ol' days' are occasionally invoked.

The reason why memes resonate with such a wide audience, transcending state borders, is a pertinent question. Is it curiosity, relatability, the quickness of the medium, or perhaps all of the above? However, another important reason for its popularity, to our mind, is laughter or fun, which reduces stress from the monotony, challenges or difficulties of everyday life of contemporaries (Vitiuk et al., 2020). It is well-known that memes are often a subject of humour, but understanding the reasoning behind their relatability is another matter. One aspect that stands out is the non-verbal nature of communication, where memes gain more traction through their visual aesthetics. Whilst distorting ideas from aesthetics under the discursive paradigms of linguistics, such garbling remains an issue for any precise meaning of the elusive and protean

notion of memes (Cannizzaro, 2016). Hence, the proliferation of memes has made their understanding more widespread. Internet memes become simple to understand in the same way an emoticon is understood (Ahmed Ali, n.d.). However, as much as aesthetics are important, relatability, as mentioned earlier, plays an even more crucial role here.

Memes are largely reliant on humorous punchlines to draw attention and can only have the desired outcome when it is understood in the same context as the one in which it is posted (Sewak, 2021). A meme has a greater impact though when the scene it

depicts is familiar to the individual. The interpretation of the meme, then, is better understood within its context. Familiarity with a meme often relies on linguistic and cultural awareness, which plays a crucial role in both understanding and appreciating its humor. Without this contextual knowledge, much of the intended meaning can be lost, and the humor may not resonate. Take, for example, the Hindi meme phrase '*Zor zor se bolke scheme bata de*' from *Phir Hera Pheri* (2006). When translated into English, the meaning and humor of the phrase are significantly diminished. Simply translating the words doesn't capture the comedic essence, because the humor is deeply tied to the cultural and linguistic nuances of the original language. The humor in this case thrives within the specific cultural context, where the delivery, tone, and associations come together to create something that is instantly recognisable and relatable to those familiar with the source material. Without this awareness, the meme loses its full impact, as the humor cannot be fully appreciated by those who lack the necessary linguistic and cultural awareness. The humor is best understood within its linguistic and cultural context, where it makes sense and resonates more appropriately.

However, a popular meme can simultaneously be widely recognised and recalled by a large audience, many of whom are ironically unaware of the original content it is based on. In this instance, relatability operates in a peculiar way. Art is too interpretive for everyone to see the same thing as everyone else (d'Errico, 2016). In other words, consuming content without knowing the full picture is itself a form of engagement, as it evolves through a process of self-discovery. A person may recognize, share, or interact with a meme without any knowledge of the movie, show, or cultural reference it originated from. This highlights the unique way memes function as self-contained cultural units, often detaching from their original context while still conveying humor, emotion, or commentary. Over time, the meme can become more widely recognized than its source material, leading people to associate an image, phrase, or clip with its meme usage rather than its original meaning. This phenomenon underscores how internet culture repurposes and reinterprets existing media, allowing older or niche content to gain new relevance and meaning in entirely different contexts.

One major reason behind the fast-paced nature of meme culture, as a key attribute of evolving pop culture, is the portability of content. Convergent media plays a pivotal role in the rapid spread of memes. Portable mobile devices, equipped with chat windows and social media applications, have become key platforms for sharing content in real time. These devices not only make it easy for individuals to engage with and create memes, but they also facilitate their

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viral distribution. With the ability to instantly share content across various networks, memes can quickly transcend geographical boundaries and cultural barriers. This interconnectedness ensures that memes reach a wide audience in a matter of seconds, contributing to their widespread popularity and influence in today's digital culture. Today, media consumption is mobile and flexible; we don't have to miss out on media content just because we weren't home in time to catch a show, didn't find the book at the bookstore, or forgot to buy the newspaper yesterday (Campbell et al., 2016). The portability of memes, combined with their inherent visual and textual language, enables them to seamlessly integrate into chat conversations in ways that words alone often cannot. Their ability to convey complex emotions, reactions, and situations with a single image or phrase makes them an effective form of communication, bridging gaps in expression that might otherwise require lengthy explanations. Memes serve as instant cultural references that resonate across diverse audiences, making conversations more engaging, relatable, and efficient in capturing the essence of a moment or sentiment.

3. CONCLUSION

Memes, with their comedic nature, inherently connect with the art of caricature, as both rely on exaggeration and visual cues to evoke humor and/or provoke thought. The process of selecting the right frame is crucial—it's about choosing an image or moment that will resonate with the audience, amplifying its impact and recall value. In this scheme of things crowded scenes of leisure and clubbability – club caricatures – could be transformed into subjects of caricature (Khanduri, 2014). Caricatures, often crafted with subtle or overt humor and infused with elements of thrill or surprise, play a significant role in enhancing the reach and impact of memes as a form of communication. Their exaggerated features and playful distortions amplify emotions, making the message more engaging and memorable. By tapping into shared cultural references, satire, or visual storytelling, caricatures not only add depth to the humor but also create a lasting impression on audiences. This contributes to the formation of a collective memory, where certain images, characters, or styles become instantly recognisable and serve as shorthand for specific ideas, emotions, or social commentaries within digital conversations. This shift is heavily influenced by pop culture, where memes, viral trends, and social media phenomena play a central role in how we collectively remember and relate to current events, entertainment, and shared experiences.

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