



RESEARCH PAPER

From Humor to Headlines: The Rise of Memes in Mass Media

Aroosa Altaf

Lecturer, Department of Mass Communication, Abasyn University, Islamabad, Pakistan

Corresponding Author aroosa.altaf@abasynisb.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

This research focuses on the transformation of internet memes from humorous, inconsequential postings to vital, social implements of mass communication. It assesses the capacity of memes to serve as the primary means of social and political visual expression which translates into the social and political awareness of the populace and the mobilization of the masses. The research explains the memes' defiance of mainstream/journalism and their ability to encourage public and participatory discourse through satire and critique. It also expounds on the mass communication and communication ethics of memes which are instrumental to social fragmentation and vertical stratification of society. This study portrays memes as formative to public communication, demonstrates their ability to facilitate critical discourse and alter social and social mentality and consciousness. This study showcases the prominence of memes in the digital public sphere.

Keywords: Internet Memes, Mass Communication, Journalism, Public Discourse, Social Change, Political Communication, Digital Culture, Ethics

Introduction

It is a noteworthy recent development that memes have developed into a dominant form of communication. The internet and social media have created a digital environment conducive to the creative and viral spreading of memes (Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2018). The evolution and communication of memes should be studied. The impacts of memes on political communication, journalism, education, public health, science, and on the public, should all be to research the communication of memes. To study the evolution and proliferation of memes, user generated content, intertextuality, and discourse types, and the use of humour and irony, should be the focus (Hakoköngäs, Halmesvaara, & Sakki, 2020).

The rise of commercial social media has made memes a central part of mainstream digital culture. Yet, the nature of memes is problematic. The dynamic, everchanging, and ephemeral nature of memes as they circulate present a methodological issue, affecting the comprehensibility of any collection of digital objects (Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2018; Trillò & Shifman, 2021). The term 'meme,' modeled after the biological term 'gene,' is a unit of self-replicating cultural information and can be transmitted via digital media. Memes can undergo variation, competition, selection, and retention, evolving from a single idea to a social phenomenon (Rieger & Klimmt, 2019). The term was first used by a biologist, Richard Dawkins, in the 1970s to explain the culture of transmission of cultural elements such as traditions and beliefs. The term had shown to be compatible with digital culture especially with the rise of crisis memes during the COVID 19 Pandemic (Pulos, 2020).

The proliferation of cultures of memes internationally, extending even within mass communication, humor, entertainment, and more recently, journalism (Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2018). Memes, once deemed trivial, having made their way into the journalism fields, serve as an effective and interesting medium for news communication and information dissemination. This demonstrates memes' pliability within the continually shifting media environment and their ability to boil down complex subjects into an aesthetically and

digestibly pleasing substance. Within journalism, memes are effective in relaying information in an environment that is fast-paced and on social media, where display of shorter/concise information bombs, attention, is the order of the day in an environment where attention spans are usually significantly shorter. They serve for studies where attention can be scarce, and in the process, shed more light into information that is usually heavy, or hard to grasp.

The chance to incorporate memes into journalism gives a chance to combine something informative with something entertaining, enabling a more entertaining, informative, yet still journalism-accurate piece. Memes, initially coined by Dawkins as a cultural unit, evolved to become a dominant method of communication as well as a contact retaining mechanism. In a journalistic setting, the major risk is altering the message's integrity by prioritizing humor or meme-ability. Strategic meme use is required to lessen the chance of disseminating misinformation and to remain professional (Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

This study focused on the evolution of internet memes and the degree of influence they now currently have in the political and social activism arena. This is due to the fact that memes have transformed from insignificant jokes to serious political instruments (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). The study of memes should be taken seriously since they have the potential of transforming public ideology and activism, disturbing and altering political order, and changing the public's view (Bene, 2017; Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2018). This relates to the study of memes as they pose serious socio-ethical and legal issues as they can be used to manipulate lieu of the people, paradoxically, to cover the issues of media and social journalism (Bene 2017).

Literature Review

The role of memes in mass communication has been well established (Hakoköngäs et al., 2020). However, there continues to be a significant gap in research concerning the transition of memes from a humorous medium to a form used within journalism (Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2018). While there are studies such as those conducted by Dutceac Segesten and Boretta which focus on the effectiveness of memes within social media and electoral politics, the primary focus continues to be on the political communication side rather than the journalism side.

This work attempts to contribute to the literature investigating the role of cultural and historical contexts in the propagation of memes into contemporary forms of journalism. Drawing from the conceptual foundation of Hakoköngäs et al. (2020), the aim here is to assess what this phenomenon entails for the transformation of public discourse. The study focuses on the peculiar function of memes — on the one hand, they have the potential to increase audience participation substantially, but on the other hand, they might undermine the reputation of journalism. This concern calls for a more thorough examination, and this is the study's goal — to determine how media practitioners should respond to the challenges.

Additional scholarship considering the impact of memes across disciplines has also been included in the analysis of this work. For example, Riser, Clarke, and Stallworth (2020) discuss the impact of memes in the sciences and the dangers, as with some types of journalism, the memes can become disseminators of false information. Also, in digital politics, Dean (2019) emphasizes the visual rhetoric of memes, and the particular moments of political feelings which make the memes visual tokens of discourse in politics, and as such, of considerable importance in the politics of the moment. Engaging with these scholarly works, the current research attempts to piece together the fragmented interpretations of memes' influence, especially in the sphere of journalism, and the impact of these interpretations in addressing the influence of journalism today. This research also seeks to

address the piecemeal and sometimes contradictory interpretations of the influence of memes on society.

Material and Methods

This explains why the current study focuses on the impact that memes have on public communication and the communication field itself, particularly journalism. Following the trajectory of memes in mass communication and their assimilation into journalism, this study aims to understand how these have affected the news production, the reception and the interpretation of news by the public.

This study has historiography; the literature review has been done in this study. Researcher has conducted a thorough and systematic review of the relevant literature. As a result of initial searches on major databases, about 400 documents were being retrieved. After a thorough review process researcher narrowed this number to 170 that focused on journal articles from the Social Sciences and Arts and Humanities from the years 2018 and beyond in order to ensure the documents were relevant and of high quality. These documents served as the foundation of the literature review presented in this study.

Preliminary scrutiny of each title and each abstract was measured against the study's research questions, identifying 43 relevant materials that matched the inclusion criteria. A full text, more elaborate review of these 43 relevant materials was done to assess their worth in relation to the understanding of the movement of memes as a form of humor to a tool of journalism. Out of this, 11 reports which had undergone the most meticulous analysis were included in the final sheaf of documents that were to undergo in-depth further analysis. This analysis refined and classified the most important of the secondary and tertiary information collated.

Out of 305 records identified from Scopus databases, 11 studies were included after screening 228 records, retrieving 170 reports, assessing 43 reports for eligibility, and excluding 127 reports.

Results and Discussion

The goal of this systematic review is to present a meaningful account of the transition of memes from being humorous to being an important element of journalism. It accounts for the trends and abstractions and accounts for the effects and changes of such memes on journalism.

There is evidence of a concentration of memes on the entertainment and humor elements of the communication of journalism and news media. This change also indicates how memes achieve positively public communication and influence the re-organization of the social structure.

The studies reviewed also assist in clarifying the several roles' memes perform in the arena of public communication. Used for political critique and persuasion, memes span messages to conflicted audiences on the socio-political spectrum to incite action. One of the findings that accounts for the virulence of such memes is the emotional effects on the audience.

Discussion

Analyzing the results so far, it will no longer be a novelty merging meme with journalism, but instead, it represents a more substantial change in the domain of communication. Memes dispel information in a manner that is easy to consume and replicate. They may be an especially useful tool in trying to tackle issues in an information-

overloaded audience by trying to engage the audience and work around the problem. However, the claims about memes being highly critical and emotionally provocative lays the groundwork for the oversimplification of news, which may constitute the decline of meaningful discourse, the proliferation of disengagement and disinformation, and ultimately, the decline of engagement, which are the very issues memes were suggesting addressing. The emotional engagement described in memes is critical and therefore, news should be examined with the conflicting priorities of depth and fact. While memes in news journalism is an emphasis on emotion rather than humor, it should be no different in terms of journalism itself, and therefore, a more fundamental approach should be employed in terms of the mechanisms supporting its use in journalism.

Table 1
Research Summary on the Impact of Meme and Digitization on Public Service Delivery

Paper	Study Objectives	Methodology	Main Findings	Outcome Measured
Memes As the Phenomenon of Modern Digital Culture (Polishchuk et al., 2020)	To explore the ubiquity of memes in society, evaluate their characteristics as information products, and focus on artistic imagery in memes.	Semiotic and hermeneutic analysis of internet memes.	Memes are a novel communication tool in digital culture, with a focus on those created by altering artistic imagery.	Popularity and traits of memes, especially those using artistic imagery.
The Conquest of the World as Meme (Baishya, 2021)	To analyze memes' formal qualities, their potential for serious discourse, and their impact on political engagement in India.	Visual and textual critique, survey of popular memes on social media, creation of a meme classification system.	Memes serve as a medium for political critique, and social media encourages political engagement in India.	Influence of memes on political discourse and public opinion.
Boosting Health Campaign Reach and Engagement Through Use of Social Media Influencers and Memes (Kostygina et al., 2020)	To investigate how Twitter posts and influencer marketing impact the reach and engagement of health campaigns among young adults.	Data analysis using machine learning, SVM classifier, and human coding to assess tweets.	Influencer marketing and shareable content increase campaign reach and engagement, particularly among youth.	Effectiveness of social influences in boosting campaign reach and engagement.
Sorted For Memes and Gifs: Visual Media and Everyday Digital Politics (Dean, 2019)	To critique the limitations of political science in analyzing digital political participation and suggest reforms.	Critical analysis of existing approaches, incorporating media and communication studies insights.	Social media engagement is crucial to understanding political participation in the digital age.	Practices of politically engaged citizens using digital media in the 2017 UK General Election.
Extending The Internet Meme: Conceptualizing Technological Mimesis and Imitation Publics on The TikTok Platform (Zulli & Zulli, 2022)	To analyze how TikTok's design fosters user imitation and how these influences networked publics.	Grounded theory and walkthrough analysis of TikTok's interface and design.	TikTok's design encourages replication and imitation, shaping social interactions and networked publics.	Influence of TikTok's structure on user behavior and social interaction.
Meaningful Memories and the Art of Resistance (Silvestri, 2018)	To examine internet memes' rhetorical role in shaping public memory and challenging norms, particularly	Rhetorical criticism and close reading of meme content, using 80 image macros.	Memes challenge societal norms and promote civic awareness through parody, influencing	Role of memes in shaping collective memory and promoting social resistance.

regarding events like 9/11.			collective memory.	
Persuasion Through Bitter Humor (Hakoköngäs et al., 2020)	To analyze the content and rhetorical functions of memes used by Finnish far-right groups on Facebook.	Multimodal discourse analysis of meme content and forms.	Memes are used by far-right groups to spread nationalist agendas, influence political discourse, and build in-group identity.	Influence of far-right memes on mobilizing support and spreading nationalist rhetoric.
ChokeMeDaddy: A Content Analysis of Memes Related to Choking/Strangulation	To understand the ideas about sexual choking conveyed through social media memes.	Qualitative content analysis of 316 memes.	Women and sexual minorities are particularly affected by sexual choking memes, which have significant social implications.	Analysis of memes about sexual choking and their impact on public perceptions.

Memes have a wide range of applications, and among them are in public health, which influences and health promotion campaigns have helped boost engagement and conversion of targeted campaigns (Kostygina et al, 2020). In some cases of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of rhetorical arenas and multimodality have been used to analyze and try to understand the meaning and rationales of some of the memes (Pulos, 2020). In the same manner and for the vaccine hesitancy and the vaccination debates, supporters and adversaries of vaccination have designed memes to implement specific public persuasion (Harvey, Thompson, Lac, and Coolidge, 2019).

The evolution and societal impact of memes as forms of amusement communicating ideology and news represent another critical development in the history of mass communications. They have grown in the ability to communicate, influence and activate populations around socio-political issues, highlighting the memes impact in the digital age communication (Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

Memes as a Form of Mass Communication

Memes are a form of mass communication that has the power to impact people's feelings and mobilize them around various social and political issues in society and have been used for many purposes such as political critique, political persuasion, crisis communication, and advocacy (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Memes can attract and sustain the attention of a particular audience, and therefore, are able to effectively communicate a message. Additionally, researchers have found that they play a significant role in the formation of public opinion and in the polarization and fragmentation of the public digital sphere (Paz et al, 2021).

Memes are not just entertainment; they are active participants in the public digital sphere released to influence political debates and public participation (Baishya, 2021). Academics have also pointed out that memes are a form of political participation by the people, and therefore, they are likely to influence political debates and social participation (McLoughlin & Southern, 2021). In addition to the above, Kostygina et al. (2020) captures the use of memes to enhance public health initiatives, and the campaigns offered to extend the reach of the campaigns via social media, influencers, and meme- based user generated content.

Digital Marketing and Journalism

Marketing, and journalism specifically, are most directly affected by the rapid growth of the wave of social media marketing. There is potential when used correctly and the marketing of memes has become an avenue of marketing journalism and has resulted in

journalism across the world being morphed into journalism of the meme. The journalism of the meme is focused on the specialization of visual memes in the transfer of complex ideas in an understandable, entertaining, and engaging manner. Journalism is disseminating information and storytelling in modern ways. This is of great significance in the world of politics. The marketing of memes engenders the support of the public, and it divides the polity into a positive and negative manner. This viral meme is an online public political forum with enabled polarizing speech.

In journalism, more than any other field, memes are challenged because their impact on the economy of attention (Dean, 2019) is unparalleled. As a recent trend, memes are being utilized by journalists to spark engagement and motivate audiences to focus on complex information, as they are aesthetically pleasing and allow for easier interpretation of information. Boone et al. (2018) view memes as a hybrid, self-published, and participatory form of sophisticated political expression, allowing individuals to engage critically with structures of power and advocate for social change (pp. 592-93). Concerning the speed revolution of memes, we are witnessing journalists using memes as a form of journalism. Today, journalists are tasked with the challenge of balancing the primary entertainment and educational role of journalism with the efficiency of memes for wide circulation. Within the context of mass communication, the consequences of memes on the psyche are significant. They can evoke feelings of joy, cheerfulness, delight, humor, discomfort, and even anger. An examination of the way memes cause these feelings will help them to understand their ability to attract attention and sway the feelings of the masses (Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

Analyzing the Impact of Memes on Public Discourse

The origin of memes stems from the 1970s, when biologist Richard Dawkins published *The Selfish Gene*. Therein, Dawkins introduced the term 'meme' to describe a cultural unit of ideas, behaviors, or styles that move horizontally from person to person within a society. Dawkins analogized memes to genes wherein, in a cultural context, they replicate and evolve. Memes, in their first instantiation, were exclusively tied to cultural events, such as fashions, fads, and rituals. However, with the rise of the internet and social media, memes are now a popular and somewhat unique form of rapidly communicable digital content (Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

In its earliest days, the internet saw the emergence of what are now known as 'image macros,' simple images paired with witty captions that quickly became an early form of internet meme. This genre includes the historically significant 'Distracted Boyfriend meme,' which became popular and recognizable throughout the world over in 2017. Growing social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram popularized meme culture as an ordinary aspect of online communication. Memes then underwent a dramatic transformation of form and function beyond mere entertainment; they became effective means of social commentary, subversion and political engagement (Guenther et al., 2020).

Ethical Considerations in The Use of Memes by Journalists

Memes are an exceptionally controversial and ethically problematic addition to journalism. While an entire generation of people were raised to understand and use memes as a common method of online communication, journalism is the only field of communication whose use of memes is publicly and professionally scrutinized and debated due to concerns of balance, neutrality, and fairness in their use. While memes are arguably the easiest and lightest form of online communication, journalists must maintain an ethical and professional balance to the use of memes in their work as a form of communication, and be cognizant of the harm that could be done to individuals and groups that the memes target for ridicule, even as humor or satire is intended (Bene, 2017; Rieger and Klimmt, 2019).

Conclusion

From the examination of the evolution of memes in mass communication, the conclusions reached bear a direct relation to the problem statement and the objectives that were originally set. It has been documented that the research participated in the examination of the evolution of memes from the first state of being a trivial cartoon to a major instrument that transformed and influenced the public and societal changes within journalism. The research adequately identified the role of memes in the transformation of public interaction, the public relations, and the role of the journalist in the use of memes in the profession.

This research informed the journalists of the necessity to exercise extreme caution in the use of memes, in that they should not deviate from the principles of journalism, which are to be factual, fair, and objective. The journalist will, therefore, meet the ethical requirements of using memes in the media and, at the same time, enrich the media by defending the role of the journalist and protecting the public trust. The research has identified the need to continue to investigate the use of memes in journalism in order to identify the implications and challenges that will arise from the use of memes.

Recommendations

In summary, the study provided a satisfactory answer to the research question posed at the beginning of the study, which was to show how memes can alter the communication of the public and transform mass communication. It also addressed the research objectives to study the engagement of audiences and the practices of journalism. The future studies which can use the different frameworks and methodologies present in the study will provide a greater understanding of the studies of journalism and memes, and will aid in the weaving of the essential social, ethical, and technological frameworks of the developed forms of communications

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