

The Social and Cultural Role Internet Memes in Social Media Networks

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Abstract. *This article examines the significant social and cultural impact of internet memes shared on social media platforms. The article argues that the decentralized, grassroots nature of meme creation and circulation makes them a uniquely potent cultural force. However, the article also highlights problematic aspects of memes including their use to spread misinformation and engage in harmful stereotyping.*

Keywords: *internet memes, social media, participatory culture, digital communication*

INTRODUCTION

In the span of just a few decades, the internet and social media have become ubiquitous, transforming the way people communicate, share information, and engage with culture [1]. One of the most significant cultural products to emerge from this digital landscape is the internet meme. Defined as a piece of media that spreads virally across the internet, often evolving and spawning derivatives along the way [2], memes have become a primary way ideas and attitudes spread in the participatory ecosystem of social media.

This article will examine the social and cultural impact of internet memes, looking at their role in online communication and identity construction as well as their subversive potential and problematic aspects. It will show that memes are a significant cultural force that both reflects and shapes social attitudes. As such, developing "meme literacy" is an increasingly important skill for navigating online spaces and engaging critically with the ideas that spread there.

METHODS AND LITERATURE REVIEW

To analyze the cultural impact of internet memes, this article draws upon existing theoretical frameworks as well as specific case studies. The concept of participatory culture, which sees media production and consumption as increasingly collaborative and decentralized [3], is vital for understanding the creation and circulation of memes. Likewise, theories of multimodality [4], or how communication leverages multiple modes like text, image, and video, helps explain the persuasive power of memes.

A growing body of literature examines internet memes from a social and communicative perspective. Milner (2016) provides an in-depth look at memes as "vernacular creative practice" while Denisova (2019) analyzes their role in political communication and ideology [5][6]. Case studies have examined influential memes like LOLcats [7] or Pepe the Frog [8] and how they variously circulate as



entertainment, social commentary, and tools for extremism. This article synthesizes insights from this literature along with original analysis of meme examples.

RESULTS

Examination of memes from the early 2000s to the present shows their powerful cultural impact. Early meme formats like LOLcats and Advice Animals were relatively simple but introduced the idea of easily customizable images that could quickly convey an idea or attitude [7]. Over time, memes have become increasingly sophisticated, remixing pop culture references with layers of inside jokes and self-referential meta commentary [9].

A key feature of memes is their participatory nature. Rather than being created and distributed in a centralized, top-down way, they emerge from grassroots social media communities and evolve through collaboration [2][3]. An image spawns an initial meme, which inspires spinoffs and derivatives, which themselves generate further evolution [6]. This decentralized development allows memes to very quickly respond to cultural events and attitudes.

Memes are a key way social media users express identity and community belonging [10]. Using specific memes signals fluency in internet culture and affiliation with particular subcultures and fandoms [9]. Memes also shape identity through their content, which often reproduces social stereotypes and cultural assumptions. A notorious example is the "expectation vs. reality" meme which frequently depicts unrealistic beauty standards and gender stereotypes.

Perhaps the most troubling use of memes is by hate groups to normalize prejudice and far-right extremism [8]. The Pepe the Frog character was notoriously co-opted by white nationalists on sites like 4chan and 8chan to spread antisemitic and racist messages [8]. This hatred is often veiled in layers of irony and plausible deniability, a strategy that exploits Poe's law - the idea that without clear indicators, it's impossible to distinguish between sincere extremism and satire of extremism.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The above analysis shows that internet memes play a highly significant and complex cultural role. In one sense, they are a powerful tool for democratizing communication - their bottom-up, decentralized nature allows grassroots communities to quickly respond to cultural events, critique dominant discourses, and advance social movements [3][5][6]. They allow people to signal identity and build a sense of affiliation and community [9][10].

However, memes also have highly problematic aspects. Many memes reproduce harmful stereotypes and prejudices, especially related to gender and race. More concerningly, they can be used by hate groups to recruit and radicalize, spreading far-right ideology and conspiracism [6][8]. The ironic, multi-layered nature of memes makes it easy for extremists to engage in crypto-hate - deniably spreading hate speech under the guise of humor and satire.

Ultimately, internet memes demonstrate the double-edged nature of participatory media. The same bottom-up dynamics that allow novel ideas to quickly spread and dominant attitudes to be challenged can also enable tribalism, misinformation, and hate to proliferate. This is the paradox of the memescape - it's a space of both empowerment and manipulation, social critique and social regress.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown that internet memes are a significant cultural and communicative form that has emerged within the new media landscape of social networks. Memes allow ideas and attitudes to



quickly spread in a participatory, decentralized way. They enable people to engage in shared meaning-making, identity construction, community-building, and cultural commentary.

At the same time, memes reproduce social biases and can be used to radicalize and spread misinformation. As memes continue to grow as a tool for political communication and cultural participation, it's vital to develop meme literacy - the ability to not just understand references and inside jokes, but to unpack underlying ideologies and spot extremist co-optation.

Future research should continue analyzing the circulation and reception of specific memes as well as the larger structural forces shaping the memescape. Additionally, more work is needed on best practices for promoting the prosocial, democratic potential of internet memes while mitigating their potential for harm. This is key to creating a healthier digital public sphere.

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