Article Title

The Role of Memes in Shaping Online Culture: Analyzing Their Influence on Political Discourse, Social Movements, and Internet Culture

Abstract

This research explores the role of memes in shaping online culture, especially their influence in molding the political discourse and social movements. The study highlights the journey and development of memes from the original image macro format to the dynamic formats followed currently.. The literature review provides a thorough context on the influence of memes on social movements, political movements and the overall internet culture. The study applies a content analysis approach to analyze memes regarding two political and two social movements- Feminism/Me Too movement, Black Lives Matter movement, the Israel-Palestine conflict and the US Presidential Elections 2024. The results showcased that memes on social movements had limited and minimal effects on the movement, whereas political memes provided a moderate impact on the political commentary and discourse.

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Contents

Abstract

This research explores the role of memes in shaping online culture, especially their influence in molding the political discourse and social movements. The study highlights the journey and development of memes from the original image macro format to the dynamic formats followed currently.. The literature review provides a thorough context on the influence of memes on social movements, political movements and the overall internet culture. The study applies a content analysis approach to analyze memes regarding two political and two social movements- Feminism/Me Too movement, Black Lives Matter movement, the Israel-Palestine conflict and the US Presidential Elections 2024. The results showcased that memes on social movements had limited and minimal effects on the movement, whereas political memes provided a moderate impact on the political commentary and discourse.

Introduction

Memes have long since played a vital role in shaping online culture and have been a pivotal part of everyday internet consumption. Memes are generally described as a unit of cultural information spread by imitation (Dawkins, 2016). Meme culture is popularly followed by avid social media users in modern times, however, the history of memes dates back to before the advent of the internet. The term *'meme'* was initially coined by British biologist Richard Dawkins, in 1976, which initiated the process of academic research on the concept to fully grasp its creation, transmission within the online community, and its impact on the public discourse. Dawkins defines a meme as *"a unit of cultural transmission or unit of imitation"* (Dawkins, 2016).

Until recently, memes were only looked upon as a piece of entertaining content, with the ability to take hold of any ongoing situation and create a laugh out of it. Memes can be seen as "*remixed, iterated messages which are rapidly spread by members of participatory digital culture for the purpose of continuing a conversation* (Wiggins & Bowers, 2014)." The main striking feature of memes can be seen as their rapid spread, even more so than their ability to replicate. The advent of the internet introduced a new term into literature, called the internet meme, commonly applied to describe the propagation of content items such as jokes, rumors, videos, or websites from one person to others via the Internet (Shifman, 2013).

However, recent studies have tapped into the potential of memes to act as cultural reflectors, understanding how the cultural and social dynamics of a society can be indicated via using memes.

Evolution of Memes

Memes have largely changed and evolved from their original form, along with changes in the online fabric and the introduction of various social media platforms. Initially, memes had a fixed and standard format, available on all platforms in the form of image macros, with a picture of context and a related text. The text was usually a witty one-liner and could be changed according to the context and situation. Some of the most popular memes of this format include the 'Distracted Boyfriend,' the 'Grumpy Cat,' and, 'Woman Yelling at a Cat.' However, with the advancement in technology and the boom in popularity of video-dominant and video-streaming sites like YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, X, TikTok, etc. the overall outlook of memes has changed too. Memes have taken a fairly free form and are no longer bound to a standard image format. The introduction of short videos, emoticons, GIFS, etc. has enhanced the complexity and creativity of the meme culture (Holzmann, 2024).

Role of Memes in Society

In addition to providing entertainment and enhancing the light-heartedness of the online internet experience, memes also play various other roles within a community. Memes are generally made by covering various social issues, ranging from adding political insights, to pop culture and trends

within the society, which allows individuals to understand complicated political concepts by boiling them down into simplified content. The simplification of this political content makes it more accessible and understandable to the general public, especially the younger generation. Memes can also be considered major contributors to raising awareness and advocating for various social issues, partaking in political discourse, and formulating internet culture (NSights, 2024). Memes can act as excellent cultural mirrors, reflecting the trends and cultural flow of society, providing a vital outlook on the trending topics, issues, and events that the youth considers worthy of being discussed. Memes can also help form online communities of people with similar mindsets, interests, and sense of humor, providing a sense of validation and belonging to the creators and consumers of the content (NSights, 2024).

Literature Review:

Dawkins' Meme Theory

Dawkins' Meme Theory proposes that ideas, behaviors, and cultural practices spread through society in a way akin to biological evolution, using the term 'meme' to describe

units of cultural information. This theory highlights how memes also evolve and show changes similar to how genes evolve and replicate, to stay relevant within the human culture and aid people in active communication in the most updated formats (Rogers, 2024).

Richard Dawkins initiated the concept of *'memes'* in 1976 in his book called *'The Selfish Gene'*, in which he correlated memes with biological genes and pinpointed how their functioning is similar to the working of genes. He further elaborated the concept by explaining that genes undergo changes, evolve, and replicate, similarly, memes also undergo changes and evolve according to human culture, impacting the social fabric and shaping the public discourse. Memes can be available as phrases, pictures, short videos, GIFs, and many different forms depending upon the platforms they are being shared on and the audience they are targeting. Successful memes are often simple, catchy, and easily replicable, allowing them to spread quickly and widely among individuals (Rogers, 2024).

Memes as Units of Cultural Transmission

Memes are unexploited assets as units and indicators of culture, which positions memes as units that reflect specific contexts and meanings understandable to some and less understandable to others (Iloh, 2021). Certain features showcase the nature of memes as

reflectors of culture. These features include fecundity, fidelity, and longevity. Fidelity refers to the power of the meme to be effectively communicated and received, and highlights the extent to which it can be accurately copied, Fecundity, describes how quickly a meme can or is replicated and Longevity illustrates the length of time a meme has lasted and grown (Iloh, 2021). The entirety of this concept consults that for a person to fully understand the meme, one needs to be fully aware of the context of the culture or scenario the meme represents. Memes have the potential to reflect the actualities and become a representative of the culture, norms, values, and dynamics of the society or community they originate from (Iloh, 2021). The Crying Jordan meme can be taken as an example to further study this claim. At the passing of Kobe Bryant during his memorial service, Michael Jordan got teary-eyed while talking about his friend and made a witty comment about his crying face becoming an updated version of the Crying Jordan meme which originated a few years back at the event of his retirement in 2011. The comment insinuated a laugh from the crowd, which showcased that everyone understood the context of the original meme and its relevancy in the situation at hand (Iloh, 2021).

Memes in Communication Theory

The term 'memes' can be looked at from various perspectives and can be studied with an interdisciplinary approach, despite being propagated by a Biologist. From a communication perspective, little importance was given to the use and potential of memes in formulating public opinions or transmitting ideas and beliefs, and this practice continued well into the twenty-first century. It wasn't until recently, that memes became a major weapon for communicators to propagate their thoughts and concepts. In the era of digital media, when the audience has shifted from mainstream to social media, and a variety of content

has been sought, memes have become a means for effective exchange (Shifman, 2013). The overall communication pattern of youth now solely depends on the memes and reels that they share and spread amongst communities, providing a safe space for like-minded individuals and creating a sense of belonging for each other.

Role of Memes in Social and Political Movements

History has proved that memes have played an integral role in mobilizing public opinion, and have become pivotal parts of any social or political movements. Memes, as a form of

communication and exchange have become a main source of transmitting updates and information regarding different social and political movements. Formerly, the Ukrainian government began to post memes regarding the impending war situation with Russia on its official X account as a way to showcase its point of view. A meme, dated in November 2021 used satire to stump the intentions of Russia in bombing Ukraine and initiating war. Similarly, a meme with a picture showing a person with a headache was posted to signify the troubles of being neighbors to Russia. This is proof of how something as disturbing and alarming as a looming war can be made accessible to people in a humorous way to increase engagement and bring more eyes to the issue (Brown, 2022). Memes are used to drive various controversial social or political issues, especially in oppressive and communist regimes that do not allow mainstream media the freedom to pass anti-authority or anti-establishment remarks. A research study found sarcastic memes posted on Moroccan Facebook pages openly having rebellious interactions about the monarchy, despite being seemingly harmless and taken as light banter. The research study also showed that these memes increased the interest and contribution of people in the political events of the country (Brown, 2022).

Internet Culture

With the advent of the internet, it not only became a major form of communication between individuals but also became a source of connection worldwide. The world witnessed the effects of global internet consumption and its consequences on knitting the social fabric.

Additionally, the internet created a means for

people to interact, advertise, share ideas, advocate and for issues and events close to their hearts (Allebach, 2021). The free access to the internet allowed its creation to influence the world with full force, making it an addiction for anyone who used it regardless of their age. The age of the internet can be seen to originate between the early 2000s, opening up portals of entertainment and communication like Facebook, Myspace, YouTube, Reddit, Tumblr, etc. People began to interact with others on these platforms, owing to their similar interests and beliefs in movies, video games, humor, books, music, pop culture, etc. These interactions led to the rigorous use of the internet and were a pivotal point in shaping the internet and online culture between the early 2000s. Between 2005-2009, the integration of newer technology like computers and smartphones increased the influence of the Internet. People could personalize and limit

the content they consumed however they wanted, and everything of use became accessible in digital formats. The era of physical CD players and books became outdated, and the introduction of e-books, e-magazines, online music streaming sites, etc. allowed individuals to always have content within access. Furthermore, the age of smart technology from 2009 till the present has left traditional media and traditional content sources behind in the dust. Social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, etc. are people's modern sources of entertainment, information, interaction, and connectivity (Allebach, 2021).

Research Questions

In light of the data collected and the theories studied via the literature review, various research questions were brought to light. The study of previous research studies and articles supported the conclusion that memes do have a role in shaping political and social movements. The thematic study also follows the impact of memes on the internet culture. In light of the literature review, the following research questions arose, which will be answered via the research study:

1. How do memes shape public discourse on major issues?
2. What role do memes play in the development and spread of social and political movements?

Methodology

To complete the current study, a content analysis was done on the memes collected from Instagram, centering around two political movements and two social movements. The two social movements selected were the Feminism/Me Too movement and the Black Lives Matter movement whereas the two political movements selected were the Palestine-Israel Conflict and the US Presidential Elections 2024. Content analysis is a research methodology that requires the systematic analysis of any visual, textual, and aural content for the purpose of checking their effects or influence on any aspect (Coe & Scacco, 2017). The memes were collected from Instagram via purposive sampling by browsing the search bar using keywords such as 'feminism memes,' 'BLM memes,' 'Palestine-Israel memes,' and 'US Elections memes.' The unit of analysis for this study was each meme that was collected by this search and the point of analysis in each meme was to understand what role these memes play in these social movements and the public discourse, including the political commentary they instigate amongst

the people. The sample size for all the memes collected was N=30.

Coding

To conduct a proper content analysis and to come up with accurate results, four coding

sheets about each movement were designed to properly categorize the memes on the basis of eight categories. The categories that the memes were passed through include meme ID, type of image, the tone of the meme, its target audience, its purpose, its engagement, and the influence of the meme to see whether it aligns with the movement or negates it. For further descriptions of the categories, the detailed coding sheet is attached in the Appendix as Table 1.0. A content analysis was done on the memes collected from Instagram because, according to the literature review, it was the most suitable and repeated method of research study used in prior studies having common concepts. It was the most suited way to clearly understand the impact of memes on political commentary, public discourse, social movements, and the online culture overall. The main factor to be checked was the impact of memes

on various movements, to see whether they negated the movement or supported it, and the purpose of the meme (whether it was to inform, provoke thought, advocate, entertain, etc.). The influence of the memes was checked by navigating the context of the meme and the engagement it generated on Instagram. The memes with 500 or fewer likes were considered ones with minimal engagement, the ones with likes that were between 500-50k were considered moderate engagement, and likes above 50k were considered high engagement. The engagement of the memes corresponded to the influence of the memes and became the deciding factor in checking which memes had significant, moderate, or minimal influence on political or social movements.

Findings

The content analysis of memes was done for the purpose of understanding the influence of the memes on four movements; two social movements and two political movements. The social movements selected were the Feminism/Me Too movement and the Black Lives Matter movement, whereas the political movements chosen were the US Presidential Elections 2024 and the Israel-Palestine Conflict. The movements were chosen on the basis of being the most currently trending and popular amongst the public. The results of the influence of the memes on

this movement were considered on the basis of the engagement i.e. likes that the meme managed to get on Instagram. The results for each of the four movements were compiled separately through a separate coding sheet.

US Elections 2024

Upon careful speculation and analysis of the memes, the coding result indicated the influence of memes on the US Presidential elections in 2024. The memes were given a unique and exclusive meme ID that set them apart, and were analyzed and passed through the coding sheet on the basis of the categories; image type, tone of the meme, target audience, purpose of the meme, engagement of the meme, its alignment with the movement (whether it opposes the movement, aligns with it or is neutral about it) and the influence of the memes judged on the basis of its engagement. According to Table 1.1 linked in the Appendix, the coding sheet for Political Movement 1

(US Elections 2024), 37.5% of the memes showed significant influence on the movement, 37.5% of memes showed moderate influence on the movement and 25% of memes showed minimal engagement and influence on the propagation and commentary of the movement. The results show an overall moderate influence of memes on political commentary and decision-making of voters in the United States regarding the US Elections 2024.

Israel-Palestine Conflict

The second political movement that was coded upon was the Palestine-Israel conflict. Despite being a grave matter involving loss of lives and conflicts at the international level, it was observed that memes on this issue helped create awareness, provide advocacy windows, and give people constant updates about the situation on the ground. The memes were coded based on the same categories as discussed before, and the results were as follows. According to Table 1.2, linked in the Appendix, the coding sheet for Political Movement 2 (Palestine-Israel Conflict), 71.5% of the memes related to the issue had moderate engagement on Instagram, hence having a moderate influence on the movement in general. Additionally, 28.5% of the memes were found to have a minimal influence on the movement, and none of the memes selected regarding the issue were observed to have a significant influence on the propagation of the movement. Overall, the findings indicated that the memes had a somewhat moderate influence on the Israel-Palestine conflict, and their role in the political movement can also be considered mid-par in the bigger picture.

Feminism

The first social movement that was selected to be analyzed was the Feminism/Me Too movement and memes regarding the issues were analyzed to check their influence on the movement in general. The coding sheet categorized the meme on the basis of seven categories that are mentioned in Table 1 of the Appendix. According to Table 1.3, the coding sheet for Social Movement 1 (Feminism) highlighted that overall 20% of the memes analyzed had a moderate influence on the spread and propagation of the movement, whereas 80% of the memes showcased minimal influence on the movement, and none of the memes analyzed were found to have a significant

influence on the social movement according to the analysis structure that was followed. Overall, it was analyzed and found that memes had minimal influence on the Feminism/Me Too movement, and had little role in shaping the public opinion about the issue or propagation of the issue.

Black Lives Matter

The second social movement that was analyzed was the Black Lives Matter movement, and the memes that were selected were categorized into a coding sheet on the basis of their ID, image type, tone of the meme, its target audience, the purpose of the meme, the engagement it generated on Instagram, its alignment with the movement and the overall influence of the meme on the movement. According to Table 1.4 in the Appendix, it was found that 40% of the total memes on the Black Lives Matter movement generated moderate engagement, hence indicating that they had a moderate influence on the social movement and in supporting the social issue.

Additionally, the table also indicates that 60% of the total memes selected as a sample had a minimal influence on the BLM Movement as a whole, and none of the memes selected generated a significant influence and response from the audience. Overall, it can be noted that according to the findings, the majority of the memes about the BLM Movement did not play a big role in shaping public opinion and making people socially aware.

Discussion

The research focused on the role of memes in shaping online culture, and the role of said memes in relevant political movements or social movements. The purpose of the research was to understand the correlation of memes with the influence of the social or political movement they provide cultural context. The main focus of the research was to understand the role of memes, not just as a means of entertainment and relaxation, but also as tools for propagating social and political movements. Memes can play a pivotal part in arousing political commentary and improving advocacy efforts regarding social movements, as well as shaping the course of the online/internet culture. The main motive of the research was to tap into the non-conventional role of memes, rather than taking the mainstream route of considering them as facets of entertainment and leisure. The study followed the research methodology of the previous research and followed a content analysis method to understand the influence of the memes. Due to this analysis, it was made clear that memes possess varying levels of influence, no matter what cultural context or target they hold. In this research, the influence of the memes was checked through the engagement they generated on Instagram. According to this method, a coding sheet was designed for each of the four movements that were selected- Feminism, Black Lives Matter, the Israel-Palestine Conflict, and the US Elections 2024. The results showcased that memes regarding political movements, discourse, and commentary such as US Elections 2024 and the Israel-Palestine Conflict had a moderate influence on the movements. Similarly, the memes on social movements like the Feminism/Me Too movement and the Black Lives Matter movement had minimal influence on the propagation and success of these movements. The results proved that memes can play different roles and have varying degrees of impact, and it does not guarantee that the bigger and more popular the movement is, the greater the influence of the movement generated by memes. The study mainly highlights the part memes play in democratizing conversation, allowing people to make advocacy efforts regarding social issues, and participating in political commentary.

However, the original purpose of the memes (to entertain) may sometimes take away the essence of the context they represent. The future potential of memes can be tapped by studying the implications of technological advancements and digital advent on the format of memes.

Limitations

Although the research's main purpose was to highlight the influence of memes in social and political movements, the research is subject to certain boundaries and limitations. Firstly, the research features memes that have a static image or text format only, whereas, with the evolution of technology, memes have also taken up new formats and forms. Secondly, the research sample allowed the content analysis of 30 memes, whereas, if the research sample could be increased and the scope broadened, the research could be a lot more authentic and reliable. Thirdly, the memes were

collected from Instagram, whereas if other social media meme-generating platforms like X, Facebook, TikTok, Reddit, etc. were consulted for samples, the research would have produced more inclusive results and findings. Lastly, the engagement metrics (only likes) used as a gauge to understand the influence of the memes did not fully encompass the broadness of audience interactions.

Conclusion

The research aimed to fully understand the role of memes in shaping online culture while also tapping into their potential to affect social or political movements. The memes were selected, circulating around four movements, two of which were social movements and two were political. The movements selected were Black Lives Matter, Feminism, the Palestine-Israel conflict, and the US Presidential Elections 2024. The results were obtained by making coding sheets for each movement and proved that the memes on social movements had minimal effect on the movement whereas the memes on political movements had moderate influence on the movements. Whereas, when looking at the bigger picture, memes generate a moderate effect on movements or the context they uphold. The research was subject to many limitations as mentioned above, however, the most pressing struggle faced during the research study was the small sample size. The research would have provided diversified viewpoints and produced better results and findings if the sample size selected had been bigger. Overall, the research study expands on the knowledge obtained from previous research on similar topics and has the potential to be expanded further. However, the need for future research is essential and critical to understanding the role of memes in the ever-changing landscape of social media.

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Appendix

Table 1

Coding Sheet for Content Analysis of Memes

Meme ID	Image Type	Tone of Meme (humorous, critical, aggressive, sarcastic, satire, neutral)	Target Audience (activists, general public, youth)	Purpose of Meme (humor, awareness, criticism)	Engageme nt Level (high, medium, low)	Alignment with Movement (aligns, neutral, opposes)	Influence (significant, moderate, minimal)

Table 2

Coding Sheet for Political Movement 1 (US Elections 2024)

Meme ID	Image Type	Tone of Meme	Target Audience	Purpose of Meme	Engagement Level	Alignment with Movement	Influence of Meme on Movement
M001	Image	Critical, Sarcastic	General Public	Criticism	Medium	Neutral	Moderate
M004	Image	Humorous, Critical	General Public	Criticism, Humor	High	Neutral	Significant
M005	Image	Humorous, Sarcastic, Critical	General Public, Youth	Humor	Medium	Neutral	Moderate
M008	Image	Humorous, Satirical, Neutral	General Public	Humor	High	Neutral	Significant
M023	Image	Sarcastic	General Public, Youth	Humor, Awareness	Low	Neutral	Minimal
M027	Image	Humorous, Neutral	General Public	Humor	Medium	Oppose	Moderate
M029	Image	Humorous, Neutral	General Public	Humor	High	Opposes	Significant
M030	Image	Sarcastic, Critical, Humorous	General Public, Youth	Awareness	Low	Neutral	Minimal

Table 3

Coding Sheet for Political Movement 2 (Palestine-Israel Conflict)

Meme ID	Image Type	Tone of Meme	Target Audience	Purpose of Meme	Engagement Level	Alignment with Movement	Influence on
M002	Image	Satire, Sarcastic, Critical, Humorous	Activists	Criticism	Medium	Opposes	Moderate
M003	Image	Critical, Satire	Activists	Criticism	Medium	Opposes	Moderate
M006	Image	Humorous,	Activists	Criticism	Medium	Opposes	Moderate

Meme ID	Image Type	Tone of Meme	Target Audience	Purpose of Meme	Engagement Level	Alignment with Movement	Influence on
M024	Image	Critical Sarcastic, Humorous	Activists, General Public	Criticism	Low	Opposes	Minimal
M025	Image	Sarcastic, Critical	General Public	Criticism	Medium	Opposes	Moderate
M026	Image	Sarcasm, Critical	Activists	Criticism	Low	Opposes	Minimal
M028	Text Only	Humorous, Sarcasm	Activists	Criticism	Medium	Opposes	Moderate

Table 4

Coding Sheet for Social Movement 1 (Feminism)

Meme ID	Image Type	Tone of Meme	Target Audience	Purpose of Meme	Engagement Level	Alignment with Movement	Influence on
M007	Image	Humorous, Critical, Sarcastic	Activists	Humor, Criticism	Low	Aligns	Minimal
M009	Image	Humorous, Satire, Sarcastic	Activists	Humor	Low	Opposes	Minimal
M010	Image	Critical, Satire, Aggressive	Activists	Criticism	Low	Opposes	Minimal
M011	Image	Humorous, Neutral	Activists	Awareness	Medium	Aligns	Moderate
M012	Image	Critical, Humorous, Sarcastic	Activists	Humor, Criticism	Low	Aligns	Minimal
M013	Image	Sarcastic, Critical	Activists	Humor, Criticism	Low	Opposes	Minimal
M014	Image	Humorous, Critical, Satire	General Public, Youth	Humor, Awareness	Low	Aligns	Minimal
M015	Image	Humorous, Critical, Sarcasm, Satire	General Public	Humor, Criticism	Medium	Opposes	Moderate
M016	Text Only	Critical, Sarcastic, Satire	Youth, General Public	Humor, Criticism	Low	Aligns	Minimal
M017	Image	Sarcastic, Aggressive	Youth, Activists	Humor, Criticism	Low	Aligns	Minimal

Table 5

Coding Sheet for Social Movement 2 (Black Lives Matter)

Meme ID	Image Type	Tone of Meme	Target Audience	Purpose of Meme	Engagement Level	Alignment with Movement	Influence on Movement
M018	Image	Sarcastic	Activists	Humor, Criticism	Low	Opposes	Minimal
M019	Image	Sarcastic, Critical	Activists, Youth	Humor, Awareness	Low	Aligns	Minimal

M020	Image	Humorous, Aggressive	Activists, Youth	Humor, Criticism	Medium	Aligns	Moderate
M021	Image	Critical	Youth	Criticism	Medium	Neutral	Moderate
M022	Image	Critical	Activists, Youth	Awareness	Low	Opposes	Minimal