

# The Influence of Memes- A Dynamic Internet Phenomenon

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## ABSTRACT

*Memes are a big part of the internet now-a-days. Memes control the internet culture (Romano, 2019). According to Oxford Languages, memes are defined as an image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by internet users, often with slight variations. There are various genres, subjects and natures of memes. This study aims to explore the use of memes and its impact on the youth, aged between 15-30 years. Going through so many opinions about the ever so dynamic meme culture, this study shows that memes are as dynamic and ambiguous as the society itself. Memes are present on every social media handle and every community has their own style and context of memes. Almost every person browses, views and shares memes, and might get affected by them, either positively or negatively, depending on the content they consume. If a person wants to positively use this internet culture, they need to make sure that the content they share and connect with is socially acceptable, relatable and harmless in certain ways. People need to realize that memes are just personal opinions shared publically, made popular through relatable contexts, extensive sharing and vast globalization and connectivity amongst people. Memes can have a positive as well as a negative impact on an individual, a specific group or the whole society. They can be a source of entertainment, information, a portal for sharing positive action and opinions if used wisely, or cause humiliation to certain people and make stereotypes more prominent in the society, disrupt and hurt public interests and spread hate. Hence, they should be taken as just another source of infotainment, rather than a means of spreading hate.*

**Keywords:** Memes, Relatable, Positive Impact, Opinions, Negative Impact, Hate

## I THE INFLUENCE OF MEMES- A DYNAMIC INTERNET PHENOMENON

A meme is an idea, behaviour, or style that spreads by means of imitation from person to person within a culture and often carries symbolic meaning representing a particular phenomenon or theme (Webster's Dictionary). Memes became popular with the significant rise in the use of internet and social media. The internet became popular in the 1990s, at the same time, memes started to be shared around, at first on private forums. The people online started to actively promote meme-sharing within the message boards or newsgroup population by asking for feedback, comments, opinions, etc. (Cantrell, 2020). This act of constant sharing amongst new forming and different communities gave rise to a new meme culture, where making pictures and/or videos with a humorous intent became a trend. People started to bring up social issues into light by expressing their public opinions in the form of humorous and relatable memes. Some of the first memes of the internet are the dancing baby animation, the rick-rolling trend, etc. These memes were popularized due to being technologically new. Animation was still new at that time, and the dancing baby animation brought in a new direction of possibilities for the animation industry. The English song, Never gonna give you up, popularized the rick-rolling trend amongst the youth. The word meme was coined by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The*

*Selfish Gene* as an attempt to explain how ideas replicate, mutate, and evolve (memetics).

With the evolvement and advancement of technology, the expansion of internet usage and the onset of globalization, many social media sites, apps, and online forums came into existence recently. When these apps and sites started becoming popular, they started promoting meme cultures. Memes can be subjected to in-jokes within online communities such as Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, YouTube, Reddit, and 4chan (Stryker, 2011).

An Internet meme may stay the same or may evolve over time, by chance or through commentary, imitations, parody, or by incorporating news accounts about itself. Internet memes spread online through influences such as popular culture (First Monday, 2021). Needless to say, memes are becoming an ever-present part of the internet culture. This study is done to see the impact and influence of memes on the youth. We explore many aspects of memes, their types and even functions in the society.

## II METHODOLOGY

**(a) Study Design** -This study uses the questionnaire method of data collection. It encouraged participants to submit their responses from the comfort of their homes and allowed them to take it whenever they want to. It ensured safety during the pandemic and gave researchable responses. There were mostly optional questions, with options

to give an answer other than the options provided.

- (b) **Participants** -The main focus of this research was on the youth; hence the ages between 14 to 30 years were covered. Most of the participants were school and college students, who are active on social media and interact with memes on a daily basis. The questionnaire was shared with the participants on social media and through personal messaging. Everyone was made aware of the aim of the research and the maintenance of confidentiality. There was no gender and age bias and everyone's response was considered into the research. All the participants are Indians.
- (c) **Questionnaire** - The questionnaire was shared with the people of the particular age group. They were given no time limits to complete the questionnaire. The first set of the questions was about the participants, which would be kept confidential. The second set was about their meme preferences. The third set comprised of questions about their meme sharing habits. The questionnaire tried to cover every aspect of the research in an organized and presentable manner. The questions were in an easy to understand language and it was made sure that the questions were not biased against any person or their preferences.
- (d) **Ethics** - One of the most important parts of conducting a psychological research is maintaining the ethics. It was made sure that the participants were informed about the aim of the research. Every participant gave consent for taking part in the questionnaire. Answering all the questions was necessary; however, options of maintain confidentiality was given in the first set of questions, i.e., the set comprising of personal information of the participants. Full confidentiality is still maintained and the answers of the participants are not to be revealed as per their choices. The research will be made public and all the participants will have the chance to read it.
- (e) **Data Analysis** - The data was analysed in a pie chart form and a horizontal bar graph form. This made it easy for all the options to be measured at the same time with minimal mistakes. Each and every question was checked and analysed and no question was missed. The pie charts and bar graphs are shown at the end for referencing.

### III RESULTS

The topic explores the influence of memes on the youth, between the age of 14 to 30 years. There were 15 questions asked, all of which have a specific purpose. All these questions are analysed below in detail.

- (a) **Do you regularly browse memes?** - This question is the basis of the whole study. The aim of this question was to actually analyse how many of the participants actively engage in meme browsing, whether they search for memes themselves, whether they just receive memes in their feeds without specific browsing, or whether they don't search for memes at all. Most of the participants see memes in their feeds without specific browsing, around 66.7%. The rest 33.3% participants actively search for memes, both answers will play important roles in further questions. There wasn't any participant who didn't engage with memes, either actively or passively. This shows that memes indeed are a dominant part of the Internet Culture.
- (b) **Where do you usually browse memes?** - This question analyses the source of meme browsing. Around 77.8% users receive their memes through friends and social media. [Other than that, 18.5% users rely on social media (Instagram, Reddit, Discord, etc) and 6.3% users receive memes through friends separately.] This shows that both, social media and friend groups play an important role in the circulation of memes. These both are important systems of any society now-a-days. Thus, it is not only that social forces influence our behaviours, but that, in turn, our behaviours impact societal outcome (Baker, 2021).
- (c) **What type of memes do you usually look at?** - The participants were given 5 choices for this answer (with the liberty to choose more than one answer).
- (i) Political
  - (ii) Current Affairs
  - (iii) Self-Depreciating and Offensive
  - (iv) Light Humour
  - (v) Other (please specify).

Around 81.5% of the users interact with light humour memes, followed by current affairs at 51.9%, Self Depreciating and Offensive at 37%, Political at 33% and other categories like ironic, technological, etc. This shows the impact of current affairs in the making of memes. How people feel is vital to engagement with information (especially political information), because it changes what issues they pay attention to, influences how they look for (political) information, affects how they process that information, shapes how they view the world, and ultimately, can change a range of (political) activities

(Wyer, 2004). A lot of the negativity around the world only causes people to make negative memes and engage with yet more negativity.

- (d) According to you, are your meme preferences offensive?** - This is a very direct question indeed, but it was important to know. Offensive memes can be a great cause of negativity in young adults; being targeted towards a certain group or stereotype, they can give rise to social issues and strengthen the already existing stereotypes. Mass media play a role in shaping collective identities and intergroup attitudes and, by typecasting certain groups, distort the picture that audiences see of different groups. There is evidence to suggest these skewed media representations can not only promote public hostility toward other ethnic groups but also lower ethnic minority individuals' self-esteem (Ross T, 2019). According to the pie charts, 44.4% participants say that their meme preferences might be offensive, 40.4% say no, and 14.8% of them say they may be offensive. The duality of this statement is to be deciphered more extensively further.
- (e) According to you, are your meme preferences self-depreciating?** - This direct question is mainly focused on a person's identity. It affects a person's personal identity and in the long term, their social identity. Self refers to the total accumulation of a person's cognition, with regards to themselves. It defines the existence of a person. A person needs to have a high self-esteem, i.e., their judgement about themselves needs to be positive in order for them to function well. A negative self-esteem can loosen up a person's confidence and if a person is exposed to self-depreciating content, it'll only cause more negativity to breed in the person's mind and hence, causing them to evoke maladaptive behaviour. People might even get triggered to engage in self-harm if the negativity affects them too much. There is significant potential for harm from online behaviour (normalization, triggering, competition, contagion) but also the potential to exploit its benefits (Marchant et al, 2018). 25.9% people say their meme preferences are self-depreciating. 29.6% people say they might be self-depreciating. The rest 44.4% say the memes are not self-depreciating. This shows that only a selective population engages in negative meme browsing.
- (f) According to you, are your meme preferences motivating/positive?** - Whatever digital content people consume affects their mental state. Around 70.4% people are not sure about the content they consume; hence they chose the option "maybe". 18.5% people say that their

content is positive; the rest 11.1% people said it's not positive.

- (g) According to you, do your meme preferences usually support a light humour, or dark humour?**- Light humour is just a fun aspect of humour, with harmless jokes and a bit of slapstick comedy. Dark humour, on the other hand, is more inappropriate and negatively aimed. 77.8% of people have "both" as their preferences. 18.5% have a dark humour and only a small percentage of people left have only light humour as their options. This shows that many people might be engaging in a dark humoured digital content.
- (h) According to you, do your thoughts get influenced by memes?**- Such an influential phenomenon of the internet is bound to create an impact on the people. 29.6% people say that their thoughts are influenced by memes. The rest 29.6% say they may be influenced by memes. The rest 40.7% people say that they're not influenced by memes. The people with a strong sense of self efficacy and self-regulation will not be influenced by any negative source; but the 59% (approx.) population seems to be affected by the negative influential content.
- (i) According to you, do your actions get affected by memes, either day to day or long term?** - Around 51.9% of the people say that their actions aren't influenced by memes. This shows that people with a strong, willed mind cannot be affected by this internet phenomenon. People with a strong self-regulation might not be affected by memes. Around 11.1% people though say that they are influenced by memes, action wise. Their minds might be more influential and the memes they browse might as well get embedded in their consciousness, hence affecting their actions. Consciousness seems especially useful for enabling behaviour to be shaped by non-present factors and by social and cultural information, as well as for dealing with multiple competing options or impulses. It is plausible that almost all of human behaviour comes from a mixture of conscious and unconscious processing (Baumeister, 2011).
- (j) Do you share the preferred memes with others?** - When people like something, they share it with other like-minded people. The internet is all about sharing and receiving. Around 59.3% of people share their preferred memes with some people only. 22.2% people only share memes sometimes. 18.5% people share memes extensively. It is important to note that none of the participants chose the option 'no'. This shows the vast range of connectivity that memes provide; the fact that they facilitate sharing of ideas and entertainment is one of the

major reasons as to why memes are considered influential.

**(k) Are you the receiver of some shared memes? -** 40.7% say 'yes', 33.3% people say 'with some people only', 25.9% people say 'sometimes'. Again to be noted that no participant chose the option 'no'. This also shows that people get influenced by others' meme preferences too apart from being influenced by their own meme choices.

**(l) Do you think memes play a part in shaping public opinions and actions? -** 74.1% of the people say yes. This was a very direct question. People do think that memes shape public opinion and actions; being a result of public opinion and actions themselves, it's pretty obvious for memes to keep the cycle going on for shaping what the public thinks and does. 22.2% people say maybe and the left up amount of people say no. The needs to leave footprints in social media by retweeting or repeating memes override other reasons. Updating a status, even just forwarding memes, is important to stay updated and maintain existence. A meme could be a representation of public opinion. However, as we are all aware how dynamic social media is the issues could not last very long. Therefore, the impact of social critics in meme could not contribute much to public policy (Handayani et al, 2016).

**(m) What do you think memes do most actively in the society? -** The participants were given the following choices. They could choose multiple options. These are the options with the respective answers.

- (i) Share public opinion 70.4%
- (ii) Give rise to certain actions 40.7%
- (iii) Spread humour and positivity 63%
- (iv) Connect people 59.3%
- (v) Spread hate and negativity 25.9%
- (vi) Just a source of entertainment 48.1%
- (vii) A source of expression 63%
- (viii) Other (give a different point of view) 7.4%

The options chosen by people show that memes serve almost all the above functions in the society.

**(n) Do you make your own memes? And do you share your own memes? -** Around 63% of the people don't make memes. A small amount of participants make memes and share them, another small amount of them make memes but don't share them. 29.6% of them 'sometimes do both', i.e., make memes and share them with only some people. This question was asked to see how many people, who get influenced by memes, either just for entertainment or significantly, make their own memes, therefore

influencing other people and sharing their opinions through memes.

**(o) What type of memes do you usually make? -** The participants were given the following choices. They could choose multiple options. These are the options with the respective answers.

- (i) Political 3.7%
- (ii) Current Affairs 7.4%
- (iii) Self-deprecating and offensive 18.5%
- (iv) Light Humour 59.3%
- (v) Other (Technology, etc.) 3.7%
- (vi) I don't make memes 63%

Most of the people who make memes focus on light humour and self-deprecating and offensive memes. These two also seem to be some of the most browsed meme preferences (81% and 37% respectively). Thus showing that whatever content people engage with, makes them elicit that specific type of behaviour.

#### IV DISCUSSION

I conducted this case study to study the impact of memes on a particular demographic. The study has shown a great variety of results. This is what I've been able to study so far.

The ages of people for this study were from 14 to 30 years. This age group consists of the millennial and the generation z, the most socially active age groups. They're modern, open minded, have a high moral value and also, bear a great responsibility in the society. Every person from this age group, and involved in this study, are familiar with memes. They regularly interact with memes, either directly through personal browsing, or getting recommendations in their social media handles, or receiving them through their friend groups. Whatever the source may be, everyone knows what memes are, what purpose they serve and how they do it. People look at all sorts of memes, from political and current affairs related, to light and subtle humour, to offensive and self-deprecating ones. All people have their own preferences and interests, and looking at specific type of digital content may have certain reactions and responses from the people.

If a person is mainly looking at positive content, their conscious and sub-conscious mind will mostly have a positive approach and nature. Our subconscious takes in everything from the environment, and since we aren't aware of our subconscious mind, we aren't able to recognize the effect of our digital content on it. If a person will consume negativity, it is bound to have certain negative repercussions on a person, whether through maladaptive behaviour, negative thinking, etc.

Memes are dynamic. i.e., they're constantly changing. Everyday something new is trending on social media, and people start making memes according to it. The new societal issue might be positive, empowering and motivating; or it might be negative, disturbing, humiliating. Making, browsing and sharing such memes brings upon an impact on an individual and a society as a whole. Although according to the study conducted above, many people believe that they aren't affected by memes, but, they do interact with memes on a daily basis. Interacting with anything on a regular basis brings about a change in us. It gets embedded in our subconscious and affects us in such ways. Some people did admit to memes affecting their opinions and words, others said that memes don't affect them per say; but almost everyone agreed to the fact that memes play a very crucial role in the society. Shaping public opinions, strengthening or weakening stereotypes, raising issues and even entertainment and connecting one with another, almost everyone agreed that memes serve a variety of purposes. Saying that memes don't affect the person but agreeing that they do affect the society around them can be a sort of defence mechanism, denial to be exact, since some people might not be able to accept the fact that such a common internet phenomenon might be affecting them. On the other hand, they might have such a strong sense of self-realization and self- efficacy that such a strong societal force might actually not be affecting them. There are a few conclusions though, which cannot be denied.

Memes are an important, interactive and dynamic part of the society. They provide us with information, entertainment, a medium of expression and, if used correctly, a medium to being about a positive change

Certain people view, and react to certain memes differently. Some people are only into light, subtle, harmless humour, while others engage in self-deprecating, offensive and dark humour. Their cognition and subconscious might or might not be affected by their digital content preferences.

As actively people browse and make memes, they share them too. People might share their preferred memes as their opinions, beliefs, or just for mere laughter. They either might share them with their friends, or with the society as a whole. Memes connect people as much as they relate to individuals.

## V LIMITATIONS

This study was conducted on only a minor percentage of the whole population. It cannot be used as a reference for any one person or a whole group. This is just one of the results of a relatively new topic. Since memes are very dynamic due to the ever changing society and its constantly developing

trends, this study cannot be referred to as the final answer. Memes are a new topic in the research field related to media, psychology and sociology. Doing more and more researches on this topic and further in this area will give us new ideas and theories.

## VI CONCLUSION

Memes are such a big part of the society that its impacts can be studied very extensively, in different demographics and contexts. This study concludes that memes can have both, a positive and a negative impact on a person and the society as a whole. From entertainment to expression, from relatable content to connecting social groups, memes have many uses. From politics to humour, memes can be used to express any and every opinion and situation. If a person wants to be benefitted from memes, they should not let the society and their opinions influence them in a negative way, and should themselves spread positivity in and around them. The occasional dark humour won't do anyone any harm, as long as people remember their limitations.

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