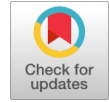


Rising Popularity of Internet Memes in India: A Media Psychology Perspective



Shiv Shankar Das

Abstract: *The psychology behind internet memes is complex and multi-faceted, drawing on various aspects of human behaviour and cognitive processes. Memes have become a part of the social media culture and its popularity continues to grow in India. The analysis of internet memes can provide valuable insights into the cultural, social, and psychological aspects of our online lives. In the field of media psychology, the impact of memes on human behaviour and cognition is a growing area of research. Researchers are exploring the ways in which memes can be used to shape social attitudes, as well as the psychological mechanisms behind their popularity and spread. Media psychology and memes are both important areas of study that shed light on the ways in which communication occurs in contemporary society. By examining the relationship between media messages and the psychological processes that underlie them, we can gain a better understanding of how communication shapes our attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. In the context of memes, the emotions evoked by a meme can be amplified through its spread and can have a significant impact on public opinion and discourse. Based on qualitative analysis, the paper employs the Social Cognitive Theory along with Uses and Gratifications Theory to decode the manifestation of memes in our social system and creation of echo chambers.*

Key words: *Internet Memes, Media Psychology, Psychology of Memes, Echo Chambers*

I. INTRODUCTION

A meme is a cultural phenomenon that spreads rapidly from person to person, typically through the internet. It is often defined as a unit of cultural information, such as a catchphrase, image, or video, that is transmitted from one individual to another. According to Macmillan dictionary "A meme, or, more precisely, an Internet meme, is some kind of idea or piece of information that spreads very rapidly across a large number of internet users"[1]. The term "meme" was first introduced by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book 'The Selfish Gene'[2]. He used the word to describe an idea, behaviour, or style that spreads from person to person within a culture. Memes have been termed as alternative media vehicle and as 'political mind bombs' (Denisova, 2019, [3]). It can take many forms, including images, videos, hashtags, and catchphrases. They often have a humorous or satirical tone, and can be used to comment on social, political, or cultural issues.

Manuscript received on 28 February 2023 | Revised Manuscript received on 06 March 2023 | Manuscript Accepted on 15 March 2023 | Manuscript published on 30 March 2023.

* Correspondence Author(s)

Dr. Shiv Shankar Das*, Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Birla Global University, Odisha, India. Email id: shivsdas@gmail.com, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3979-6857>

© The Authors. Published by Lattice Science Publication (LSP). This is an open access article under the CC-BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

Some memes are created for the purpose of entertaining or making people laugh, while others are used to spread a particular message or ideology. Blackmore (2000, [4]), argues that memes are the basic building blocks of culture and that they function as units of imitation that are subject to the processes of natural selection, just like genes. Blackmore is of the view that memes are not just a trivial phenomenon of digital culture, but a fundamental aspect of human cognition and social organization. She sees memes as playing a crucial role in the evolution of human culture and intelligence, and as a way of understanding the workings of the brain.

The power of memes lies in their ability to spread quickly and widely through social media and other online networks. They can spread rapidly across the internet because they are easy to understand and share, and they often tap into current events or cultural trends. Memes are created and spread through a variety of channels, including social media, websites, and instant messaging platforms. They can be shared through reposting, reusing, or modifying an existing meme, or by creating a new one from scratch. The popularity of memes is driven by their ability to generate an emotional response in the viewer, such as laughter, awe, or shock, and to create a sense of community. Limor Shifman (2014, [5]), a leading scholar on internet memes, from her book "Memes in Digital Culture" discusses the significance of memes as a cultural form that transcends their humorous or entertaining value. The book also emphasizes the broader cultural meanings and social functions that memes serve, emphasizing their role in expressing individual and collective identities, connecting people, and reflecting the characteristics of contemporary digital culture. It also underscores the participatory and networked nature of memes, emphasizing the democratic and decentralized nature of meme culture among those who share and understand the meme. Ross and Rivers (2017, [6]) highlight the idea that memes are cultural units that can be transmitted and transformed in ways that resemble the spread of infectious diseases, but without the negative consequences for the individuals involved. They also underscore the importance of understanding the psychological and social processes that underlie the creation, dissemination, and evolution of memes in today's digital age. While memes are often associated with humour and satire, they also play a significant role in shaping our perceptions of the world and influencing our attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. For example, memes have been used to spread political messages, to promote social and cultural causes, and to influence public opinion. They can also be used to generate viral marketing campaigns, spread awareness about important issues, or simply provide a source of entertainment.

II. DECONSTRUCTING INTERNET MEMES

Memes are a powerful and flexible form of cultural expression that have become an integral part of our online lives. They continue to evolve and change as new technologies emerge, and as new communities form and interact online.

An internet meme typically consists of several elements:

Visual component: This could be a picture, a comic, a GIF, or any other form of visual media that serves as the basis for the meme.

Catchphrase or caption: This is a short, humorous text or phrase that is placed over the visual component and serves to convey the joke.

Context: The meme often refers to a particular cultural reference, event, or social phenomenon, providing context for the humour.

Format: Some memes follow a specific format, such as using a particular font, size, and style for the caption.

Virality: The success of a meme often depends on how easily it can be shared and spread online, leading to its popularity and eventual saturation.

The virality of an internet meme refers to its ability to spread rapidly and widely through online communities and networks. This can happen in a number of ways, such as through social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and Instagram. The virality of a meme depends on several factors, including its humour, relevance to current events or popular culture, and its visual appeal. Memes can also go viral through influencer marketing, where popular social media influencers or celebrities share the meme to their followers, exposing it to a wider audience. Additionally, the use of hashtags and trending topics on social media platforms can also contribute to the virality of a meme.

The key psychological factors that contribute to the creation and spread of internet memes include:

Humour: Humour is a universal language that appeals to people across cultures and demographics. Internet memes often use humour to make light of social, political, or cultural issues, creating a shared sense of humour and connection between people.

Social identity: Internet memes can help to define and reinforce social identities and communities, as people use them to signal their belonging to a particular group or subculture.

Emotional appeal: Internet memes can elicit strong emotional reactions, such as laughter, shock, or anger, making them more likely to be shared and spread online.

Conformity: People often share and spread internet memes to conform to social norms and to fit in with their peers.

Information processing: The format and structure of internet memes make them easy to understand and process, making them a quick and efficient way to share information and ideas.

III. RISE OF MEME CULTURE IN INDIA

Memes have become a popular form of online expression and communication in India, and have had a significant impact on the country's culture, politics, and society. Here are some ways in which memes have become a prominent part of the Indian internet culture:

Political Satire: Memes have become a popular form of political satire in India, with many people using them to

criticize and mock the country's politicians and government policies. These memes often address a wide range of political issues, including corruption, economic policies, and social justice.

Cultural Reflection: Memes also serve as a reflection of Indian culture and society, and often draw upon popular cultural references, such as Bollywood movies, regional folklore, and historical events.

Viral Phenomenon: Memes have become a viral phenomenon in India, with many popular memes being shared widely across social media platforms and messaging apps. This has contributed to the spread of memes across the country, and has helped to shape the public discourse on a wide range of issues.

Language Diversity: India is home to a wide range of languages and regional cultures, and memes have become an important way for people to connect with each other across these linguistic and cultural boundaries. Many popular memes are created in local languages, and are widely shared across the country, helping to foster a sense of national unity and cultural exchange.

In India's vibrant and active internet culture, there is an array of popular memes in circulation. Some of the most well-known memes include:

Troll Memes: These memes use humour to poke fun at people or events, and often feature well-known politicians, celebrities, and other public figures.

Memes from Bollywood: Bollywood, India's Hindi film industry, provides ample material for memes, with popular actors and movie scenes frequently appearing in them.

Rickshaw Uncle Memes: This meme format features a photo of a man driving a rickshaw, with a caption that humorously captures the difficulties and frustrations of daily life in India.

Desi Memes: Desi is a term that refers to Indian culture, and these memes often feature images or references that are specific to India.

Political Memes: Indian politics is a popular source of humour for memes, with politicians and political events frequently appearing in them. This list is constantly evolving, as new memes emerge and old ones fade away. India's pulsating internet culture and dynamic meme scene make it an exciting and ever-changing space for creative expression and social commentary. Memes have become an integral part of the internet culture, and have had a significant impact on the country's social, cultural, and political landscape. Whether they are used for political satire, cultural reflection, or simply as a form of online entertainment, memes have become an important part of the Indian online experience, and are likely to continue to play a major role in shaping the country's internet culture in the years to come.

IV. INTERNET MEMES AND THEIR IMPACT ON AUDIENCE

Burnham et al. (2020,[7]) emphasizes the playful and subversive nature of memes, highlighting their ability to engage with complex social and political issues in a way that transcends language and cultural barriers. She also emphasizes the affective and collective dimensions of meme culture, underscoring the ways in which memes create new forms of social relationships that challenge conventional understandings of the self and the social.

The analysis of internet memes can provide valuable insights into the cultural, social, and psychological aspects of our online lives such as:

Emotional Response: This involves examining the emotional response that memes generate in their audience, and how this response contributes to their popularity and spread. This can provide insight into the role that humour, satire, and other emotional responses play in shaping our perceptions of the world and influencing our attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours.

Cultural Significance: This involves examining the cultural and social context in which memes are created and spread, and how they reflect and shape our cultural values and norms. This can provide insight into the role that memes play in shaping our collective understanding of the world, and in shaping the cultural and political discourse.

Psychological Impact: This involves examining the psychological impact of memes on their audience, including the effects on self-esteem, well-being, and other aspects of mental health. This can provide insight into the ways in which memes can shape our perceptions of ourselves and others, and into the mechanisms behind how they can influence our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.

From a psychological perspective, memes are driven by self-expression, social identity and entertaining motives. (Leiser,2022,[8])

Overall, the study of internet memes can provide a rich and complex picture of the role that these cultural artifacts play in our online lives, and of the ways in which they influence our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. Xie (2022,[9]) states that memes are like a lens that provides an insight into the deep states of human nature while Phillips and Milner (2017,[10]) state the need to understand the complex social and cultural dynamics that shape the production and circulation of memes online.

The psychology behind internet memes is complex and multi-faceted, drawing on various aspects of human behaviour and cognitive processes. They are a complex interplay of emotions, cognition, and social behaviour, making them a powerful tool for communication and cultural expression.

V. MEDIA PSYCHOLOGY THEORIES AND MIMETICS:

Memetics is a theoretical framework that seeks to understand the spread of cultural information and ideas, such as memes, as a form of evolutionary process. According to memetics, memes are units of cultural information that can be transmitted from person to person, and they evolve and change over time based on the success of their replication. The theory of memetics is based on the idea that memes, like genes, can be thought of as replicating entities that can spread from one individual to another. Just as genes compete for survival in the natural world, memes compete for survival in the cultural world, and the most successful memes are the ones that are most effectively replicated and spread.

Memetics seeks to explain how cultural information and ideas evolve and change over time, and how they can have a significant impact on individuals and societies. The theory suggests that memes can influence individuals' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours, and that they can play a role in shaping cultural norms and values.

An important theory in Media psychology is the Social Cognitive Theory. It is a theoretical framework in media psychology that posits that individuals process information from media through a combination of cognitive and affective processes. This theory suggests that our beliefs and attitudes are shaped by how we attend to, perceive, and evaluate information from media sources. According to social cognitive theory, individuals engage in selective attention, meaning that they focus on certain aspects of media while ignoring others. They also engage in selective perception, interpreting information from media in a way that is consistent with their existing beliefs and attitudes. Finally, they engage in selective evaluation, judging the accuracy and credibility of information based on their personal experiences and biases. It also suggests that media can have a significant impact on individuals' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours by shaping their perceptions of reality and influencing their sense of self and others. For example, media exposure can influence an individual's self-esteem, body image, and sense of social comparison. Additionally, media can also serve as a source of socialization, teaching individuals about social norms, values, and expectations.

Overall, social cognitive theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex relationship between media and human behaviour, highlighting the role of cognitive and affective processes in shaping our attitudes and beliefs about media.

Seen through the lens of social cognitive theory, memes often involve selective attention and selective perception, as individuals create and share memes that align with their personal beliefs, values, and sense of humour. Memes can also serve as a form of social comparison, as individuals use memes to express their opinions and identity, and to connect with others who share similar beliefs.

In terms of impact, memes can shape individuals' perceptions of reality by reinforcing or challenging their existing beliefs and attitudes. For example, political memes can influence individuals' views on political issues, while humorous memes can shape their sense of humour. Memes can also serve as a source of socialization, teaching individuals about cultural norms and values, and providing a means for them to express their opinions and identity. Social Cognitive Theory provides a useful framework for understanding the role of memes in shaping individuals' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours, highlighting the interplay between cognitive and affective processes in the creation, dissemination, and influence of memes.

Uses and Gratification Theory is another important theory that explains how people actively seek out and use media to satisfy their specific needs and desires. The theory suggests that individuals are not just passive receivers of media messages, but instead actively select and interpret media content based on their motivations, goals, and individual characteristics.

According to the theory, individuals have different needs that they seek to fulfill through media consumption, such as the need for information, entertainment, social interaction, or personal identity.

Rising Popularity of Internet Memes in India: A Media Psychology Perspective

People select media channels and content that best satisfy these needs and derive various gratifications from their use of media. The theory also suggests that media use is a dynamic process that changes over time as individuals' needs, motivations, and circumstances change.

The Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) identifies four key factors that influence why people use media:

Gratification sought: People choose media that satisfies their needs and desires, such as information seeking, entertainment, social interaction, or personal identity.

Gratifications obtained: People evaluate whether the media they consume meets their needs and desires, and adjust their consumption accordingly. **Individual differences:** People differ in their needs, goals, and values, and as a result, choose media that aligns with their individual preferences. **Social and cultural factors:** People's media use is influenced by their social environment, such as family, friends, and social institutions, and by the culture they live in. It can also be applied to understanding why people create and share internet memes. Memes are a type of media that have become increasingly popular in the digital age, and UGT can help explain why people engage with them. First, the gratification sought in creating and sharing memes could be for entertainment, social interaction, and self-expression. Memes often contain humour or satire, which can provide entertainment for the creator and viewer. They can also be used as a way of social interaction, as people share memes that reflect their own sense of humour or that express opinions or feelings they share with others. Additionally, creating and sharing memes can be a form of self-expression, as people use them to communicate ideas or feelings in a creative way. Second, the gratifications obtained from creating and sharing memes could be the social validation or feedback from others. Memes often become viral, with many people sharing and interacting with them. This can lead to a sense of satisfaction and validation for the creator, who may feel that their content has been appreciated and enjoyed by a wider audience. Third, individual differences can also impact the creation and sharing of memes. People may have different senses of humour, interests, and values, which can influence what type of memes they create or engage with. Finally, social and cultural factors can also impact the creation and sharing of memes. Memes are often shared within social networks, such as friends or online communities, and can reflect the cultural values and norms of those groups. Memes can also reflect larger cultural trends or events, as people create and share memes related to popular culture or current events. Uses and Gratification Theory can provide a fresh perspective for understanding why people engage with internet memes, and can help media researchers interpret the audiences' motivations and preferences.

VI. CONCLUSION

Internet memes are a ubiquitous aspect of internet culture that have evolved and changed over time. They serve as a form of self-expression, communication, and humour, and can reflect cultural trends and social issues. Memes have been used to spread information, ideas, and sentiments, and they can have a significant impact on public opinion and discourse. While some memes are harmless and entertaining, others can spread

misinformation, reinforce stereotypes and perpetuate harmful attitudes. It is important to appreciate their significance and approach them with thoughtfulness and awareness. As technology continues to evolve and more people have access to the internet, it is likely that the role and significance of memes will continue to evolve as well.

In India, memes are increasingly being used as a form of social commentary, reflecting the country's unique cultural, social, and political issues. Through humour and satire, memes can highlight social problems and challenge dominant narratives and beliefs. However, as with any form of social commentary, memes in India can also perpetuate harmful attitudes and reinforce stereotypes. Some memes rely on offensive or derogatory humour, which can be hurtful and perpetuate negative attitudes towards certain groups. It is important to be aware of the potential impact of memes and to use them responsibly, with an understanding of the context and potential consequences. Analysing memes through media psychology can provide insights into the ways in which individuals and society as a whole create and interpret cultural products, and can help us better understand the impact of memes on our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.

The rapid spread of memes through social media can lead to the spread of misinformation and the creation of echo chambers, where people are only exposed to information and opinions that reinforce their pre-existing beliefs. This can contribute to polarization and divisiveness in society. Media psychology can also shed light on the role of emotional responses in social media echo chambers. Emotional reactions to media content can be powerful motivators for sharing and engagement, and can reinforce individuals' pre-existing beliefs and attitudes. For example, a provocative or humorous meme that aligns with an individual's political views may generate strong emotional reactions and lead to increased sharing and engagement within their own echo chamber. Overall, media psychology can offer valuable insights into the psychological processes that underlie the formation of social media echo chambers. By understanding these processes, we can develop strategies to promote more open and inclusive communication on social media platforms, and to reduce the negative effects of echo chambers on individuals and society.

DECLARATION

Funding/Financial Grants/Financial Support	No. I did not receive.
Conflicts of Interest/Competing Interests	No conflicts of interest to the best of our knowledge.
Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate	No, the article does not require ethical approval and consent to participate with evidence.
Availability of Data Material	Not relevant.
Author Contribution	I am the sole author of this article.

REFERENCES

1. <https://www.macmillandictionary.com/buzzword/entries/meme.html>
2. Dawkins, R. (1976). *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford University Press.
3. Denisova, A. (2019). *Internet Memes and Society: Social, Cultural, and Political Contexts* (1st ed.). Routledge [CrossRef]
4. Blackmore, S. J. (2000). *The meme machine*. Oxford University Press.
5. Shifman, L. (2014). *Memes in digital Culture*. The MIT Press. [CrossRef]
6. Ross, A. S., & Rivers, D. J. (2017). Digital cultures of political participation: Internet memes and the discursive delegitimization of the 2016 U.S Presidential candidates. *Discourse, Context & Media*, 16, 1–11. [CrossRef]
7. Burnham, S. L. F., Arbeit, M. R., & Hilliard, L. J. (2022). The Subtle Spread of Hateful Memes: Examining Engagement Intentions Among Parents of Adolescents. *Social Media + Society*, 8(2). [CrossRef]
8. Leiser, A. (2022). Psychological perspectives on participatory culture: Core motives for the use of political internet memes. *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, 10(1), 236–252. [CrossRef]
9. Xie, C. (2022). *The pragmatics of internet memes*. John Benjamins Publishing Company. [CrossRef]
10. Phillips, W., & Milner, R. M. (2017). *The ambivalent Internet: mischief, oddity, and antagonism online*. Cambridge, Uk Polity Press.

AUTHOR'S PROFILE



Dr. Shiv Shankar Das is working as Assistant Professor (Journalism and Mass Communication) at Birla Global University, Odisha. He has qualified in the UGC-NET (Mass Communication and Journalism) examination and has a PhD in Journalism and Mass Communication from Utkal University, Odisha. Having more than ten years of teaching and training experience, he has mentored

students for job placements in leading organizations of India. He has been invited as a resource person by leading institutions like IIMC, NIFT, BFTIO, PRCI and KIIT. His research interests lie in the area of Media Effects, Public Relations and Documentary Films. Email id: shivsdas@gmail.com

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of the Lattice Science Publication (LSP)/ journal and/ or the editor(s). The Lattice Science Publication (LSP)/ journal and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.