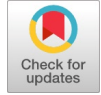


Rising Popularity of Internet Memes in India: A Media Psychology Perspective

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 an integral part of social media culture, and their 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 investigating how memes can influence social attitudes, as well as the psychological mechanisms underlying their popularity and dissemination. Media psychology and memes are both critical areas of study that shed light on how 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 the Uses and Gratifications Theory, to decode the manifestation of memes in our social system and the 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 vehicles 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.

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Some memes are created to entertain or make 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 shared through various 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 highlights the participatory and networked nature of memes, underscoring the democratic and decentralised aspects 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 disseminate political messages, promote social and cultural causes, and shape public opinion. They can also be used to generate viral marketing campaigns, spread awareness about important issues, or 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 occur in various 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 broader 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, having 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

criticise 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 numerous popular memes being widely shared across social media platforms and messaging apps. This has contributed to the widespread dissemination of memes nationwide and has helped shape public discourse on a diverse range of issues. **Language Diversity:** India is home to a wide range of languages and regional cultures, and memes have become an essential way for people to connect 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, often featuring well-known politicians, celebrities, and other public figures. **Memes from Bollywood:** Bollywood, India's Hindi film industry, offers an abundance of material for memes, with popular actors and movie scenes frequently featured 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:** The term "Desi" 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 used for political satire, artistic reflection, or simply as a form of online entertainment, memes have become an integral part of the Indian online experience. They are likely to continue playing a significant 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 how 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 disseminated, as well as 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 influencing 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 how memes shape our perceptions of ourselves and others, as well as the mechanisms behind how they 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 artefacts play in our online lives, as well as how 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 essential 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 specific aspects of media while ignoring others. They also engage in selective perception, interpreting information from the 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 affect an individual's self-esteem, body image, and understanding 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 valuable 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 critical 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 merely passive recipients 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 fulfil through media consumption, such as the need for information,

entertainment, social interaction, or personal identity.

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 satisfy 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 personal preferences. **Social and cultural factors:** People's media use is influenced by their social environment, including family, friends, and social institutions, as well as the culture in which they live. 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 can be attributed to 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 means of social interaction, as people share memes that reflect their sense of humour or express opinions and feelings they share with others. Additionally, creating and sharing memes can be a form of self-expression, as people use them to convey ideas or feelings creatively and engagingly. Second, the gratifications obtained from creating and sharing memes may include 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 gain access to the internet, the role and importance of memes are likely to continue growing.

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 essential to be aware of the potential impact of memes and to use them responsibly, with an understanding of the context and possible consequences. Analysing memes through media psychology can provide insights into how individuals and society as a whole create and interpret cultural products. It 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 societal polarisation and divisiveness. 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 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 adverse effects of echo chambers on individuals and society.

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