

Research Article

Popular Internet Meme Templates through the Semiotic-Symbolic Interactionist Lens: A Look into Meme Culture

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Abstract: This study analysed popular internet meme templates as a form of cultural expression by using the theories of semiotics and symbolic interactionism. It revealed the popularity of these templates, how it allowed a select group to communicate particular emotions in a distinct culture than other forms of language representations permit and if a specific group can understand the semiotic and symbolic-interactionist meaning of memes by making their own templates. An explanatory sequential mixed method was used which included thirty Graduate School students from a selected private university. Five templates were presented and respondents were asked to answer questions intended to reveal their culture and perceived understanding of the context and purpose of memes. The study showed that respondents were able to identify the semiotic meaning of the memes presented, and can identify the signifier-signified used in each template. The difficulty lies on the understanding of the symbolic-interactionist meaning where respondents tend to take the “surface” rather than the “subliminal” meaning. This was affected by some factors: a) familiarity and interest with memes. b) personal understanding of meme semiotics. c) syntax used in the creation of memes. The study recommends that people who intend to use memes for instruction such as educators should be exposed in the appropriateness of memes relative to their use in teaching. This can be done by coaching teachers on both semiotic and symbolic-interactionist contents of a meme template they wish to use in their instruction.

Keywords: Meme, Semiotics, Symbolic Interactionism, Meme Culture.

Introduction

An Internet meme or simply coined as meme is any concept, catchphrase, or piece of media that spreads as mimicry or humoristic in nature via the Internet. An Internet meme usually takes the form of an image or video, a word or phrase, sometimes including intentional misspellings or corrupted grammar coupled by a random image which brings about an intended meaning for the reader or viewer. Memes spread from person to person via social networks, blogs, direct email, or news sources, which relate to various existing Internet cultures or subcultures, often created or spread on various websites (Cassingham, 2017).

An Internet meme could be anything from an image to an email or video file; however, the most common meme is an image of a person or animal with funny or witty captions. The proliferation of social media has led to Internet memes spreading rapidly and reaching a wide variety of internet and social media users. It transcends cultures and professions and have recently proliferated the education spectrum, as teacher are slowly adapting memes as forms of motivation and instructional materials. Many Internet memes use humor and appeal largely to the adolescent and post-adolescent demographic: this demographic is much more likely to discover Internet memes, understand the

humor behind them and be willing to forward it on to friends (Beal, 2019). With the premise that memes are treated as symbols and not taken literally, we delve into the field of semiotics.

Semiotics is the study of signs and sign-using behaviour. It had been outlined by one in all its founders, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand Saussure, because the study of “the lifetime of signs among society.” de Saussure treated language as a sign-system, and his add linguistics has provided the ideas and ways that semioticians apply to sign-systems apart from language. One such basic semiotical construct is Saussure’s distinction between the 2 indivisible parts of a sign: the *signifier*, that in language could be a set of speech sounds or marks on a page, and the *signified*, that is that the construct or meaning behind the signifier. This study incorporates the rudiments of philosophical doctrine and the way the human person interprets symbols as social expectations dictate such interpretations, a thought amplified by the idea of Symbolic Interactionism. This study incorporates the rudiments of Semiotics and how the human person interprets symbols as societal expectations dictate such interpretations, a concept amplified by the theory of Symbolic Interactionism.

Symbolic Interactionism, on the other hand, states that societal order is kept through micro-level interactions between symbols and receivers of symbols. A traffic light for example is a symbol that controls a traffic intersection. A meme is a symbol that in a way that it controls the internet viewers and how they see these internet symbols. But the question remains, how do we get these meanings become attached to these symbols? A symbol’s meaning can be dictated by society or by a higher power influencing society. Either way, the process is still the same. This is the essence of Symbolic interactionism. It controls society based on how we react to the symbol.

Memes are a common way for individuals to communicate online. Internet users often use memes to reply to each other on social networking sites or other online forums. This study argues that memes may contain varied communication purposes because certain memes are essentially speech acts and are also understood as being speech acts by internet users. When creating a meme, choices are made concerning the specific semiotic resources to be used and the internet community then interprets these resources to facilitate communication between the meme creator and the internet community. Memes can be recreated for different purposes and therefore it is possible to group memes under already existing speech acts and speculate about the ways in which these might correspond to speech acts in the future. To accomplish this, the study chose meme templates which have the most specific semiotic purpose and signified emotion.

As Bauckhage (2011) explained, Internet memes are phenomena that rapidly gain popularity or notoriety on the Internet. Often, modifications or spoofs add to the profile of the original idea thus turning it into a phenomenon that transcends social and cultural boundaries. It is commonly assumed that Internet memes spread virally but scientific evidence as to this assumption is scarce. In his study, he addressed this issue and investigated the epidemic dynamics of 150 famous Internet memes. His analysis is based on time series data that were collected from different search engine platforms.

In the same light, Cannizzaro (2016) argues for a clearer framework of internet-based “memes”. The science of memes, dubbed ‘memetics’, presumes that memes remain “copying units” following the popularisation of the concept in Richard Dawkins’ celebrated work, *The Selfish Gene* (1976). Internet memes can and should be conceived, then, as habit-inducing sign systems incorporating processes involving asymmetrical variation. So, drawing on biosemiotics, Tartu-Moscow semiotics, and Peircean semiotic principles, and through a close reading of the celebrated 2011 Internet meme Rebecca Black’s Friday, her article proposed a working outline for the definition of internet memes and its applicability for the semiotic analysis of texts in new media communication.

In an analysis Dawkins’ work on memes, Powell (2006) claimed that evolution is driven not by species, nor by individual organisms, but rather by a more basic unit, the replicator, where a replicator is “anything in the universe of which copies are made”. The most obvious of Dawkins’s

evolutionary replicators is the gene, the basic unit of biological evolution. But Dawkins suggested that culture, just like biology, is a matter of the competition between particular replicators. The label Dawkins proposed for the cultural equivalent of the gene is the 'meme.'

De Seta (2015) offers a novel definition of Internet memes: digital content units with common characteristics, created with awareness of each other, and circulated, imitated, and transformed via the Internet by many users. She differentiates memes from virals; analyzes what makes memes and virals successful; describes popular meme genres; discusses memes as new modes of political participation in democratic and nondemocratic regimes; and examines memes as agents of globalization. Memes encapsulates some of the most fundamental aspects of the Internet in general and of the participatory Web 2.0 culture in particular. Internet memes may be entertaining, but this article makes a compelling argument for taking them seriously. Internet memes as a representation of culture is derived from and returns to the human mind—the subject being at the center of meme creation and dissemination rather than decentralized from it. It is in this light that the researchers will try to understand how a group understands internet memes from a contextualized perspective, revealing their emotional, linguistic and technological culture, analysed through the semiotic and symbolic Interactionist lens.

This study will analyze the emergence of popular internet meme templates as a new form of cultural expression by using the theories of semiotics and symbolic interactionism. It will be based on their pictorial format, established purpose and deriving meaning from its referentiality. The results of the respondents' response will hypothetically reveal how popular internet meme templates are and how memes allowed them to communicate particular emotions and a distinct culture than other forms of language or graphical representations permit. This study will also reveal if a specific group can understand the semiotic and symbolic interactionist meaning of memes and how they interpret meme symbols by making their own templates. Specifically, this study answered the following questions: (1) What are the most popular internet meme templates and their generally accepted semiotic and symbolic interactionist content and purpose? (2) What is the contextualized understanding of these popular internet meme templates among selected USI graduate school students vis-à-vis their semiotic and symbolic interactionist content and purpose? (3) What common emotions, visual representations, linguistic meaning and general interpretations were revealed by the respondents through the analysis of these popular internet meme templates? and (4) What culture is revealed by the interaction of the respondents with these popular internet meme templates in relation to their semiotic and symbolic interactionist content and purpose?

Methodology

An explanatory sequential mixed method using quantitative and qualitative design was employed in this study to obtain answers to the research problems. Part of the analysis of the data is intended to reveal the culture of the respondents and their perceived understanding towards the context and purpose of memes. The collection and analysis of qualitative data was done through the administration of a survey questionnaire and direct observation. The study included thirty (30) students from the Graduate School in a selected private university. Before the study was conducted, the prospective respondents were given a copy of the Informed Consent Form. They were given time to read and sign the consent form. Only those that have signed the informed consent became participants of the study. The identity of the selected private university, identities of the respondents and data gathered for the entire experimental period were held confidential. An open-ended survey questionnaire was given to the respondents. This allowed the respondent to answer in open text format such that they can answer based on their complete knowledge, feeling, and understanding. This means that responses to these set of questions are not limited to a set of options.

This study followed the following procedures: The researchers sought the approval of the Dean of the Graduate School to conduct the study and secure a permit to administer surveys and conduct observations. Then, the researcher sought the approval of the subject professor of the selected class

to conduct the study. Next, the researcher identified the respondents who will be part of the study and discussed with them the background of the study and provide each a copy of the Participant Information and Informed Consent Form. Then the respondents, after giving their consent, were given the survey questionnaire and asked to fill the needed introductory information and were directed to the instructions. Next, the popular internet meme templates were flashed one by one and the respondents were given time to answer the guide questions. After the data collection, results were collected and themes that surfaced were identified and together with the observation results during the intervention, providing a general view of the contextualized understanding of the said internet meme templates.

Results and Discussion

Demographically speaking, the respondents for this study are as follows: seven (7) are male respondents (23.33%) while twenty-three (23) were female respondents (76.67%). Female respondents account for the majority of the sample. Seventeen (17) respondents are young adults who are in their 20's, while the rest are in their 30's (9 respondents) and 40's (4 respondents). Young adults account for the majority of the sample.

The meme templates used for this study were lifted from Pocket-lint Limited, a US and UK-based online journal which focuses on computer-technology information and entertainment articles. Part of their writers are professional *memetics* analysts who review and analyse the most popular internet memes every year (popularity would mean frequency of usage, proliferation and repetition). Five out of the ten most popular memes of 2018 which this online journal reviewed were used for the study which are:

Success Kid: The first meme template used for this study is the *Success Kid*. The image is a toddler who is fist pumping. The viewer may recognize the combination of both childish and adult attributes of the image, as young children don't usually do fist pumps. These contradictions found in the image projects a new visual language by integrating two different and somewhat opposing personalities. This template uses the fist pump as a sign of extreme excitement, yet it can also express frustration, which leaves the viewer to question the real emotions conveyed by the Success Kid's facial expression.

In the study conducted, nineteen of the thirty respondents said that they have seen this meme template before, and they are familiar with its content. These respondents also said that the meme was introduced to them through social media platforms like Facebook and 9gag. As to the semiotic purpose of the meme, most of the respondents can decipher the signifier of the template as majority of them created captions that convey the *signified* of the meme, the overall emotion being presented by the template. The responses revolved around emotions of courage, success, perseverance and reaching someone's goal. Only two respondents did not have any signifier made for the template and one respondent gave a negative signified for the template. As to the symbolic-interactionist purpose of the template, the respondents have a low understanding of the symbolic interactionist meaning of the template, in a way that they did not decipher that the meme does not only convey emotions of success, but also emotions of relief caused by evading trouble or concealing mistakes or blunders. This other emotion was not revealed by the respondents, which was affected by either their unfamiliarity with the meme template or the surface understanding of the signifier-signified meaning of the meme.

Philosoraptor: The second meme template used for this study is the Philosoraptor. While many popular memes have a basic prototype that simply require the creator to substitute one or two words into a formula each time a new image is created, the Philosoraptor puts a twist on the concept of the template. Instead of replacing a noun or a verb, the dinosaur meme is repetitive in the fact that each individual picture poses a philosophical yet humorous question. The top line nearly always gives a statement or fact that is generally known to be true and the text below the image concludes by giving

the actual joke or play on words that add sparkle to the meme. This meme template is heavy on the signified because of the satirical and ironic remarks the meme conveys. It also has a unique symbolic-interactionist purpose because the dinosaur does not relate to any themes conveyed by the signified.

In the study conducted, only eight respondents are familiar with the meme, and twenty-two have only seen the meme template during the actual conduct of the study. This also means that there was little understanding of its semiotic meaning, as only one respondent succeeded in providing the correct signifier for the meme. Majority of the respondents have given similar signified interpretations which can be attributed to the image used in the meme, as the dinosaur is projected to be in a thinking stance. Some of the responses included questions on existence, self-worth, doubt (Who am I?, Why am I alive?, Am I not enough?). The respondents arrived at an interpretation that indeed the image is thinking, however, they failed to decipher the symbolic interactionist purpose of the template, as it involves satirical remarks for a known truth. In this meme, the respondents depended on the signifier rather than the signified to arrive at a symbolic interactionist meaning for the template, which caused an incorrect interpretation of the template.

Scumbag Steve: The third meme template for this study is the Scumbag Steve. The person in the photo is Blake Boston whose photo was taken by his mother and was never meant to go viral. The subject of this meme template is often related to drugs, alcohol, sex, and partying, and the meme series often depicts Steve as being crude and inconsiderate in a laughable fashion. The humor of the meme is what has allowed it to become popular over the years. In terms of who spreads the meme, students are most likely to find the meme series humorous, and thus proliferate it, because they are a part of the in-crowd that the meme series is built around. Students may relate to the subject of the meme and likely know individuals who act like Scumbag Steve.

In the study conducted, only four respondents have seen the meme template before, but although the respondents failed to give the correct signifier and signified for the meme, they gave an almost similar interpretation of the symbolic interactionist meaning of the template. The respondents described the man in the template as happy-go-lucky, independent, adventurous, young millennial. A general feeling of neutrality can also be gleaned from the responses as the respondents were indifferent with their emotions toward the template and cannot give a definite emotion which can be attributed to the facial expression of the man in the picture. When asked to provide a signifier, most of the responses revolved around being relaxed or simply doing nothing at all, which is far from the popularly-accepted symbolic-interactionist meaning which is unremorseful trouble making or repeated law breaking activities.

Distracted Boyfriend: The fourth meme used for this study is the Distracted Boyfriend. This meme is composed of a 2015 photo by the Spanish photographer Antonio Guillem, which depicts a boyfriend a girlfriend walking together, with the boyfriend getting distracted by another girl walking past, along with text captions. Different variations of the meme are created by adding different text captions to the image to make different meanings. The memes generated from this template are funny, and therefore popular, because they are relatable. They can mock politics, procrastination, distraction, culture, moving on to new crazes, as well as being adapted to be applicable to fandoms, for example by using the names of fictional characters as the captions. This is called re-contextualisation, as the meme is adapted and reoriented towards a different community. This template is popular to the respondents of the study, as twenty-three of them have seen the meme before. The respondents were also correct in saying that jealousy and distrust is the main theme of the meme, as reflected in the signifiers they created for the template (Wit weew! Sexy! Wow! What a catch!). However, they failed to substitute the theme with satirical remarks on politics, culture, social trends and focused more on the dominant signified theme of the said template. This can be affected by their prior interpretation that the template does resemble infidelity and no other concepts can be attached to it.

Bad Luck Brian: The last meme used for this study is the Bad Luck Brian meme which features a kid with braces posing for what seems to be a school picture wearing an awkwardly uncomfortable smile. Needless to say, the picture came out awful, and once it hit the Internet, captions of humorous misfortunes and occurrences were added to the original template. The top line usually describes a fortunate situation, followed by the bottom line which ironically turns the situation into a misfortune. The irony comes from a bottom line that is unexpected or absurd and completely irrelevant that it is also funny. The most prevalent memetics strategy in the Bad Luck Brian meme series is one of an unexpected coupling pattern, in which the text on the image of a child taking a school picture does not reflect what one would expect a kid of that age to be doing. It also makes a humorous suggestion as to why his school picture might look how it does.

In the study conducted, only seven respondents were familiar with this template, and for most of the respondents, it was their first time to see such a template. The respondents sensed that this meme template revolves around weirdness or nerdiness, as the child in the photo projects a peculiar smile and odd clothing. Though the signifier and the signified of this meme is interrelated, the humor of the meme comes with the intent to reverse a positive action with a misfortunate event, masked by the awkward smile of the boy in this template. This is reflected in the study of Bauckhage (2011) where modifications or spoofs add to the profile of the original idea thus turning it into a phenomenon that transcends social and cultural boundaries. The symbolic-interactionist meaning of the meme was not received by the respondents, as well as the signified meaning of the meme (“I feel happy because the smile of the man was very genuine even if its in a picture, you can easily say that he is genuinely happy”, “Happy because he is proud of himself”, “Happy because i think he doesn't have any problems.”). Although the photo is a genuine portrait of a happy child, this emotion is not its semiotic purpose. One respondent who is familiar with this template shared the irony of the template’s semiotics (“I felt sad because this photo was for a yearbook pictorial and people made fun of how he looks, it sad to make fun of other people”).

Conclusion

Memes have become a new mode of communication in this digital age, and its purpose of entertainment has transcended into transmission of information, platform for raising opinions on societal issues, giving satirical comments on almost all facets of society. Because of its popularity, memes have also been utilized by educators to capture the interests of their digital-native learners, often using memes in an attempt to bridge the digital gap for most teachers and to contextualize the meme usage in classroom instruction.

However, the study showed that the respondents were able to identify the semiotic meaning of the meme templates presented, as they can identify the signifier and signified used in each template. The difficulty lies in the understanding of the symbolic-interactionist meaning of each template. The respondents tend to take the “surface” or “literal” meaning of the meme rather than its “subliminal” or “symbolic” meaning. This was affected, according to the results of the study, by some factors: a. familiarity and interest with memes. Memes appeal to a younger range of audience, as its medium of dispersion is the internet. While the respondents of the study were young adults, their familiarity and interest with memes affected their appreciation of its content and purpose b. knowledge and personal understanding of meme semiotics. Because memes relies on semiotics and symbolic interactionist models to communicate information, the audience may have difficulty threshing out these language jargons, as exhibited by the study wherein most of the respondents only reached the surface meaning of each template c. syntax used in the creation of memes. While memes were initially created using the English language, there is a wide gap in its syntax when used in other languages because English syntax loses its humor when used in other languages, and memes are heavily dependent on the use of language to convey humor.

With these results, the researchers recommend that people who intend to use memes as a medium for communication and/or instruction, such as educators who may use memes as part of their lessons

should be exposed in the appropriateness of memes relative to their use in teaching. This can be done by coaching teachers on both semiotic and symbolic-interactionist contents of a meme template they wish to use in their instruction. Not all memes are appropriate in all circumstances, which is why there is a need to discover the purpose of each one. Also, having a background on English or even Filipino syntax related to humor can affect the effectiveness of memes as they are used as puns for a specific situation. These measures can help an individual use and appreciate memes further from their literal content and meaning.

Conflicts of interest: There is no conflict of interest of any kind.

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