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Memification of Serious Issues: Irony and Desensitization in Digital Culture

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Abstract:

Memos are typically jokes which gain traction through online transmission. Internet memes are digital content units sharing common characteristics of content, form and /or stance that are circulated, imitated, and transformed via the Internet by many users (Shifman). Memos as a mode of humor, satire, and entertainment have been widely discussed in academia. This paper will investigate how memes, through repetition and irony, trivialize serious issues. Thus, leading to desensitization and apathetic engagement. Moreover, it will also discuss how platform algorithms affect human psychology. The paper will also critically discuss how it is imperative for the audience to understand the ethics of meme consumption and thus engage with memes in an ethical manner. This paper adopts a multidisciplinary approach that combines critical cultural analysis, media psychology, and digital ethics to examine how memes misrepresent serious issues, specifically through processes of trivialization, emotional desensitization, and ethical disengagement in digital spaces. The scope of this paper chiefly deals with memes circulated on social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, X (earlier known as Twitter), with an emphasis on themes like relationships, mental health, and gender dynamics. However, it remains open to discussing other themes if relevant to the central argument. Therefore, this paper will contribute to the fields like Cultural Studies and Media by highlighting how digital culture is blurring the lines between what is serious and

what is not. Additionally, it aims to educate the audience on the importance of being ethically aware and the need to engage rationally with the meme culture.

Keywords: Apathetic Engagement, Digital Desensitization, Ethics of Humor, Irony, Memes.

Introduction

The term meme was coined by Richard Dawkins who is an English biologist, in his book, *The Selfish Gene*. The term meme is an all-encircling term that contains text-based images, audio recordings, GIFs, videos, or a combination of any of these formats. According to Dawkins, memes are units of culture that are transmitted from person to person through a process of copying or imitation. The two key features of memes, therefore, according to Dawkins, are their ability to spread and replicate. Memes are media objects created by people and shared through electronic communication, such as through websites (Reddit) or on social media platforms like Facebook, X (earlier known as Twitter), Instagram, and other instant messaging apps like WhatsApp to entertain people. Their subject of discussion may range from discussing contemporary issues like the myths of urban times, politics, gender stereotypes, etc. Memes do not follow any one single pattern. However, they are often made using the stock images of Bollywood. These images are further intertwined with politics and cricket, or any other real issues.

1. Memification and the Trivialization Serious Issues

Memes usually employ sarcasm or humour to comment on real-life issues, ideology, or to comment on any person. However, these days humour is attached to serious messages, which trivializes the seriousness of the message, thus deflating the seriousness of the issue and causing people to perceive it as a joke. In the words of Kirsch, when humour is attached to social messages, “a cognitive transformation occurs, rendering material that might otherwise be

considered grave as whimsical” (qtd. in Moyer-Gusé et al. 768). These social messages are, therefore, considered a form of entertainment, known as memification of serious issues. It means that when social issues are passed off as entertainment, it may lead to trivialization of these issues by those who consume such content. Humour is, therefore, applied in an area where humour should not have a place, but when this occurs, as Dominic Basulto says, it “trivializes the big ideas, and in the process, trivializes who we are as humans” (qtd. in Willems 6). It is indeed true that researchers in the past have found out that when humour is attached to such serious issues, people tend to take such social issues less seriously.

In March 2025, a gut-wrenching, gruesome murder of Saurabh Rajput (29) by his wife Muskan Rastogi (27) and her alleged lover Sahil Shukla in Meerut, UP, came to the forefront. Saurabh’s body was dismembered and was later stuffed in a blue plastic drum. Soon, this blue drum became a meme template (Thete). Many Instagram accounts soon started posting memes embedded in reels featuring a blue drum. In one of the memes, the husband is seen sweating



after seeing the blue drum, in yet another, the size of the blue containers is discussed. Memes embedded with texts like “men’s biggest fear” started gaining traction (Targothra). These memes reflect how real-life tragedy turned into a mere spectacle of entertainment. The tragedy soon turned into a comic play, thus stripping the crime of its emotional and moral weight.

Fig. 1 Meme of Daniel Kaluuya with the caption ‘Aaj Ghar mein wife ko ye wala drum laate dekh liya.’

Fig. 2 Meme of various plastic drums with the caption ‘Apna Apna Size Ka Dekh Lo.’

Fig. 3 Meme comparing a drum and a refrigerator as ‘Men’s Biggest Fear Now’ and ‘Women’s Biggest Fear Now.’



Memes describe various aspects of our life, often in a humorous way, including mental health. There are many pages dedicated to creating and sharing content on the mental issues, which generally use morbid language and dark humour. For example, the online forum Reddit hosts a subreddit called *memes and misery*, followed by over 1.7 lakh followers (Akram and Drabble). Memes often trivialize and normalize serious mental anguishes like depression, anxiety, and suicide, thereby plummeting them to mere punchlines. This performative expression trivializes the seriousness of emotional pain and presents mental issues in a casual manner. Just like any other memes, here too, irony, playfulness and humour play an integral part. In one of the memes, a person discovered that the only cure for anxiety was having everyone around them continuously assuring her that they were not angry with her (Primavera).

Fig. 4 Sarah Gailey's tweet about finding a “cure” for anxiety.

Here, it is evident that instead of seeking medical support, the person has found her haven in social validation, thereby using a coping mechanism which is detrimental to one's health. Moreover, it is also contributing to misinformation and is further stigmatizing anxiety and those affected with it, rather than reducing it. In yet another meme, a man is shown almost drowning in the river and lacks the energy to draw himself out of the river. The meme is captioned "feeling sad, being broke, getting fat, having no friends, me doing literally nothing to improve my life" (Primavera). It perpetuates stereotypes by representing the person as incompetent of taking control of his life, as lazy and as someone who is unskilled of doing anything significant in life. Moreover, it may also inadvertently activate those experiencing severe mental agony by overgeneralizing complex mental issues or depicting them in an amusing way. In alternative meme, a therapist enquires the person about any suicidal thoughts, the person refutes it, though deep down the person has wriggled with those feelings since middle school (Primavera). Memes like these, when circulated and read, may lead to self-destructive behaviour, and people who are suffering might resort to mechanisms that will only worsen their mental condition.

Memos not only trivializes gender in the form of sexualized humour, but they also trivialize people having intersectional identities, especially those marginalized by class and caste. For example, "tag a friend" memes often target fat, coloured, or transgender women, thereby reinforcing gendered beauty stereotypes and class and caste-based bias in the guise of relatability. (Mallya and Dennis). *Un-Dank Memes by Un-Woke Teens* an article in *The Wire* talks about how Upper- class youth/ Upper class youth often produce and circulate memes that mock reservation beneficiaries, including Scheduled Tribe/ Scheduled Caste. They are depicted as lazy or undeserving, which then intersect with sexist content for women beneficiaries. Memes like these dismiss layered marginalization as "just a joke." Moreover, it also further reinforces social hierarchies and stereotypes. An article in *The Print* examines how parody

meme pages utilize content woven around caste, class and rooted in sexism and delivered to the audience as comic relief. The memes analyzed in the article also normalize bigotry and encode caste and racism into ‘harmless jokes.’ Therefore, these intersectional experiences are trivialized and flattened into humour, thereby stripping away their dignity and complexity (Gurmat and Rampal).

Guy Debord, in *The Society of the Spectacle*, discusses how in modern times we no longer experience reality directly. However, we consume representations that are visual fragments which replace our lived experiences with symbols that are simplified and mediated. In meme culture, memes on blue containers, mental distress, and intersectional identities have become symbols which are understood out of context and reduced to sheer entertainment. These serious issues, which are the site of trauma and complexities, have now become just content which is liked, shared, and mocked at by the masses.

2. Platforms, Algorithms, and the Rise of Apathetic Engagement

Digital platforms are not neutral in nature. They deliberately condition our emotions and habits of perceiving through their interfaces, which are tactfully engineered. They incorporate features such as infinite scroll, push notifications, and algorithmic ranking, which forces us into a habit loop, which leads to compulsive engagement. These design strategies align with BJ. Fogg’s Behaviour Model suggests that required behaviour occurs when motivation, ability, and a trigger converge at the same time (Fogg). For example, push notifications are the triggers, the infinite scrolling is the ability, and emotionally loaded content increases our motivation; all three together thus produce repetitive user behaviour. This behavioural manipulation derives from “surveillance capitalism,” as Shoshana Zuboff explains in her paper *Big Other: Surveillance Capitalism and the Prospects of an Information Civilization*. According to her, digital platforms do not just observe user behaviour; moreover, they actively participate in it.

They capture not just clicks and searches, but also emotional states of social media users. This collected data, which are emotional responses, are then used to shape their future interactions with the platform, a process which Zuboff terms as “instrumentarian power,” where digital platforms shape behaviour of users without their consent and knowledge. “The goal is to automate us” (Zuboff).

Prahlad Singh, in his paper *Digital Dopamine: The Neuropsychology of Social Media Addiction Among Adolescents*, deliberates how social media platforms stimulate the mesolimbic pathway, one of the brain’s core reward systems, through a “variable reinforcement mechanism. This leads to the release of dopamine, the chemical which is connected to pleasure and motivation. With recurrent random rewards, such as a new like, or a hilarious meme, the brain becomes conditioned to assume a dopamine release.

Moreover, digital platforms use recommendation systems that continuously predict, reinforce, and narrow user behaviour patterns. An audit of X’s (earlier known as Twitter) “who to follow” system reveals that algorithmic curation results in the formation of echo chambers, and it further leads to ideological polarization among users. (Duskin et al.). In the same capacity, content curation strategies are employed on other social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, which minimizes dissent and pluralism. These echo chambers weaken our ability to think critically about content, and normalizes consuming the same kind of content repeatedly.

3. Repetition, Irony, and Digital Desensitization

This behavioural automation is closely linked to habituation. Habituation is a mental process in which recurrent contact to the same type of stimulus leads to lessened responses (Rankin et al.). Initially, digital media users may experience a heightened affective or cognitive arousal when they come across curated content; however, as this pattern becomes familiar, the impact lessens. For example, the perception of severity on memes about violence, death, and mental

health crises fades over time as the users of digital media encounter successive iterations. This is clearly demonstrated in a 2014 study on adolescents and violence. The study revealed a key finding that those with high exposure to violence in movies habituated rapidly, where there was an increase in their blood pressure initially, but then it declined with repeated scenes of violence (Mrug et. al).

The repeated exposure also leads to diminished empathy and reduced the urge to help people. Bushman and Anderson conducted pivotal studies demonstrating that participants who are exposed to violent games and movies respond less to the suffering of others. According to their study, college students who played violent video games took a longer time to help an injured person during a staged emergency. They were less likely even to notice the event and rated it as less severe. The results indicate emotional numbing, which is a reduced affective response to others' pain after exposure to repeated violence. The longitudinal study of Sylvie, Anjana and Michael found that adolescents exposed to high and multi-contextual violence at a young age showed lower internalizing symptoms such as anxiety and depression. This may appear as a positive sign, however, only superficially. According to the above study, it is a sign of emotional desensitization. This emotional numbing may serve as a short-term coping mechanism; however, in the long term, it may lead to anti-social behaviour, including the development of callous and unemotional attributes.

Finally, Irony intensifies this emotional numbing. Irony in meme culture is that it turns grave issues into an ironic or humorous format. According to Sanchez, the artistic process behind the creation of memes not only involves adoption of pictures detached from their original context, but it also involves recontextualizing thoughtful issues as source of entertainment, humour or satire. Memes, therefore, contribute to a cultural practice of minimizing the seriousness of real-life events by removing them from their authentic context and representing them as relatable or humorous. It also raises vital questions about societal desensitization and the normalization

of “dark” humour. Albert Bandura connects this “moral disengagement” to a psychological process in which individuals deactivate their self-regulatory moral standards selectively. According to her, specific mechanisms facilitate this engagement. These mechanisms include cognitively restructuring harmful content as morally justifiable, using euphemistic language, attribution of blame on those harmed, displacing, or diffusing responsibility, dehumanizing victims. These mechanisms work together to equip the individual to accept or ignore the problematic material.

4. Ethics, and awareness in Meme Culture

In participatory culture, the audience becomes not just consumers but a hybrid of consumer and producer. This hybridity empowers the audience to produce, remix, and distribute media. However, in digital spaces, “no established set of ethical guidelines shapes the actions of bloggers and podcasters...different online communities have their own norms” (Jenkins et al.). Responsibility for the content is diffused, therefore, blurring the lines between the author and interpretation. Therefore, there is no single authority that governs what is authentic or ethical. He further continues to argue that one important goal of media education should be to educate children to be reflective, to engage with the content critically, and make ethical choices when creating the content, and sharing it. They should also equip themselves with research skills so they can understand what is fact and fiction, fact, and opinion (Jenkins et al.).

Stuart Hall, in his essay *Encoding/Decoding*, argues that ideological meanings are encoded in media messages (including memes) that can be decoded by receivers in more than one way. The audience may accept the dominant meaning, negotiate it or outrightly oppose it. Therefore, it becomes imperative for meme creators to anticipate the wide variety of meanings a meme can generate and the risk of misinterpretation, especially when the content is stripped out of its original context. According to Baudrillard, when such signs, such as memes, are detached from

their authentic context in a hyperreal world, they exist as self-referential signs whose meanings are derived from circulation and repetition. This decontextualizing raises concerns about normalizing stereotypes, beliefs, opinions, or inadvertent harm they can cause when they exist without any stable context. Zizi Papacharissi, in his book *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*, discusses that repetition and circulation of digital content is the result of networked public formation that mobilizes and sustains itself through mobilizing emotions like outrage, pity, fear, amusement, etc., rather than using critical or deliberative reasoning. Memes and other forms of digital content, therefore, often circulate by mobilizing sentiments rather than structured meaning. Moreover, it accelerates dissemination of information, but it reduces the opportunities for critical engagement with the content.

Floridi in *Information Ethics, Its Nature and Scope* highlights that all informational entities have their intrinsic moral value and deserve respect. Therefore, everyone involved in the “infosphere,” whether as individuals, groups, or platforms, bears an ethical responsibility to prevent “entropy” in the digital environment and to foster its growth. This ethical perspective demands that we should not only pay attention to individual actions, but also to their collective effects in the “infosphere.” Additionally, Helen Nissenbaum argues that the ethics of meme culture are not just governed by the law, but also by context-specific informational norms. When private photos or video clips are repurposed into memes, they may violate a person’s privacy because such actions breach the ethical norms of authentic context, even though the media is publicly available. Therefore, creators must be aware of the contextual integrity framework before they reuse any image or video.

Yurou, Shichao, and Kamarin argue that there is, therefore, a need for an “inclusive database” that represents a diverse and broad range of cultures, traditions, symbols, and perspectives from both dominant and minority cultures. Moreover, incorporating “participatory design,” i.e., involving actual users from diverse cultures in the design process of digital platforms and their

features, will ensure that digital platforms are relevant for everyone. Additionally, include design features such as explanations, translations, or cultural background information, disclaimers signifying that the content may be culturally specific and not collectively applicable, and moderation policies that identify cultural differences. Together, these will reduce the chance of misinterpreting culture-specific content, and will serve global communities, thus it will lead to a creation of an inclusive digital environment.

The content, whether authentic or inaccurate, can be verified by adding secure provenance information such as authorship, edit date, and edit details to metadata in social media feeds. It can help users make an informed decision whether to circulate a meme or not, as well as about the credibility of the content. However, this alone is not sufficient and may further confuse users regarding the credibility of “provenance metadata” (Feng et. al). It further requires educational interventions that teach both interpretative and reflective creation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, memes trivialize grave issues by integrating the frames of humour, irony, and sarcasm. Social media platforms’ unique features emotionally manipulate the audience, thus, leading to societal desensitization. Therefore, the responsibility lies in the hands of meme creators to be aware of the ethics of meme creation, and on the audience who should reasonably assess memes before circulating.

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