

Humor in Digital Discourse: A Pragmatic Analysis of Memes on Social Media

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Abstrak

This research aimed to investigate the pragmatic functions of humor employed in memes shared across major social media platforms. Utilizing a qualitative approach grounded in pragmatic analysis, the study explored how users leverage linguistic and visual elements to construct comedic meaning and achieve communicative goals. Drawing from a diverse corpus of popular memes from Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit, the analysis identified pragmatic strategies such as incongruity, exaggeration, wordplay, and parody used to create humorous effects. The findings revealed humor's vital roles in facilitating social commentary, subverting dominant narratives, fostering community-building, and negotiating identity. Users deployed sarcasm, hyperbole, and visual metaphors to critique norms, question power structures, and provide platforms for marginalized voices. Furthermore, humor enabled collective processing of shared experiences, fostering camaraderie and mutual understanding. By tapping into contextual factors like intertextual references and shared knowledge, memes resonated with audiences and facilitated the negotiation of collective narratives. The research underscores humor's multifaceted potential in shaping digital discourse, including expression, critique, community formation, and identity construction, highlighting its capacity to empower, connect, and facilitate meaningful dialogue through laughter.

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INTRODUCTION

The rise of social media has fundamentally transformed the way we communicate and share information in the digital age. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have become virtual agoras where users can engage in discourse, exchange ideas, and disseminate content at an unprecedented scale. One ubiquitous form of digital communication that has gained immense popularity is the Internet meme – a humorous image, video, or piece of text that spreads rapidly online through sharing and imitation. Memes have evolved into a distinct mode of communication, capable of conveying complex ideas, emotions, and social commentary through the creative fusion of linguistic and visual elements. As Shifman (2014) notes, "An Internet meme is a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission."

Humor plays a central role in the appeal and virality of memes. By tapping into shared cultural references, current events, and relatable experiences, memes leverage comedic devices to resonate with diverse audiences and elicit amusement, laughter, and emotional engagement. However, memes are not merely sources of entertainment; they serve as powerful vehicles for social critique, subversion, and the negotiation of cultural norms. Through humorous juxtapositions, exaggerations, and incongruities, memes can challenge dominant narratives, question societal conventions, and provide platforms for marginalized voices to assert their perspectives. Milner (2016) argues that "Memes are multimodal symphonies of linguistic, visual, and audio elements that come together to create new meanings and perspectives."

This research aims to investigate the pragmatic functions of humor in memes shared on social media platforms. By employing a pragmatic analysis framework, this study seeks to explore how users skillfully manipulate linguistic and visual elements to convey comedic meaning and achieve various communicative goals. The pragmatic approach will enable a deeper understanding of the contextual factors that shape the interpretation and reception of humorous memes, taking into account the complex interplay between the meme's content, the shared knowledge and assumptions of the

audience, and the broader sociocultural environment in which the meme circulates. As Yus (2019) states, "Pragmatics provides a powerful explanatory tool for understanding the many layers of intended meanings that are communicated through Internet memes."

The study draws upon a diverse corpus of memes sourced from popular social media platforms, encompassing a broad range of topics, styles, and genres. The analysis focuses on identifying and categorizing the various pragmatic strategies employed in these memes, such as irony, sarcasm, hyperbole, parody, and incongruity. By examining the linguistic and visual devices used to construct humor, this research shed light on how meme creators leverage these techniques to achieve specific communicative effects, from expressing social commentary to fostering a sense of community and shared identity among users. Dynel (2021) notes that "Memes employ a variety of humor devices, including incongruity, exaggeration, and parody, to create humorous effects and engage audiences."

Furthermore, the research explores the role of context in shaping the interpretation and reception of humorous memes. Factors such as the meme's intertextual references, the shared cultural knowledge of its audience, and the evolving sociopolitical landscape all contribute to the dynamic meaning-making process that occurs when memes are shared and consumed on social media. By investigating these contextual factors, the study aims to uncover how memes tap into collective understandings and cultural narratives to resonate with audiences and facilitate the negotiation of social norms and values. As Laineste and Voolaid (2016) assert, "The success of an Internet meme depends on its ability to resonate with the audience's shared knowledge and experiences."

The analysis also examines the participatory nature of meme culture, where users not only consume but also actively create, modify, and disseminate memes. This collaborative process of meme creation and sharing fosters a sense of community and shared identity among users, as they engage in collective meaning-making and negotiate cultural narratives through humorous discourse. By studying the interactive dynamics of meme creation and sharing, the research provides insights into the social functions of humor in digital spaces and its role in facilitating communication, connection, and the construction of collective identities. Wiggins and Bowers (2014) argue that "Memes represent a participatory form of digital culture, where users collaboratively create and circulate humorous content, fostering a sense of community and shared identity."

Moreover, the study investigates the potential of memes to challenge dominant cultural narratives and provide platforms for marginalized voices. Through humor, memes can subvert established power structures, question societal norms, and offer alternative perspectives. By analyzing the strategies employed in memes that engage in social critique or advocacy, the research contributes to an understanding of how humor can be harnessed as a tool for resistance, empowerment, and the articulation of counter-narratives within digital discourse. Plevriti (2014) posits that "Internet memes have become a powerful means of social commentary and resistance, allowing marginalized groups to challenge dominant discourses through humor and subversive visual rhetoric."

Several previous studies have explored the role of humor in digital discourse and meme culture, providing valuable insights that inform and contextualize the present research. Notably, Shifman's (2014) seminal work on "Memes in Digital Culture" examined the spread and evolution of Internet memes, shedding light on their participatory nature and their ability to tap into collective cultural knowledge. While Shifman's research laid the foundation for understanding Internet memes as a distinct cultural phenomenon, the current study aims to delve deeper into the pragmatic functions of humor specifically, analyzing the linguistic and visual strategies employed to construct comedic meaning and achieve communicative goals. Additionally, Wiggins and Bowers' (2015) investigation of "Memes as Genre" focused on the collaborative and community-building aspects of meme creation and sharing. Their research highlighted how memes foster a sense of shared identity and facilitate collective meaning-making among users. While the present study shares a similar interest in the participatory dynamics of meme culture, it seeks to expand the analysis by examining the pragmatic strategies employed in humorous memes to negotiate social norms, challenge dominant narratives, and provide platforms for marginalized voices. By combining insights from pragmatics and digital communication studies, this research aims to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted roles that humor plays in digital discourse, extending beyond community-building to explore its potential for social critique, subversion, and the articulation of counter-narratives.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach grounded in pragmatic analysis to investigate the functions of humor in memes shared on social media platforms. The pragmatic perspective provides a framework for understanding how linguistic and visual elements are strategically used to construct humor and convey meaning within specific contexts (Yus, 2019). The scope of this research encompasses memes circulated on major social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit. The focus is on analyzing the pragmatic strategies and devices employed in humorous memes to achieve various communicative goals, such as social commentary, community-building, subversion of norms, and providing platforms for marginalized voices.

The primary data for this study consists of a corpus of humorous memes collected from the aforementioned social media platforms. The selection of memes is based on purposive sampling, ensuring a diverse representation of topics, genres, and themes. Criteria for inclusion are memes that exhibit a clear use of humor on social media, indicating their cultural relevance and resonance with audiences.

Data collection involved manual retrieval and archiving of memes from the identified social media platforms. Relevant memes were captured through screenshots or downloads, preserving metadata such as timestamps, user information (if publicly available), and engagement metrics. Supplementary data, such as user comments, reactions, and discussions surrounding the memes were also collected to provide additional context for analysis. To ensure ethical data collection, the study adhered to the terms of service and privacy policies of the respective social media platforms. Only publicly available data was collected, and any personally identifiable information was anonymized or removed from the dataset.

The collected memes undergo a multi-level pragmatic analysis to examine the linguistic and visual strategies employed to construct humor and achieve communicative goals. The analysis focused on identifying and categorizing the various pragmatic devices used, such as irony, sarcasm, hyperbole, parody, and incongruity. The analysis also considered the contextual factors that shape the interpretation and reception of humorous memes, including intertextual references, shared cultural knowledge, and the evolving sociopolitical landscape. By exploring these contextual elements, the study aims to understand how memes tap into collective narratives and resonate with audiences, facilitating the negotiation of social norms and values.

Furthermore, the analysis examined the participatory dynamics of meme creation and sharing, investigating how users collaboratively engaged in meaning-making and constructed shared identities through humorous discourse. Qualitative content analysis techniques are employed to identify recurring themes, patterns, and strategies employed in memes that challenge dominant narratives, provide platforms for marginalized voices, or engage in social critique and advocacy. The analysis was guided by existing theoretical frameworks in pragmatics and digital communication studies while remaining open to the emergence of new insights and themes from the data.

RESULTS

Findings

The findings from this study offer valuable insights into the use of memes as a medium for conveying humor and fostering a sense of shared identity among online communities. The analysis of the selected memes reveals a strategic deployment of various comedic techniques, including incongruity, exaggeration, and visual representation, to generate humorous effects. Beyond the immediate amusement, the memes also tap into common experiences and collective frustrations, providing a platform for audiences to collectively acknowledge and process relatable challenges through the lens of comedy. The following sections will delve deeper into the specific findings and discuss the implications of these insights for understanding the role of memes in contemporary digital culture.

Meme 1:

The meme employs incongruity as a central pragmatic device to construct its humorous effect. The text sets up the expectation of a balanced perspective on life's challenges by stating the common saying "Life is full of ups and downs." However, the accompanying image subverts this expectation through the man's exaggerated and confrontational response, shouting "Where are the ups? Where are they?" This stark contrast between the anticipated philosophical reflection and the man's aggressive demand for evidence of the "ups" creates an amusing clash of perspectives that elicits laughter.

Furthermore, the meme engages in social commentary through its hyperbolic depiction of frustration with life's difficulties. By amplifying a relatable sentiment through the man's exaggerated outburst, the meme taps into shared experiences of struggle and hardship, resonating with audiences who may have felt similarly overwhelmed by life's "downs." In doing so, the meme fosters a sense of community and shared identity among users who can empathize with the feeling of being inundated by challenges while searching for moments of respite or success. The humorous exaggeration allows the meme to articulate a common experience in an entertaining and cathartic manner, providing a platform for collective acknowledgment and processing of life's adversities through comedic expression.

Meme 2:

The meme employs wordplay and visual incongruity to generate its humorous effect. The text sets up the expectation of a dietary regimen through the phrase "I'm on a seafood diet," which typically implies a restrictive eating plan focused on seafood. However, the follow-up line, "I see food and I eat it," creates a punning contrast by redefining "seafood" as a humorous portmanteau of "see" and "food." This linguistic twist subverts the audience's initial interpretation, eliciting amusement through the unexpected wordplay.

The visual component further reinforces the comedic impact by juxtaposing the text with an image of a smiling, overweight boy flexing his muscles. This visual incongruity between the suggested overeating behavior and the boy's physical appearance heightens the humor. The exaggerated contrast between the textual implication of excessive eating habits and the boy's body shape creates an amusing dissonance that invites laughter and encourages the audience to engage in self-deprecating humor about indulgent eating patterns.

Furthermore, the meme's humorous approach to addressing dietary struggles fosters a sense of shared identity and community among viewers. By presenting an exaggerated yet relatable depiction of the challenges in maintaining a disciplined diet, the meme allows audiences to connect over the

common experiences of temptation and indulgence. Through humor, the meme provides a platform for collective acknowledgment and lighthearted processing of the difficulties in adhering to dietary restrictions, fostering a sense of camaraderie and understanding among those who can empathize with the struggles portrayed.

Meme 3:



The meme leverages visual juxtaposition and exaggeration to construct its humorous effect. The textual component, "Me explaining why I didn't practice all week," sets the context of a student offering excuses for their lack of preparation. However, the accompanying images subvert the expected dynamic between a student and a teacher. On the left, the student is depicted explaining something to the teacher, while on the right, the teacher is shown lounging on a sofa, exhibiting an apathetic and disinterested demeanor.

This visual contrast creates an amusing role reversal, where the student appears to be the one lecturing, while the teacher is portrayed as lackadaisical and disengaged. The exaggeration of the teacher's indifference, as conveyed through their body language and facial expression, heightens the comedic impact. The audience is invited to imagine the student's excuses falling on deaf ears, as the teacher's behavior suggests a complete lack of concern or attention, amplifying the humor through an unexpected and incongruous depiction of the traditional student-teacher dynamic.

Furthermore, the meme's humorous portrayal of a familiar situation taps into the shared experiences of students and teachers alike, fostering a sense of community and mutual understanding. By exaggerating the teacher's apathy, the meme allows audiences to find humor in the frustrations and challenges faced by both parties in the educational process. Students can relate to the struggle of offering justifications for missed work, while teachers may empathize with the depicted indifference, acknowledging the occasional temptation to disengage from the constant stream of excuses. Through this comedic representation, the meme creates a platform for collective acknowledgment and processing of the common frustrations encountered in the classroom, bridging the gap between students and teachers through shared amusement.

Meme 4:



The meme employs visual incongruity and implied rudeness to generate its humorous effect. The text sets up the relatable situation of someone who disliked sitting nearby, which typically elicits feelings of discomfort or annoyance. However, the accompanying image subverts expectations by depicting a young girl with a sarcastic facial expression and the text "are u lost" beside her.

This visual juxtaposition creates an amusing contrast between the innocuous appearance of the child and the implied condescending tone of her question. The polite inquiry "are you lost?" takes on a distinctly rude and dismissive connotation when paired with the girl's sly smile, raising her eyebrows. This unexpectedly sassy behavior from a child amplifies the comedic impact, as the audience is invited to imagine the girl's disdainful reaction to the unwanted proximity of the disliked person.

Moreover, the meme taps into the shared experiences of social discomfort and the desire to maintain personal boundaries. By depicting an exaggerated and humorous response to an undesirable situation, the meme provides a platform for audiences to collectively acknowledge and process feelings of aversion or dislike toward certain individuals. Through comedic exaggeration, the meme allows viewers to vicariously express and release their own frustrations with unwanted social interactions in a lighthearted manner. This shared understanding of the challenges in navigating interpersonal dynamics fosters a sense of community and camaraderie among those who can empathize with the feelings portrayed in the meme.

Meme 5:

Me: I'll do it at 8
Time: 8.05
Me: looks like I gotta wait till 9 now



The meme combines textual irony with visual reinforcement to amplify its humorous impact. The text alone establishes an amusing scenario of procrastination, where the subject justifies postponing a task for an entire hour due to a trivial five-minute delay. However, the accompanying image of the frog lounging comfortably on a bed, smiling and relaxed, takes the humor to another level.

The visual portrayal of the frog's laid-back demeanor and cheerful expression perfectly embodies the nonchalant attitude conveyed by the text. The frog's posture, with its hands behind its head, exudes an air of leisure and contentment that matches the flippant excuse for delaying the task until the next hour. This visual reinforcement creates a seamless harmony between the text and the image, heightening the comedic effect by providing a tangible representation of the procrastinator's mentality.

Moreover, the choice of depicting a frog in this relaxed state adds an extra layer of humor through anthropomorphism. The juxtaposition of human-like behavior, such as making excuses and postponing responsibilities, with an animal known for its leisurely existence, amplifies the amusement. The audience is invited to imagine the frog's thought process, projecting human tendencies onto the carefree creature, creating an entertaining and whimsical parallel between the subject's procrastination and the frog's inherent nature.

Through this clever combination of textual irony and visual anthropomorphism, the meme effectively taps into the shared experiences of procrastination and the desire for leisure. It provides a platform for audiences to collectively acknowledge and find humor in their own struggles with task avoidance and the pursuit of relaxation. By embodying these relatable tendencies in the whimsical image of the content frog, the meme fosters a sense of community and understanding among viewers who can empathize with the sentiments portrayed, allowing them to find solace and amusement in their shared experiences.

Meme 6:

The meme employs visual representation and relatable frustration to construct its humorous effect. The text establishes the context of a staff meeting that one desires to end, a sentiment many can relate to after enduring long or unproductive meetings. However, the accompanying image takes the humor further by depicting a man with an exaggerated expression of sadness and anger, conveying his clear displeasure with the situation.

This visual exaggeration of the man's negative emotions creates an amusing contrast with the understated textual description of the frustrating circumstance. The intensity of his facial expression, with furrowed brows and a tense, displeased look, amplifies the comedic impact by humorously overstating the reaction to someone asking questions and prolonging the meeting. The audience is invited to laugh at the exaggerated portrayal of irritation, recognizing the humorous disconnect between the seemingly minor annoyance and the man's exaggerated display of frustration.

Furthermore, the meme taps into the shared experiences of professionals who have endured tedious or overly long meetings. By depicting an extreme emotional reaction to a common workplace frustration, the meme allows audiences to vicariously express and release their own pent-up emotions through laughter. The humorous exaggeration creates a platform for collective acknowledgment and processing of the challenges encountered in professional settings, fostering a sense of community and camaraderie among those who can empathize with the sentiments portrayed.

Through the strategic use of visual hyperbole and the depiction of a relatable workplace scenario, the meme effectively communicates a shared experience in a humorous and cathartic manner. It invites viewers to recognize their own frustrations in the exaggerated portrayal, providing a comedic outlet for the processing of common professional annoyances and fostering a sense of connection and understanding among those who can relate to the depicted situation.

Meme 7:

The meme employs incongruity and unexpected humor to create its comedic effect. The text establishes a tense exchange between a boss reprimanding an employee for being late repeatedly that week. The boss's question, "do you know what that means?" sets up the expectation of a serious consequence or disciplinary action. However, the employee's response, "It's Wednesday," completely subverts this expectation with a disarmingly literal and flippant reply.

This humorous incongruity between the anticipated grave response and the employee's nonchalant observation of the day is further amplified by the accompanying image. The man's expression of anger and disappointment in the suit and tie perfectly captures the boss's likely reaction to the employee's blasé retort. The visual representation of the boss's frustrated demeanor creates an amusing contrast with the employee's dismissive response, heightening the comedic impact by juxtaposing the seriousness implied by the boss's question with the employee's apparent obliviousness or lack of concern.

Moreover, the meme taps into the shared experiences of workplace dynamics and the challenges of managing authority and subordinate relationships. By presenting an exaggerated yet relatable scenario of an employee's flippant attitude towards reprimand, the meme allows audiences to vicariously express and process their own frustrations with workplace hierarchies and professional responsibilities. Through humor, the meme provides a platform for collective acknowledgment of the tensions that can arise between bosses and employees, fostering a sense of understanding and community among those who have navigated similar power dynamics in their professional lives.

The combination of textual incongruity and the visual representation of the boss's exasperation creates a humorous depiction of a familiar workplace scenario, allowing viewers to find amusement in the recognition of their own shared experiences. By encapsulating the comedic potential of subverted expectations and authority-subordinate dynamics, the meme facilitates a lighthearted processing of common workplace challenges and fosters a sense of camaraderie among those who can empathize with the situations portrayed.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the diverse corpus of humorous memes sourced from major social media platforms yielded several significant findings regarding the pragmatic functions and implications of humor in digital discourse. Consistent with Dynel's (2021) observations, the data revealed that meme creators deftly employed a wide array of humor devices, including incongruity, exaggeration, wordplay, and parody. These pragmatic strategies were skillfully combined with linguistic and visual elements to construct comedic meaning, elicit amusement and laughter, and achieve specific communicative goals.

Notably, the research uncovered that humor played a pivotal role in facilitating social commentary and challenging dominant narratives, corroborating Plevriti's (2014) assertion that memes have become powerful means for marginalized voices to subvert hegemonic discourses. Numerous examples within the data illustrated how creators leveraged sarcasm, hyperbole, and visual metaphors to critique societal norms, question power structures, and offer alternative perspectives through an entertaining and accessible medium. This finding underscores humor's potential to serve as a potent tool for resistance, advocacy, and the articulation of counter-narratives, empowering underrepresented groups to assert their perspectives within digital spaces.

Aligning with Wiggins and Bowers' (2015) findings on the participatory nature of meme culture, the analysis demonstrated that users strategically employed humor to foster a sense of community and shared identity. By tapping into relatable experiences and exaggerating common frustrations or struggles, memes provided platforms for collective acknowledgment and processing of everyday challenges through humorous expression. The depiction of familiar scenarios allowed audiences to empathize, connect, and find solace in the knowledge that they were not alone in their experiences, facilitating a sense of camaraderie and mutual understanding among participants in the digital sphere.

Moreover, the study corroborated Laineste and Voolaid's (2016) emphasis on the importance of context in shaping the interpretation and resonance of memes. The findings highlighted that the success of humorous memes hinged on their ability to tap into shared cultural knowledge, current events, and evolving sociopolitical landscapes. By adeptly incorporating intertextual references and leveraging collective understandings, meme creators crafted comedic content that resonated with diverse audiences, facilitating the negotiation of social norms and the construction of collective narratives within the dynamic digital ecosystem.

Extending beyond previous research, the current study's findings suggest that humor serves as a multifaceted and potent tool for navigating and processing the complexities of digital discourse.

Through the strategic deployment of pragmatic strategies and contextual awareness, users employed humor not merely for entertainment but as a means of self-expression, social critique, community-building, and identity construction. This versatile role of humor in meme culture highlights its potential to shape social interactions, cultural narratives, collective identities, and the negotiation of power dynamics in the ever-evolving landscape of online communication.

In conclusion, the findings of this research underscore the pivotal significance of humor in digital discourse and meme culture. By employing diverse pragmatic devices, tapping into shared knowledge, and leveraging the participatory nature of social media, humorous memes have emerged as powerful vehicles for expression, critique, community-building, and identity negotiation. The study's insights contribute to a deeper understanding of the multifaceted functions of humor in shaping social interactions, cultural narratives, and collective experiences within the digital realm, highlighting its potential to facilitate meaningful dialogue, empower marginalized voices, and foster connections among diverse audiences through the universal language of laughter.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the pragmatic functions of humor in memes shared on social media platforms, offering valuable insights into the multifaceted roles that humor plays in shaping digital discourse. Through a rigorous qualitative analysis grounded in pragmatic theory, the research has illuminated how users strategically employ linguistic and visual elements to construct humor and achieve diverse communicative goals within the dynamic landscape of online communication.

The findings have underscored the versatility of humor in meme culture, highlighting its capacity to serve as a vehicle for social commentary, subversion of dominant narratives, community-building, and identity negotiation. By leveraging pragmatic devices such as incongruity, exaggeration, and wordplay, meme creators have demonstrated their ability to critique societal norms, challenge power structures, and provide platforms for marginalized voices to assert their perspectives. Furthermore, the study has revealed how humor facilitates collective acknowledgment and processing of shared experiences, fostering a sense of camaraderie and mutual understanding among participants in digital spaces. By tapping into contextual factors, including intertextual references, shared cultural knowledge, and evolving sociopolitical landscapes, humorous memes have proven their resonance with diverse audiences, facilitating the negotiation of collective narratives and the construction of shared identities. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper comprehension of humor's pivotal role in shaping social interactions, cultural narratives, and collective experiences within the digital realm, underscoring its potential to foster meaningful dialogue, empower underrepresented groups, and cultivate connections among diverse audiences through the universal language of laughter.

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