

# **Impact of Internet Memes on Language and Communication Among University Students**

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***Abstract*** – As the internet is becoming prevalent in people's lives, internet memes

***Keywords*** – *Mememes, internet, language, communication*

## **1. Introduction**

Over the past few decades, the internet has grown dramatically, becoming an integral part of people's daily lives, especially among young adults through social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and more. These digital platforms serve as a medium for multifaceted social interaction on the internet, enabling individuals not only to share information, but also communicate thoughts, express themselves, and engage with others, exposing them to a wide range of content and perspectives. The proliferation of mobile devices has also contributed to enhancing people's connectivity to the internet even more. The internet's constant prevalence in people's lives has created a vast digital culture that consists of unique interaction and communication forms online. One major aspect of this culture is internet memes, a significant part of how people interact digitally found in any online engagement.

Language is never static and always changes depending on its users in response to various social and cultural influences (Steels & Szathmáry, 2018). Given that language is the primary medium through which people communicate, the role of memes as a facet of digital communication and a potential driver of language evolution has attracted significant research interest in recent years in the fields of linguistics, cultural studies, and social communication.

This survey-based research aims to observe how memes influence language and communication both on the internet and real life among university students, examining how these digital artifacts shape language usage and social interactions. The paper begins with a review of relevant literature in this area, followed by a description of the research's methodology and findings. Then, a discussion regarding the findings is constructed with the detailed limitations of the study.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **Background**

The human language is composed of a multitude of skills that develop over time to achieve a shared communicative goal. Therefore, the overall nature of language involves constant changes driven by its users (Markov et al. 2023). In the past, various factors such as war, trade, religion, and other relevant events have influenced language. (Calvet, 1998). In contemporary times, the internet and its culture of memes pose as a new factor that might impact language evolution.

The term "meme" was first used by Dawkins (1989) in the study of genetics and human culture. The concept was conceived as a cultural unit transmitted through cultural evolution. It survives by rising in popularity

enough times and sustaining enough psychological appeal to people, like a gene in evolution. In this field of culture, memes adopt forms of an idea, a skill, or a theme. Its transmission occurs when a person or community copies a cultural unit, which consists of a meme, from another person or community.

In computing terms, internet memes are a medium created in the format of images, videos, texts, etc., that spreads from one internet user to another, often with changes along the way. Internet memes are inherently humorous in nature, but their contents can also address or carry relevancy to ongoing topics or issues providing social commentary and cultural exchange (Rogers, 2024). Like their definition in the field of human culture, internet memes spread or disappear depending on their relevance and popularity and can also evolve when passed from one internet user to another.

The concept of memes is not static. Nowadays memes refer to their internet counterpart a lot more than their original counterparts. When discussing internet memes, it is reasonable to note that they align well with their original definition and characteristics described in the epidemiologic theory of genes and culture (Castaño, 2013). This suggests that internet memes are not only trivial internet jokes but also cultural phenomena with unique characteristics that are worth examining using scientific approaches that focus on their spread, evolution, and influence.

According to Petrova, (2021), as memes have become prevalent in digital communication particularly among young adults, they can serve as a new form to convey messages or expressions. A prior study by Kostadinovska-Stojchevska & Shalevska (2018) examined the linguistic aspects of memes in the English realm of the internet and found that memes utilize language features that are uncommon in the real-life equivalent of conversation and communication. These include phrases, puns, jargon, slang, shortenings, neologisms, as well as patterned ways of intentional or unintentional spelling and grammar mistakes.

The observation in this research aligns with the definition of linguistics components and formats of what contributes to a language discussed by Akmajian et al. (2020), which emphasizes the dynamic nature of language and its adaptation to various communicative contexts, including digital environments.

Another study conducted by Natsir et al. (2023) found significant changes in grammar, syntax, and vocabulary within the language used in Internet communication. However, this study analyzed memes as a factor in language change; instead, it wholly examines the language changes occurring on the internet itself.

Memes on the internet can foster a community-like connection among users who interact with them. This way, memes help shape and maintain digital communities by being an aspect that serves as a common communication form and cultural reference (Petrova, 2021). One hypothesis this paper formulate is that this shared sense of community and language pattern fostered by the culture of memes bleeds into the real world for people who interact with memes.

### **Knowledge Gaps**

Memes have experienced significant changes in their context, meanings, and usage over the past few years. One notable trend is the increasing self-awareness in usage and popularity in real-world contexts. Little research has delved into the usage and intention of memes in young adults in the past short period of two years.

Additionally, there has been little research focused on the direct impact of memes on colloquial language usage among young adults.

### 3. Methodology

#### Sample Population

The population sample of this survey consisted of university students at Ritsumeikan University in Japan. Sampling was done randomly and included a mix of both individuals who frequently engage with internet memes and individuals who do not. It was wholly conducted within the Ritsumeikan University circle of students. Therefore, even though no identifying information was collected, all participants are assumed to be Ritsumeikan University students as of the year 2024.

#### Instrumentation

This research utilized a survey questionnaire to gather data about meme consumption and its influence on language features and communication among young adults. The survey for data collection was conducted through online means using the service Microsoft Forms. The survey was distributed through social media platforms such as Line and Instagram, along with the Ritsumeikan University platform Manaba+R. The survey was provided in English and Japanese to facilitate the most common demographics found where the survey was geographically conducted.

The survey consisted of 16 questions, three focused on the participant's general demographics, one question focused on the frequency of participants' meme engagement, and the remaining questions gathered detailed information about participants' meme interactions and their potential impact on language which included Likert-scale agreement questions. The data gathering lasted for three weeks from May 20th to June 12th, 2024.

It is important to note that for the question aimed to gather information of participants' meme engagement frequency served as a critical juncture in the survey. Participants who clarified that they were not familiar with memes at all were automatically directed to the end of the survey, and their responses to subsequent questions about language aspects were not collected.

#### Ethical Overview

Explanations and the purpose of the survey were provided on the survey page. However, an explicit clarification regarding the purpose of collecting participants' consent for the usage of their answers was not provided. For future research, it would be better to formulate a survey that also collects participants' agreement of their consent. Despite this flaw, the survey aimed to ensure participants' privacy. The questions were formulated with the privacy of the participants in mind and no proper identifying information outside of general demographics was collected.

### 4. Result

The results contained 35 participants. Among the 35 participants, 20 were aged between 18 to 20 years old, 12 were 21 to 23 years old, two were 24 to 26 years old, and one was 27 to 29 years old (Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Age*

Age	Amount
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<18	0
18-20	20
21-23	12
24-26	2
27-29	1
29<	0

Out of 35 participants, 27 of them were males, four were females, and the other four chose not to specify their gender (Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Gender*

Gender	Amount
Male	27
Female	4
Prefer not to say	4

Participants came from a total of 12 countries: nine each from Japan and Indonesia, three from Bangladesh, two each from China and Hong Kong, one each from Korea, Taiwan, Philippines, Myanmar, Singapore, Australia, USA, and Brazil. The remaining two chose to not clarify their country of origin (Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Country of Origin*

Country	Amount
Japan	9
China	2
Taiwan	1
Hong Kong	2
Korea	1
Indonesia	9
Bangladesh	3
Philippines	1
Myanmar	1
Singapore	1
USA	1
Australia	1
Brazil	1
Prefer not to say	2

Out of 35 participants, 21 participants interact with memes at least multiple times a day, three participants interact at least once a day, five participants interact less than once a day, and six participants almost never interact with memes at all (Table 4).

**Table 4***Meme Consumption Frequency*

Frequency	Amount
Very often (at least multiple times a day)	21
Often (at least once a day)	3
Sometimes (less than once a day)	5
Rarely (less than once a week)	0
Almost never	6

Participants are shown to interact with memes through multiple platforms on the internet. The ‘amount’ refers to the number of use cases where participants could select multiple choices of platforms that they use. Most participants’ use case interaction are through social media such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, followed by the video streaming platform YouTube, then followed by messaging applications such as Discord, Line, WeChat, and WhatsApp, and lastly followed by the forum of Reddit (Table 5).

**Table 5***Platforms of Meme Interaction*

Platform	Frequency
Messaging apps (Discord, Line, WeChat, WhatsApp, etc.)	13
YouTube	19
Instagram	22
Twitter	11
Facebook	5
Reddit	8

Participants are shown to memes in various languages. Most participants see memes in the English language, with 28 total participants. Japanese is the next most common language, with 12 total participants. Followed by Chinese with 8 total participants. Other languages include Indonesian with 3 total participants, and Portuguese, Bengali, Burmese, Tagalog, Korean, and French with 1 participant each.

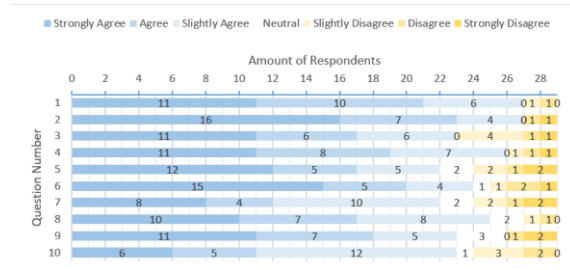
**Table 6***Language of Memes Consumed*

Language	Frequency
English	28
Japanese	12
Chinese	8
Indonesian	3
Portuguese	1
Bengali	1
Burmese	1
Tagalog	1

Korean	1
French	1

**Chart 1**

*Statements Agreement Distribution*



*Note.* Questions list for this chart is provided in the table below (Table 7).

**Table 7**

*Statements of Likert-scale Questions*

Question Number	Question Statement
1	I think memes and their contents are socially relevant
2	Memes have introduced new words or phrases in my vocabulary
3	I find myself using words or phrases I learned from memes in physical conversation
4	I find myself using words or phrases I learned from memes in digital conversation
5	Using language from memes lets me be more expressive and creative in communicating my thoughts
6	The memes I consume are often shared in my social circles
7	I feel more connected to others when using meme-related language
8	Memes provide a shorthand way to convey complex ideas quickly
9	I think memes contribute to the evolution of language over time
10	I believe the change introduced by memes and the internet to language has more positive effects than negative ones

## 5. Discussion

In examining the influence of memes on everyday language and communication on young adults, the result revealed a significant majority of participants perceiving memes as having a substantial effect on language and communication, with only a minority having the opposite view.

Participants mainly regarded memes as a socially relevant medium that can express creativity and complex thoughts easily. Many participants also shared memes between their social circles and felt more connected to others when using meme-related language, suggesting that memes play a relevant role in fostering communication in groups, aligning with the findings of Petrova, (2021).

Notably, the participants predominantly agreed that memes introduced new words and phrases and they often use meme-derived vocabularies in digital and physical conversations. This integration of online and offline

communication patterns aligns with Natsir et al.'s (2023) research regarding the role of internet culture in language evolution and supports the proposed hypothesis that memes influence bleeding outside the digital space.

These findings were consistent across participants with various nationalities and language backgrounds, suggesting a broad-reaching impact of memes shaping language among multiple users. This phenomenon mirrors the inherent dynamic nature of language itself, which has historically adapted from social and cultural influences. A key observation is the high prevalence of meme interaction among participants. This result attained from the random sampling nature of the survey reflects the real-world representation regarding the importance of memes in young adults's communication habits which also aligns with the findings from the study by Petrova, (2021). The aspect of familiarity is likely a critical factor in the pervasive agreement of the influence of memes on their language. This suggests that while the impact of memes on language is shown, they do not represent the views of the minority demographic that interact with memes less frequently on the internet.

## **6. Limitations**

This study has three limitations. First, the sample size of this study is small with only 35 responses being gathered from the survey. It could be argued that this sample size is not adequate to give any real conclusion regarding the impact of memes on language among young adults.

Second, is the absence of a control group of individuals that are non-frequent consumers of memes during the survey sample process. This approach was chosen due difficulty of establishing a proper control group in the constraint of time and environment of this study. While the random sampling was able to capture a natural representation of young adults, it resulted in an over-representation of individuals who frequently consume memes. Meaning, that this study was unable to give a comprehensive analysis of the impact of memes on the language of people who engage with memes less frequently. The study was also unable to compare the language aspects between frequent meme consumers and non-frequent meme consumers.

Third is the limitation that stemmed from the survey design which is also tied to the second limitation. Participants who indicated that they never interacted with memes in the survey were omitted from the analysis of this study. In retrospect, this survey design was an oversight and ended up constraining the study's ability to compare and comprehensively analyze the views of individuals that do not interact with memes. Despite these limitations, the study was able to fully address the research objectives and align with the scope and aims outlined.

## **7. Conclusion**

The internet's pervasiveness integration into daily life, particularly among younger people has ushered a new and unique a digital culture. As a facet of this culture and online interaction, the ubiquity of internet memes may act not only as a medium of humor but also as a driver in the evolution of language and communication. Previous studies done on the topic of the impact of the internet on language and communication have found that there are significant changes in language components through digital communications that differ from real life. However, the specific impact of internet memes on language and communication pattern of young adults in the past few years remains unstudied. This study utilized a survey to gather data and examine the influence of internet memes on language and communication among university students at Ritsumeikan University in Japan. The findings suggest that memes significantly influence language use and play a role in communication of young

adults, with participants often incorporating meme-derived language into both digital and physical conversations within their social circle. This supports the idea that memes are a factor in language evolution overall.

While this study's findings gave insights to the impact of memes on language and communication among young adults, it is important to acknowledge its limitations which includes small sample size, lack of control group, and imperfect survey design. To truly understand the effect of this impact, future research could benefit from incorporating a larger, and more diverse sample and also aim to provide an comparative analysis between frequent and non-frequent meme consumers.