**Influence of Internet Memes on Language and Communication Among University Students**

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***Abstract***

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1. **Introduction**

Over the past few decades, the internet and social media platforms have undergone massive growth, becoming an integral part of people’s daily lives, especially among young adults. Social media such as YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok have introduced a new, digital way of social interaction for individuals where they can share information, communicate thoughts, and express themselves to other people on the internet. The proliferation of mobile devices, such as smartphones, has also greatly enhanced the connectivity of people to the internet.

The growth of the internet's constant prevalence in people’s lives has given way to a vast digital culture consisting of unique forms of interaction, communication, and ways of expression to emerge on online platforms on the internet. One aspect of this culture is internet memes, which are a significant part of how people interact and communicate online and are now a feature found in any online interaction.

Language is never static and always changes through time 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 has attracted significant research interest in recent years in the fields of linguistics, cultural studies, and social communication.

This survey-based research aims to examine how memes influence everyday language and communication among young people. The paper begins with a review of relevant literature and past research in this area, followed by a description of the research’s methodology and findings. Then, discussion regarding the findings is constructed.

1. **Literature Review**

**Background**

The human language is a system composed of a multitude of skills that develop over time to achieve a shared communicative goal. Therefore, the overall nature of language involves constant adaptations and changes driven by its users (Markov et al. 2023). In the past, various factors such as war, trade, the spread of religion, colonization, and many 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 exists and survives by arising in popularity often enough 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, a theme, or a phase. Its transmission occurs when a person or community copies a cultural unit, which consists of a meme, from another person or community. According to Rogers (2024), the most successful memes, or the most prevalent ones, are usually those that people copy the most.

In computing terms, an internet meme, often referred to simply as a meme by internet users, is 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. 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 meme is not static. Nowadays meme refer to its internet counterparts a lot more that its original counterpart. 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 observation suggests that internet memes are not only trivial internet jokes but also a cultural phenomenon with unique characteristics that are worth to be studied and examined using the set of scientific approaches that focuses on their spread, evolution, and influence.

According to Petrova, (2021), as memes have become prevalent in digital communication especially among young people, memes 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, specifically image-based ones, 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 does not specifically analyze 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 whether this shared sense of community 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 manner of use over the past few years. A meme from five or six years ago is significantly different from a meme today in these features. One notable trend is the increasing self-awareness in usage and its popularity in real-world contexts. Little research has delved into the underlying usage and intention of memes in young people 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 people.

1. **Methodology**

This qualitative research utilized a survey questionnaire to gather data about meme consumption and their influence on language features and communication among young people.

**Sample Population**

The population sample of this survey consists of university students at Ritsumeikan University in Japan. It was wholly conducted within the Ritsumeikan University circle of student. Therefore, even though no identifying information was collected, all respondents are assumed to be attending Ritsumeikan University as of the year 2024.

**Instrumentation**

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. A total of 16 questions exists in the survey, three of which were demographic questions, and the other were questions aimed at gathering information about meme consumption and Likert-scale agreement questions regarding correlation of memes and communication. The data gathering lasted for three weeks from May 20th, 2024, to June 12th, 2024.

**Ethical Overview**

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

1. **Result**

The results contain 35 respondents. Among the 35 respondents, 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 |
| <18 | 0 |
| 18-20 | 20 |
| 21-23 | 12 |
| 24-26 | 2 |
| 27-29 | 1 |
| 29< | 0 |

27 of the respondents were males, four were females, and the other four chose to not clarify 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 |

The survey asked regarding how often respondents interact with memes. 21 respondents interact with memes at least multiple times a day, three respondents interact at least once a day, five respondents interact less than once a day, and six respondents almost never interact with memes at all (Table 4). The six respondents that almost never interacted with memes did not fill in the proceeding Likert-scale agreement statement questions that assess aspects of an individual’s perceptions and behaviors regarding memes and their impact on language and communication (Chart 1 and Table 6).

**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 |

Respondents are shown to interact with memes through multiple platforms on the internet. The ‘amount’ is amount of use cases where respondents can choose multiple choices of platforms. The majority of respondents’ 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).

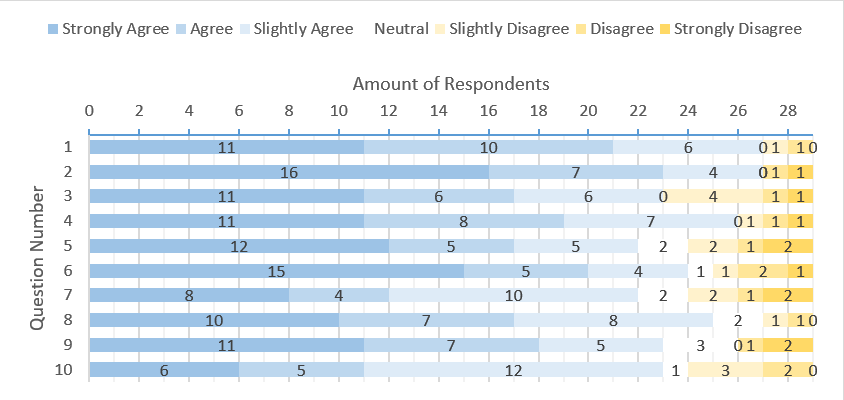
**Table 5**

*Platforms of Meme Interaction*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Platform | Amount |
| Messaging app (Discord, Line, WeChat, WhatsApp, etc.) | 13 |
| YouTube | 19 |
| Instagram | 22 |
| Twitter | 11 |
| Facebook | 5 |
| Reddit | 8 |

**Chart 1**

*Statements Agreement Distribution*

**

*Note.* Questions list for this chart is provided in the table below (Table 6).

**Table 6**

*Statements of Likert-scale Questions*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Question Number | Question Statement |
| 1 | I think memes and its 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 |

1. **Discussion**

In addressing the question of how memes influence everyday language and communication, the result from analysis questions (Chart 1 and Table 6) shows a majority in agreement with the perception that memes have a substantial effect on social interaction and communication with only a minority being the opposite. Many respondents think that memes are a socially relevant medium that can express creativity and complex thoughts more easily. Many respondents share memes between their social circles. Furthermore, the respondents are introduced to words and phrases in their vocabularies, indicating that memes are a substantial factor in language evolution. Respondents also use meme-derived language in both physical and digital conversations often, reflecting the integration of digital and real-world communication in their daily lives. This aligns with previous research by Natsir et. al (2023), which highlighted the role of internet culture in evolving language patterns and the hypothesis of the bleeding of memes influence in real world community of people who interact and share memes.

One significant observation is the prevalence of meme interaction among respondents. This interaction indicates the importance of meme interaction in young people, which also aligns with the findings of past research’s claim by Petrova, (2021). The aspect of familiarity is likely a critical factor in the pervasive influence of memes on their language. This suggests that while the findings of the impact of memes are shown, it does not represent the views of other demographics that interact with memes less frequently on the internet.

**Limitations**

This study has two limitations. First, only 35 responses were gathered from the survey, meaning the sample size of this study is small. Small enough even, that it could be argued that this sample size does not represent the views of the demographics of general people. Second, there is a bias in the population sample where the study does not cover analysis of respondents who interact with memes less often. Therefore, this study does not provide a broader view of how memes play a role in the language of those who do not interact with memes or internet culture at all.

1. **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study’s findings suggest that memes not only serve as a medium to express thoughts and ideas but also play a significant role in shaping communication and are a driving factor in language development and evolution overall among young people. However, to thoroughly understand this influence and validate these findings, future research should include a more diverse population sample that captures a broader range of perspectives and explores the broader analysis of the impact of memes on language.

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