**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 like smartphones has also greatly facilitated 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, a significant part of how people interact and communicate online which is now a feature found in any online interaction.

Language is never static and changes throughout time depending on the user in response to various social and cultural influences (Steels & Szathmáry, 2018). Given that language is a primary medium at which people communicate, the role of memes as a facet in digital communication and a potential driver in language has attracted many great research interests in the past few years in 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 the literature regarding relevant topics and the 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 that exists as a multitude of skills that develop through time to achieve a shared communicative goal. Therefore, the overall nature of language consists of constant adaptations and changes that are driven by their users (Markov et al. 2023). In the past, language has been influenced by various factors such as war, trade, the spread of religion, colonization, and many more relevant events (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 entity transmitted through cultural evolution that 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 that consists of a meme from another. According to Rogers, (2024), the memes that are copied the most are the most prevalent or, in a way, successful ones.

In computing terms, internet meme, often called without its modifier as meme by internet users, refer a medium created in the format of images, videos, texts that spread from one internet user to another often with changes in between. Internet memes are humorous in nature, but their contents can also carry relevancy to an ongoing topic or issue. Like its definition in the field of human culture, internet memes spread or disappear depending on their relevancy and popularity and can also evolve in their content, meaning, and usage terms.

The concept of meme is not static. Nowadays meme refer to its internet counterparts a lot more. When discussing internet memes, it is perfectly reasonable to note that it aligns well with its original definition and characteristics in the epidemiologic theory of genes and culture (Castaño, 2013). This suggests that internet memes are not just trivial internet jokes but a cultural phenomenon that has characteristics of its own kind that can be studied using 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. One prior research 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 will utilize features of language which is uncommon in the real-life equivalent of conversation and communication. These include phrases, puns, jargon, slang, shortenings, neologism, 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 in by Akmajian et. al (2020), which emphasize the dynamic nature of language and its adaptation to various communicative contexts, including digital environments.

Another research conducted by Natsir et. al (2023) has found that there are significant changes in grammar, syntax, and vocabulary within the language used in internet communication. This study however does not specifically analyze memes as a factor in language change, and instead wholly analyzes the language change that happens 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 great changes in its context, meanings, purposes, 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 time span of two years. Additionally, little research also focused on the direct impact of memes on colloquial language usage in young people.

1. **Methodology**

This research is qualitative research that utilized a survey questionnaire method to gather data about meme consumption and their influence on language features and communication in young people. The population sample of this survey is university students in Ritsumeikan University of Japan.

**Sample Population**

This survey was distributed through online platforms Manaba+R and LINE. It was wholly conducted within the Ritsumeikan University circle of student. Due to this, even though no proper identifying information was collected, all respondents are assumed to be an attending Ritsumeikan University student as of the year 2024.

**Instrumentation**

The survey and data-collection were conducted digitally through online means using the service Microsoft Forms. The survey was distributed through social media such as Line and Instagram and also 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).

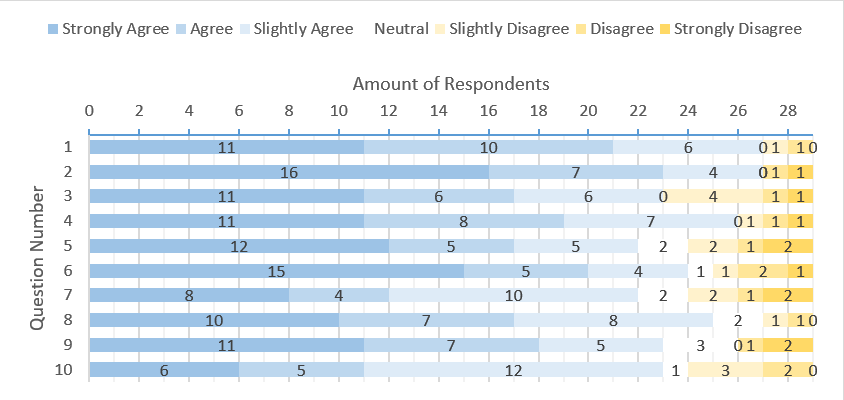
**Table 5**

*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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