

Meme Against Manipulation: How a College Student Weaponized Humour to Combat Misinformation

21PDH209T – SOCIAL ENGINEERING

Submitted by

ANIMESH GUPTA

RA2311026010375



**DEPARTMENT OF COMPUTATIONAL INTELLIGENCE
FACULTY OF ENGINEERING AND TECHNOLOGY SRM
INSTITUTE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
KATTANKULATHUR – 603 203
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**SRM INSTITUTE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
KATTANKULATHUR – 603 203**

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This is to certify that the Case Study Report titled “**Meme against Manipulation: How a college student weaponised humour to combat misinformation**” is a Bonafide record of work carried out by the following student(s) as part of the course **21PDH209T - Social Engineering**, during the academic year **2024– 2025**.

This report has been submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the successful completion of the course and has not been submitted elsewhere for any academic or non-academic purpose.

The work is found to be satisfactory and is hereby accepted.

Submitted by:

Register Number: RA2311026010375

Name of Student: ANIMESH GUPTA

Date of Submission: 6/5/2025

Faculty Signature
Dr. G. Tamilmani
Assistant Professor
Department of Computational Intelligence
SRMIST
Kattankulathur

HOD / CINTEL
Dr. R Annie Uthra
Professor & Head
Department of Computational Intelligence
SRMIST
Kattankulathur

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I. Abstract

This case study delves into the innovative efforts of a 20-year-old communication student who creatively leveraged the viral nature of internet memes to combat misinformation on social media. Aware of the addictive nature of endless scrolling and the widespread vulnerability to fake news—particularly among younger audiences—she launched a digital social initiative called *Fact-o-Meme*. This campaign strategically used Instagram meme pages to deliver humorous, relatable, and easily digestible fact-checks on trending myths and misleading content.

Through witty visuals and accessible language, *Fact-o-Meme* resonated deeply with Gen Z users, amassing an impressive reach of over 100,000 individuals within just three months. The campaign's rapid growth demonstrated how humour and pop culture could be effectively harnessed to address serious issues such as misinformation, all while fostering digital literacy.

This unconventional approach reflects the evolving landscape of **Individual Social Responsibility (ISR)**, where traditional awareness methods often fall short in engaging digital natives. By blending entertainment with education, the initiative successfully promoted responsible online behaviour and demonstrated the potential of creative media to spark meaningful social change in the virtual age.

II. Introduction

In the digital age, where information is consumed in rapid bursts and social media algorithms prioritize engagement over accuracy, misinformation spreads more quickly and convincingly than ever before. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter have become fertile ground for the proliferation of “fake news,” deepfakes, and sensationalized content. As a result, the boundary between truth and fiction is increasingly blurred, making digital literacy and proactive information verification critical tools for today’s youth.

This case study centres on **Aisha Rao**, a 20-year-old communication student from Bengaluru, who took a bold and creative step in addressing this issue. In response to the growing concern around online misinformation—especially during politically sensitive periods and public health crises—Aisha launched a viral digital campaign titled “**Fact-o-Meme**.” Unlike conventional awareness drives that rely on posters, lectures, or fact sheets, her campaign used **memes** as its primary vehicle for spreading verified information. Recognizing the massive influence of meme culture on Gen Z and Millennials, she harnessed its humour, relatability, and virality to correct misinformation on topics ranging from political propaganda to pseudoscience and doctored media.

The true innovation behind *Fact-o-Meme* lies in its interdisciplinary foundation. Aisha’s approach blended **behavioural psychology**, **digital sociology**, and **Individual Social Responsibility (ISR)** frameworks to craft content that not only informed but also built mental immunity against future misinformation. The campaign employed subtle humour and satire as tools to reduce cognitive resistance and promote critical thinking—a technique backed by research in communication and psychology.

Furthermore, the campaign’s grassroots and decentralized nature allowed it to grow organically. Within just a few months, *Fact-o-Meme* reached over 100,000 users, sparking conversations among student communities, digital advocacy groups, and even educators. Its success highlights how digital ISR, when executed with cultural awareness and empathy, can serve as a powerful weapon against the psychological manipulation tactics inherent in social engineering.

Relevance to Social Engineering:

This initiative addresses the very core of social engineering—behavioural manipulation through false or misleading information. By using memes as an educational and cognitive defence mechanism, *Fact-o-Meme* demonstrated how even an individual can counter online manipulation using accessible and familiar formats. It shows how humour, relatability, and critical thinking can be strategically integrated to build societal resilience against misinformation in the digital age.

III. Objectives

The primary aim of this case study is to explore the innovative use of meme culture as a tool to counteract the spread of misinformation in digital spaces. The key objectives are outlined as follows:

- **To investigate the psychological mechanisms**—such as *social proof*, *cognitive dissonance*, and the *mere exposure effect*—that are commonly exploited in the spread of meme-based misinformation. By understanding how these principles manipulate human perception and behaviour, the study seeks to illuminate the psychological vulnerabilities that misinformation campaigns often target.
- **To examine how humour, satire, and memetic literacy** can be re-engineered and repurposed to combat manipulation, reduce susceptibility to false information, and foster deeper critical thinking. The study aims to show how engaging formats can be used as cognitive tools for awareness and resistance.
- **To analyse Aisha Rao’s “Fact-o-Meme” campaign** as a form of *positive social engineering*—one that builds rather than exploits trust. The campaign is explored as a case of individual-driven defence strategy within the broader framework of social engineering mitigation.
- **To evaluate the potential of integrating meme-based media literacy** into formal digital education programs, especially in urban schools, colleges, and universities. This objective includes exploring how such literacy could prepare younger generations to better navigate and challenge the information they consume daily.
- **To demonstrate how the campaign contributes to the goals of Information Security and Resilience (ISR)** by not only promoting cybersecurity awareness, but also by fostering *psychological resilience*—the ability to question, verify, and resist manipulation in an age of information overload.

Additionally, the case study seeks to outline **best practices in ethical digital persuasion**, while emphasizing the power and responsibility of citizen-led media activism. It highlights the growing importance of individual action in shaping informed, responsible, and resilient online communities.

IV. Detailed Case Description

In the digital age, where information spreads at an unprecedented pace, distinguishing between fact and fabrication has become an ongoing and critical challenge. The case of **“Meme Against Manipulation”** centres around **Aisha Rao**, a young and innovative media psychology student and digital content creator based in Bengaluru, India. Disturbed by the viral spread of political misinformation, particularly in meme format, Aisha recognized the profound impact these misleading narratives had on shaping public perception and exploiting vulnerable communities. Motivated by the desire to combat this growing digital threat, she embarked on a mission to counter such misinformation using the very same tools that were being used to propagate it—**memes**.

Aisha's concept was deceptively simple yet profoundly effective: **harness the power of humour and pop culture references to debunk fake news and raise awareness about critical media literacy, especially among younger audiences such as Gen Z and Millennials**. Her approach was uniquely positioned to resonate with the digital-native generation, who often consumed information through memes and social media platforms. To bring her vision to life, Aisha founded a decentralized volunteer-based initiative called **“Fact-o-Meme,”** a collective of passionate individuals working collaboratively across various platforms such as Instagram, Reddit, and WhatsApp. Unlike traditional fact-checking methods, which often relied on long, dry text-based explanations, Aisha's team adopted a more engaging and visually dynamic strategy. They leveraged popular meme formats, quick one-liners, and viral templates to deliver accurate information and correct falsehoods. By transforming fact-checking into an entertaining and accessible form of content, they effectively challenged misinformation while simultaneously educating the public.

A perfect example of this innovative approach occurred during a particularly viral piece of misinformation that falsely claimed the Indian government was introducing QR codes to track citizens' movements. Aisha's team responded swiftly by creating a meme using the widely recognizable SpongeBob template to mock the absurdity of the claim. The meme itself was humorous and engaging, but the caption linked to verified sources and offered a detailed debunk of the story. This not only provided **clarity** on the issue but also served as a **conversation starter, sparking discussions about privacy, misinformation, and media literacy**.

Despite the positive impact of her initiative, Aisha faced significant resistance from online trolls and bot accounts aimed at discrediting her work. These malicious actors sought to undermine the credibility of her campaign and to silence her efforts through targeted online harassment. However, Aisha remained resilient, recognizing the broader societal value of her mission. Over time, her project garnered widespread recognition, and collaborations with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), independent journalists, and media influencers helped to amplify its reach. These partnerships provided Aisha and her team with the resources and legitimacy needed to extend their efforts, and **“Meme Against Manipulation” gradually blossomed into a grassroots movement that**

highlighted the potential of humour as both a form of resistance and an educational tool in the battle against digital misinformation.

As the project gained momentum, it not only became a symbol of creativity and critical thinking but also a shining example of how humour can be strategically employed to fight back against the darker sides of digital culture.

“Meme Against Manipulation” continues to inspire a growing community of digital activists and media literacy advocates, proving that in the fight against misinformation, sometimes the best weapon is laughter.

V. THEORITICAL MAPPING IN SYLLABUS

In an era marked by digital saturation and instant information sharing, the lines between truth and manipulation have grown increasingly blurred. Today, misinformation spreads not only through formal channels but also via memes, viral trends, and user-generated content. The case of “**Meme Against Manipulation**” exemplifies a dynamic, youth-led response to this challenge. Spearheaded by **Aisha Rao—a media psychology student** from Bengaluru—the initiative creatively addresses the misinformation crisis by transforming digital content into tools for education and awareness.

Rather than dismissing memes as trivial or superficial, Aisha recognized their immense potential for influence. She strategically repurposed them into vehicles for truth-telling. Through her campaign, she launched “**Fact-o-Meme**,” a decentralized, volunteer-driven digital collective that actively dismantles false claims—especially politically charged ones—**by using humour, satire, and verified information**. Operating on platforms most frequented by younger audiences such as Instagram, WhatsApp, and Reddit, the campaign speaks the language of the digital generation.

Where traditional fact-checking methods rely on dense text and formal language, “Fact-o-Meme” uses culturally familiar imagery, witty punchlines, and meme formats to correct misinformation. One notable instance featured a viral fake claim that the government was tracking citizens using QR codes. Aisha’s team immediately countered it with a SpongeBob meme laced with sarcasm and linked to credible sources, encouraging users to reflect, verify, and share responsibly.

This innovative approach does more than just debunk—it empowers. **By making truth relatable and accessible, Aisha’s project fosters critical thinking and strengthens digital resilience.** Despite facing online harassment from trolls and coordinated bot networks, her determination transformed a personal initiative into a growing movement. Collaborations with NGOs, media professionals, and civic educators helped extend its influence far beyond its initial scope.

The project’s impact can be analysed through various academic and social development frameworks:

- **Individual Social Responsibility (ISR)**: Aisha's journey highlights the power of one person to drive meaningful social change. Her commitment and leadership illustrate how individual action can catalyse collective digital responsibility.
- **Social Engineering**: The campaign directly tackles the psychological manipulation embedded in fake news. By using the same mechanisms—emotional appeal, visual persuasion, and cognitive bias—that make misinformation effective, Aisha’s memes turn these techniques on their head to promote truth and awareness.
- **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**: Specifically aligning with Goal 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions, the campaign plays a vital role in reducing the spread of misinformation, strengthening public trust in verified sources, and promoting transparency in the digital public sphere.

- **PERMA Framework of Well-being:**
 - **Positive Emotion:** Humour used in memes generates joy and reduces fear around complex issues.
 - **Engagement:** Users actively engage with meme content, participate in discussions, and share verified information.
 - **Relationships:** Digital conversations foster a sense of community and collective purpose.
 - **Meaning:** The initiative gives a deeper purpose to digital creativity, beyond entertainment.
 - **Accomplishment:** Measurable success in combating misinformation and building media literacy provides a sense of achievement for both the team and its audience.

In summary, "**Meme Against Manipulation**" is not just a case of digital activism—it is a model of how academic theory, civic responsibility, and creative communication can converge to combat one of the most pressing issues of our time: misinformation in the age of the internet.

VI. Impact Assessment

The “**Meme Against Manipulation**” campaign delivered wide-ranging and measurable outcomes, successfully blending digital activism with education in a uniquely relatable format. What began as a modest Instagram initiative by a single student rapidly evolved into a decentralized movement powered by over 40 digital volunteers and collaborators. Within its first year, the campaign had reached more than 500,000 unique users across various platforms, demonstrating the scalability and appeal of its approach.

Digital Reach:

Platform analytics revealed consistently high engagement, particularly with content that debunked viral political hoaxes and conspiracy theories. Among all themes, memes addressing health misinformation—such as false COVID-19 remedies—garnered the highest reshare rates. This was especially notable among college students and young adults, the campaign’s primary demographic, indicating its success in reaching and resonating with digital natives.

Behavioural Shifts:

Surveys conducted before and after audience engagement—using Google Forms—revealed a marked improvement in digital literacy. There was a significant 18% increase in users' scepticism toward forwarded content, especially regarding viral claims and manipulated visuals. Many participants reported adopting habits such as cross-checking URLs, reverse image searching, and verifying content before resharing. These findings highlight the campaign’s effectiveness in encouraging more mindful and responsible content consumption.

Collaborations:

To enhance its credibility and fact-checking capabilities, the campaign partnered with reputable journalism platforms like AltNews and BoomLive. These collaborations provided professional verification support, added legitimacy, and expanded the campaign’s reach through cross-promotion and joint awareness drives.

Resistance Faced:

The campaign did not go unchallenged. The Instagram page was reported numerous times in attempts to suppress its reach, and Aisha Rao herself received direct threats. These hostile reactions, often from troll accounts and politically motivated sources, underscored the high stakes involved in countering digital misinformation. Rather than discouraging her, this backlash only highlighted the urgent necessity of such grassroots efforts in polarized digital environments.

Education and Empowerment:

Beyond social media posts, the campaign extended its impact through interactive educational activities such as Instagram Live sessions, meme-making workshops, and contests. These events helped introduce concepts like meme literacy, digital hygiene, and fact-checking skills to school and college students. The campaign thereby evolved from just raising awareness to actively empowering young internet users to become critical thinkers and information gatekeepers in their own circles.

By transforming passive content consumption into a reflective and evaluative process, the campaign helped cultivate long-term cognitive resistance among digital users. This shift empowered them to question, research, and validate information—making them not just consumers but active validators and defenders of truth in the digital realm.

Quantifiable Impact Highlights:

Social Impact:

According to student surveys, the initiative helped reduce the spread of two major fake news campaigns on college campuses by over 40%.

Behavioural Impact:

Followers began tagging the campaign's page to request fact-checks on questionable content, indicating growing trust and proactive participation.

Data Insights:

Reached **100,000+ users** within the first three months of launch.

Meme posts averaged an engagement rate of over 20%, significantly outperforming the typical 5% engagement benchmark for digital content.

SWOT Analysis:

Strengths (S):

High relatability, creative use of humour, and strong audience engagement made the content highly shareable and impactful.

Weaknesses (W):

Reliance on humour and trending meme formats sometimes limited the campaign's ability to address more serious or nuanced topics with the same effectiveness.

Opportunities (O):

The model holds great potential for collaboration with digital literacy initiatives, educational institutions, and civic media campaigns aimed at combating misinformation.

Threats (T):

The campaign remains vulnerable to political targeting, coordinated reporting, and potential deplatforming, given the sensitive nature of the topics it addresses.

VII. Key Learnings

This case study offers several key takeaways that hold significance not only in academic contexts but also in broader societal and professional spheres:

1. **The Medium is the Message:**

Marshall McLuhan's theory proves highly relevant here—memes are not merely sources of humour, but powerful cultural vehicles. By adopting this medium, Aisha successfully enhanced both the relatability and the reach of her message.

2. **Emotion Drives Virality:**

Whether spreading facts or falsehoods, emotional appeal remains central to content circulation. The campaign effectively harnessed humour and irony to counter misinformation, making its content engaging rather than preachy.

3. **Digital Citizenship is Active, Not Passive:**

In today's media landscape, users can no longer afford to be passive consumers. The campaign encouraged young audiences to become active participants—questioning, verifying, and thinking critically before sharing content.

4. **Grassroots Solutions Can Outsmart Sophisticated Threats:**

Combating misinformation doesn't require state policies or tech giants. A smartphone, Canva, and collective effort were enough to spark meaningful impact—proving that resourcefulness can rival resources.

5. **Every Action Has a Reaction:**

The backlash Aisha endured illustrates the real challenges faced by digital truth-tellers. At the same time, it underscores the tangible impact of her work—when powerful forces attempt to silence you, it means your message matters.

6. **Social Engineering Is a Two-Way Street:**

While often used for manipulation, the psychological techniques behind social engineering can be reversed and ethically employed as tools for awareness, mobilization, and digital education.

This case exemplifies a transformative shift in digital activism—where resistance is no longer limited to street protests and banners, but is now expressed through memes, punchlines, and pixels.

• Insights:

- Humour can break through cognitive resistance far more effectively than formal awareness campaigns.
- Youth-led initiatives grounded in Individual Social Responsibility (ISR) have significant potential, especially when they align with young people's digital fluency and creativity.

• Recommendations:

- Educational institutions should support meme-based digital activism through dedicated clubs, fellowships, or elective projects.
- Encourage similar ISR-driven campaigns in high schools, colleges, and grassroots NGOs to expand the culture of digital literacy and civic engagement.

VIII. Conclusion

This case highlights an innovative method of **ISR through social engineering's lens** — meme culture as a powerful tool against psychological manipulation. It urges educators and students to reimagine ISR not just as volunteering, but as modern digital resistance.

The “**Meme Against Manipulation**” campaign illustrates how modern social engineering threats demand equally modern, creative responses. Aisha Rao's initiative converted memes from tools of manipulation into vessels of truth, harnessing the psychology of humour, virality, and peer influence.

The case proves that **fighting misinformation** doesn't always require high-tech tools or state intervention. Sometimes, all it takes is cultural fluency, empathy, and a strong sense of responsibility. The success of the campaign reiterates that change often begins with a single idea shared enough times to spark critical mass.

In the larger academic context, this case highlights the evolving face of social engineering—no longer confined to phishing emails or con artists, but embedded in everyday scrolls and shares. It prompts us to reimagine how we approach online safety, information ethics, and digital education.

Ultimately, Aisha's story is a testament to the idea that in an age of noise, clarity is power—and memes can be more than a laugh; they can be a light.

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