Exploring the Nexus of Meme Culture and Western Youth Culture: A Sociocultural Perspective

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Abstract

- In this **descriptive, mixed-methods** research project, the thematic content of memes (n=1089) posted on large-scale, "influencer" social media accounts were qualitatively coded and quantitatively analyzed.
- Analysis of frequencies revealed principal **themes,** including humor (sarcastic, self-deprecating, observational), social politics, relationships, single culture, media/pop culture, lifestyle, substance use, and mental health.
- Memes containing themes related to relationships, school, work, social politics, age, stereotypes, pop culture, "observational" or "savage" humor styles or AAVE had **significantly more likes** than expected.
- Situating findings within a **sociocultural perspective,** we consider the ways in which cultural values of Western youth shape meme culture, and how, in turn, digital content affects youth culture.

Introduction

- On average, Millennials (born 1980-1995) and Generation Z-ers (born after 1995) spend between **9.6 and 11.1 hours per day** consuming digital content on social media. Nearly **70%** of young adults (ages 18-29) use the Instagram platform, with even greater usage among adolescents. (Pew Research Center, 2018).
- Meme accounts are among the fastest growing accounts on **Instagram**, with millions of users increasingly exposed to the digital content featured in memes.
- **Memes** may be described as *funny images or moving pictures, accompanied by culturally-relevant text or captions made by social media users.* They appeal to wide audiences and are "digestible" in seconds.
- In assessing the types and frequencies of thematic categories embedded in memes — and analyzing quantifiable endorsement of such themes (#likes), we aim to identify the topics that are significant within the **current sociocultural context;** these topics shape, and are shaped by, Western youth culture.

Methodology

- **Data Collection**: Meme screenshots were collected from 10 "influencer" Instagram meme accounts with a minimum "likes-to-followers" ratio of 2% (ratio = mean #likes / #followers). Four large (>9 million followers) and four small (<9 million followers) accounts were selected:
  - @beigecardigan
  - @f*ckjerry
  - @memezar
  - @thefatjewish
  - @daquan
  - @girlwithnojob
  - @mytherapistsays
  - @whitepeoplehumor

  Inclusion criteria for memes required that they were static images posted a minimum of 2 days before screenshotting. Endorsements (#likes, #comments) were recorded at time of screenshot.
- **Thematic Analysis**: Open, inductive coding was used to identify major themes and construct a codebook. Codes and sub-codes were refined into 135 themes. Cohen's kappa was used to establish interrater agreement for n=200 memes across four trained coders (K = .691, 95% CI = .437 − 1.021, p<.01). Memes were then coded (n=1089) using a dichotomous coding system (0, 1).
- **Statistical Analysis:** Frequencies were calculated to examine prevalence of themes and t-tests were performed to test for significant differences between mean #likes of themes and accounts.

Findings

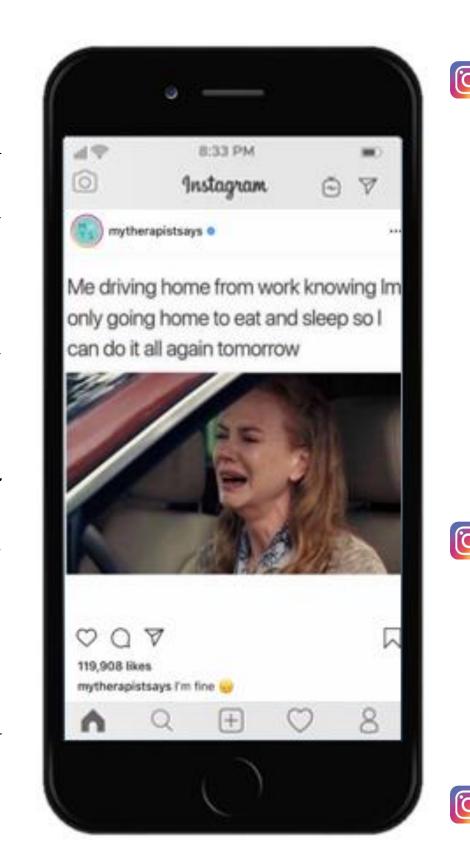| Frequencies of Themes (1 of 2)	n (%)
Social/Political (race, gender, SES/class, age, education, environment, policing, healthcare, elections/government)	40 (3.7)
Social/Political "Punching Up"	58 (5.3)
Social/Political "Punching Down"	91 (8.4)
Social/Political Stereotypes (race, age, gender, SES/class, sexuality, ability, religious, geographical, cultural)	136 (12.5)
Race	21 (1.9)
Gender	65 (6.0)
Class	27 (2.5)
Age	72 (6.6)
Ability	10 (0.9)
Current Events	43 (3.9)
Media/Pop Culture	420 (38.6)
Policing	5 (0.5%)
Parenting	24 (2.2)
Healthy Living (eating, drinking, exercising, sleeping)	22 (2.0)
Unhealthy Living (eating, drinking, exercising, sleeping)	71 (6.5)
"Relatable" (Moms, females)	32 (2.9)
"Relatable" (Dads, males)	16 (1.5)

Frequencies of Themes (2 of 2)	n (%)
Substance Use/Abuse	75 (6.9)
Mental Health (depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation)	86 (7.9)
Isolationism	29 (2.9)
Finances (distress, overspending, frugality)	32 (2.9)
Low Energy (fatigue, procrastination, laziness)	28 (2.6)
"Adulting"	47 (4.3)
School/Work	52 (4.8)
Single Culture	90 (7.3)
Relationships (any)	235 (21.6)
Relationships (family)	95 (8.7)
Relationships (school/work)	23 (2.1)
Animals/Pets	49 (4.5)
Swearing or sexually explicit language	159 (14.6)
African American Vernacular English	85 (7.8)
Use of shorthand language	140 (12.9)
Humor (Sarcastic)	147 (13.5)
Humor (Dark/Sardonic)	84 (7.7)
Humor ("Savage")	91 (8.4)
Humor (Self-Deprecating)	182 (16.7)
Humor ("Observational")	152 (14.0)

Frequencies (above) reveal the most common forms of humor are self-deprecating, "observational" and sarcastic. Common themes include media/pop culture, relationships, and social/political stereotypes.

Theme (all accounts)	t-test (all accounts)
African American Vernacular English	t(84) = 5.9, p<.001
Observational Humor	t(151) = 2.8, p<.01
Reference to Media/Pop Culture	t(419) = 3.3, p<.001
School/Work	t(51) = 2.5, p<.05
School/Academics	t(84) = 5.9, p<.001
Relationships	t(234) = 2.3, p<.05
Relationships with Family	t(94) = 2.3, p<.05

Results (above) comparing mean #likes of individual themes to mean #likes for all eight accounts indicate memes about school, work, relationships, and media/pop culture have significantly more likes. Memes using African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and "observational" humor (i.e., imposing a joke on a photo of something that exists naturally) also have significantly more likes than would be expected. When comparing mean #likes of individual themes to mean #likes of each individual account, findings vary by account (see above, right). Memes relating to age, school and work and memes mocking non-dominant/oppressed social groups have significantly more likes than average on the popular @f*ckjerry account, while memes referencing social/political topics and stereotypes and memes with a "savage" humor style receive a higher-than-average #likes on @whitepeoplehumor. Memes about relationships (in general, and with family) have significantly more likes on three accounts (@daquan, @f*ckjerry, @mytherapistsays).

Theme (by account)	t-test	Account
Relationships	t(30) = 2.0, p<.05	@daquan
Age (politics, stereotypes, "punching")	t(14) = 3.7, p<.05	@f*ckjerry
Social/Political Punching Down	t(14) = 2.1, p<.05	@f*ckjerry
School/Academics	t(16) = 5.9, p<.001	@f*ckjerry
Work	t(14) = 4.5, p<.01	@f*ckjerry
Relationships with Family	t(14) = 2.6, p<.05	@f*ckjerry
	t(11) = 11.6, p<.05	@mytherapistsays
"Savage" Humor (ruthless takedown)	t(25) = 2.2, p<.05	@whitepeoplehumor
Social/Political (race, gender, SES/class, age, education, environment, healthcare, elections/ government, policing)	t(19) = 2.5, p<.05	@whitepeoplehumor
Stereotypes (race, age, gender, SES/class, sexuality, ability, religious, geographical, cultural)	t(31) = 2.2, p<.05	@whitepeoplehumor

Implications

- Collectively, the digital content of the 8 meme accounts in this study reach over **70 million** Instagram users. Instagram users endorse (like) memes with certain themes significantly more than others, particularly those relating to **school**, **work**, **relationships**, **age**, **media/pop culture**, and **social/political topics**.
- The **sociocultural context** of Western youth and meme culture mutually reflect and shape each other.