

Semiotic Deconstruction of Internet Memes: Analyzing Layered Meanings through Intertextuality and Myth

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Abstract

This study undertakes a semiotic analysis of online memes using Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes' theoretical frameworks. The study investigates how memes serve as a sophisticated type of digital communication, conveying many concepts through humour, intertextuality, and cultural references. Through the analysis of some randomly selected memes, the study illustrates how memes establish layered meanings by interacting with signifiers and signifieds, as well as denotative and connotative levels of signification. To figure out what the pictures and words in memes mean, the method combines qualitative-interpretive semiotic analysis with intertextuality ideas. The study deciphers the multiple meanings inherent in memes using Saussure's model of signs and Barthes' concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth. Findings indicate that memes frequently either challenge or reinforce cultural beliefs, relying on shared cultural knowledge get be effective. This study underscores the significance of incorporating both Saussurean and Barthes' semiotic model and intertextuality to comprehend the complex mechanisms by which memes generate and transmit meaning. The findings of this study contribute to the expanding field of meme studies by providing a deeper understanding of the complex semiotic units that memes are, as well as how they are constantly evolving through intertextual dialogue and reinterpretation. The importance of memes in the communication and perpetuation of cultural ideas, as well as their function in reflecting contemporary digital discourse, is emphasised.

Keywords: Memes, Saussurean semiotics, Barthes' semiotics, Intertextuality

I. INTRODUCTION

In the current digital era, communication modalities and mediums are evolving, and new "languages" are emerging. The internet meme is one of the most recent mediums that individuals have employed to convey their thoughts and ideas. Davison (2012) defines an internet meme as "a piece of culture, normally a joke, which gains influence through online transmission" in his essay, The Language of Internet Memes. Despite their viral growth, academics did not give memes substantial attention until 2011, when Northwestern University in the United States created Meme Studies, an actual academic course on memes. The extended implementation of this course showcased the profound impact of the internet on society, encompassing language, culture, and beliefs. The writers have since recognised the necessity of conducting research on internet memes in order to remain current with internet culture, demonstrate an alternative method of communication, a cost-effective method of mass advertising, enhance students' media literacy, and explore the relationship between images and text, thereby generating a new meaning. This investigation aims to scrutinise the signs/symbols, or more technically, the semiotic sources, employed in the creation of memes. Additionally, it will examine the manner in which signifiers embedded in memes employ humour to undermine the prevalent ideologies of digital users.

II. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Origin of Memes

In his 1976 book "The Selfish Gene," evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins devised the concept of memes as a means of elucidating the cultural transmission, human behaviour, cultural evolution, and development of human society. Memes, in his view, are the cultural equivalents of biological genes. According to Dawkins, genes compete for environmental reproduction and dissemination. Because this is their primary function, we can also refer to them as replicators. In order to better understand cultural evolution, Dawkins sought out comparable principles, which led him to identify an additional type of replicator: a meme.

A meme is an alternative replicator. People can communicate concepts, ideas, or thoughts through memes. It may refer to an image, video, narrative, or joke, or it may be a catchy tune that you unknowingly adopt and continue to hum subconsciously as a result of a commercial's slogan. All of these have been transmitted to your consciousness from another individual's account or from one internet user to another through email, blogs, and other social networking sites. Memes often resemble viruses, acting as replicating agents that require a host carrier for replication. According to Dawkins (1976), memes possess three features:

- **Fidelity:** It refers to the elements of a meme that allow for effortless replication. The fact that a meme is memorable is more important than its truthfulness.
- **Fecundity:** The recurrence of an idea or pattern.
- **Longevity:** The longer a meme lasts, the greater its potential for replication.

Dr. Rintel, who has published on memes, notes that memes "represent a novel form of 'comment culture' on the internet." The function of internet memes in contemporary political expression, their capacity to emphasise a societal issue, and their ubiquitous presence in the development of social consciousness among internet users have been recognised by numerous researchers. Memes enable creators to articulate their responses and perspectives on critical social issues. Knobel and Lanarkshire (2007, as cited in Varona, n.d.) assert that the presence of humour, whether sardonic, satiric, or "quirky," distinguishes successful internet memes. Another component is intertextuality, which signifies "cross-references to everyday and popular culture events, icons, or phenomena." Kuipers and Shifman (2007) also noted that digital humour frequently incorporates "incongruous elements" that combine reality and fantasy

III. INTRODUCTION TO SEMIOTICS

Semiotics, according to Chris Sinha, has its roots in the traditional and scholarly study of the literary, rhetorical, and logical arts. Semiotics, which is also known as semiology, is the study of signs is known as semiotics, or semiology. Signs encompass the following:

- i. Signs that are encountered in daily life, such as road signs, pub signs, and star signs
- ii. Drawings, paintings, and photographs...
- iii. Use symbols, body language, music, and words.

Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, defines a sign as a combination of signifier and signified. He asserts that signs are conventional and arbitrary, and their significance stems from their interactions with other signs within a system. His paradigm differentiates between the signifier (the physical form of the sign) and the signified (the concept or idea it represents). Saussure underscored the importance of language as a system of signs, where the placement of a word within the linguistic structure determines its meaning. Over time, Saussure's concept of 'sign' has faced challenges due to its rigidity and limitations on the roles of signifier and signified. Roland Barthes, a French cultural theorist, has challenged the one-to-one, non-inherent relationship between the "signifier" and "concept" by focusing on the cultural and ideological

dimensions of signs, expanding on Saussure's semiotic model. He transcends the arbitrariness of language and expands the concept of "sign."

Barthes coined the terms 'denotation' and 'connotation' to describe 'literal' and 'associative' meanings. All signs in society have a denotative or dictionary meaning, while the connotative or associative meanings are contingent upon the context, situation, and relationship. For instance, the colour red is distinct from any other colour at the denotative level. It represents the color's binary opposition. However, it is understood to represent danger, revolution, blood, and so forth at the connotative level, or the second level of signification. In other words, a variety of factors determine and interpret a sign, not limiting the connotation to a single meaning.

In addition, Barthes introduced the notion of the "myth," which is the second-order signification that a sign acquires within a specific cultural context. According to Barthes, myths frequently serve to uphold prevailing ideologies and hierarchies of power. His work emphasises the significance of closely investigating the cultural meanings that signs convey, revealing underlying power dynamics and societal institutions.

IV. DEFINING INTERTEXTUALITY

Literary and cultural concepts that denote the interconnected relationships between texts are known as intertextuality. Intertextuality implies that no text exists in isolation, but rather, all writings, whether explicitly or implicitly, influence and interact with other texts. Examples of this may encompass stylistic similarities between works, allusions, quotations, or references. Julia Kristeva, a Bulgarian-French philosopher, literary critic, and psychotherapist, created the word "intertextuality," stating that "any text is a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (Kristeva, 1986, p. 37). Kristeva derived this concept from the writings of Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, with a particular emphasis on his concepts of heteroglossia and dialogism. Bakhtin had previously investigated the concept of texts in dialogue; however, Kristeva built upon this concept to develop a more comprehensive theory of the ways in which texts interact and influence one another. Intertextuality has since become a fundamental concept in literary theory, cultural studies, and semiotics, influencing our comprehension of the generation and interpretation of texts across a variety of media.

V. INTERTEXTUALITY AND BARTHES' SEMIOTICS TO MEMES

Intertextuality and Barthes' semiotics are essential for comprehending memes. Intertextuality is the manner in which memes construct layered meanings by drawing on and referencing existing texts, images, or cultural symbols. Barthes' semiotic theory, particularly his concepts of denotation and connotation, aids in the decoding of the signs in memes. Memes employ both visual and linguistic symbols, with the denotative level conveying literal meaning and the connotative level evoking cultural, emotive, or ideological interpretive meanings.

Barthes' model can be employed to comprehend the manner in which memes convey meaning through signs and establish or perpetuate cultural beliefs. The first order of signification uses literal elements like images and texts as denotations. The signified is the direct meaning of an image or text. At the connotation level (second order), memes often convey broader cultural or social implications. Intertextuality is a critical factor in layered signification because it entails the use of cultural symbols or references to create new meanings. Memes often reinforce or challenge popular myths, such as when they use images of superheroes to make social commentary. Their effectiveness depends on common cultural conventions, as audiences must recognize and interpret the references. Additionally, memes defy meaning by employing irony or satire to dismantle prevailing cultural narratives, frequently drawing on Roland Barthes' concept of myth.

VI. METHODOLOGY

To conduct the analysis, the researcher randomly selected prevalent memes from the internet that are easily comprehensible to the majority of individuals. Saussure's and Barthes' semiotics models were employed to analyse each meme, as they are particularly well-suited for the analysis of internet memes due to their emphasis on signifiers, signifieds, and signs, as well as the strata of meaning within communication, along with the concept of intertextuality. The research employs a qualitative-interpretive semiotic approach. For this study, the researcher randomly selected three memes from the Google and Yahoo search engines. The study analysed the implications of the signifiers in the selected memes and deconstructed dominant ideologies that appear natural and healthy by utilising Saussure's semiotic model and Barthes's connotative and mythological meaning of the sign. The chosen memes are analysed using semiotics, with the underlying assumption that the memes are communicated through the elements of signs that they already possess.

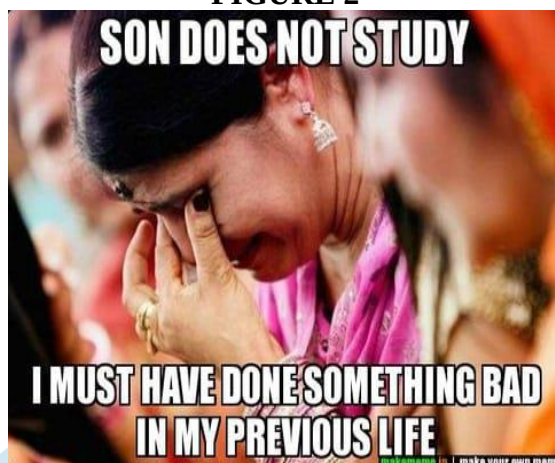
VII. SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

FIGURE 1



The idea of feminism and gender neutrality are shown in the meme. The text 'Equal rights! Equal rights!', describes the basic fundamental of feminism, and 'You can't hit me I'm a girl' which can be seen below the image, shows discrimination on the grounds of sex, whereas 'you shouldn't hit people in general' negates such perception and promotes gender neutrality. The image in the meme shows a girl with a facial expression where perhaps she is raising slogans of 'Equal rights!Equal rights!' The text and image from Saussure's semiotic model signify many different ideas at a time, and signified may perceive it differently. Also, the text is written on a girl's t-shirt 'this is what a feminist look like' goes parallel to the text above the image but rests in stark contrast with the one below the image. The viewers may receive varying connotations of this text, but as I see it, it presents the perspective of the opposite party which does not entertain the idea of equal rights as individual rights and is perhaps ridiculing the girl who demands gender neutrality but does not know what it even means. Implications of the text, if they are interpreted separately, also shield the main idea of the meme, so intertextual references are also evident

FIGURE 2



Myths are embedded in our society. According to Barthes, 'Myth is the representation of the dominant ideologies of our time, which becomes "natural" with history.' The meme shows a mother worried about her son. Text above the image, 'son does not study' describes the habit of son, while the one below the picture, 'I must have done something bad in my previous life' describes the belief which people in our society hold close to their heart, i.e. 'if you do something wrong in this life, you will have to pay in the next life' or 'Karma moves in two directions. If we act virtuously, the seed we plant will result in happiness. If we act non-virtuously, suffering results.' This interdependency of a habit and a belief here shows intertextuality, and signified may comprehend it incompletely if he skips the inter-dependence. Since, signifier, according to semiotics, is the form or sign, so the image in the meme signifies a mother giving a tense expression. But the true implication rests on the relatedness of both image and text, and the viewer needs to interpret the text and the image together.

FIGURE 3



In the given meme, the interference of parents in their children's career has been shown. The image depicts a strict father. His concern for his son's career can be seen both in his facial expression and his response below the image, 'no beta, it's pronounced doctor.' His response also introduces humor which can't be seen in his expression. In the text above the image, 'I want to be an actor' son's choice of career is highlighted, which is in obvious contrast to the image and father's response.

It should be noted in this meme that signifier narrates two different ideas, and signified must be viewed from the aspects of intertextuality. The text above the image signifies one complete idea, and the image along with the other text signifies another idea that is in contrast with the former. So, viewers need to perceive signifiers according to the relationship of signs.

VIII. CONCLUSION

To conclude, this study illustrates the significance of internet memes in contemporary digital communication and the rich complexity of these units as semiotic units. By combining Barthes' semiotic model with the concept of intertextuality, the researcher was able to reveal the complex nature of meme meaning creation. The results of the analysis indicate that memes are not merely humorous vehicles; they are complex systems of symbols that both influence and reflect cultural narratives. The interaction between denotative and connotative levels of meaning, along with the multiple meanings created by intertextual references, makes it possible for memes to convey complex ideas in short, visually appealing ways. In addition, the investigation underscores the manner in which memes frequently either challenge or reinforce cultural myths, thereby functioning as a potent platform for cultural critique and social commentary. This study adds to the growing field of meme studies by using a method that combines intertextuality and semiotic analysis. This helps us understand how memes create and spread meaning in a more complete way. It will be essential to conduct additional research in this field as digital communication continues to develop in order to comprehend the role of memes in influencing online discourse and reflecting general cultural trends. The results of this study not only improve our understanding of memes as a communication phenomenon, but also emphasize the significance of visual literacy in the digital era.

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