Emerging Meme Culture: Usage of Memes as a Source of Political and Social Awareness

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Abstract

The pandemic has pushed people into online spaces, digital education, and media literacy which is more significant than ever. Misinformation is occurring in the online internet space through various trolls and memes on social media platforms. These trolls and memes are user-generated content that exists on various popular social media sites in the form of fake information. Memes and trolls have been weaponized by various communities to support their propaganda to reach out to the public. It is a powerful means of communication and also a primary source of information for people. This study aims to find out the understanding of meme culture among people. This research is to understand the pattern of information consumption and sharing of memes by people. This study is to analyze if meme influence and shape the opinion of people. It will be a quantitative research methodology. This research will be developed by using the empirical study through an online survey tool.

Keywords: Internet, social media, memes.

Introduction

Online memes have a major impact on political and social culture. The word 'meme' was coined by Richard Dawkins in his book "The Selfish Gene." It was the first attempt to define cultural information and the way it spreads. The meme term is conceived as similar to the genes that are selfish. Same as memes, they also carry information and data that can be replicated and transmitted from one to another, though they have the ability to evolve, mutating at random and undergoing natural selection. The meme concept is already largely theoretical.

According to The Free Press journal, there are many smartphone users, and data packs are cheaper in India. The meme culture on social media platforms is losing its humour value. The satirical and humourous presentation of social issues has been emerging as dark humour as well as untraceable digital revenge, which can spread within the factions of the seconds and potentially cause irreversible damage to the targeted organisations and people. Experts have also warned that the unchecked

misuse of memes can disturb the social atmosphere of the country. Since it turns into an insensitive mockery, Prabhu Pam, head of the industry intelligence group for cyber media research, said "With the rise of Generation Z (the demographic cohort after the millennial), we have seen the birth and evolution of meme culture, and since they can be created, shared, consumed, and disseminated wittily, they can spread swiftly into popular culture due to the ease of sharing".

The word'meme' is a French word that means'same'. Therefore, another Greek word'mimoumai' means 'to intimate'. In this book by Darwin, he states that 'we need a name for the new replicator, a noun of imitation". Though Dawkins said that "it could alternatively be thought of as being related to memory or the French word meme". According to Helighen and Chielens (2009), it began to take shape in the form of an active research programme by drawing scientists from many fields in the 1990s (Hull, 2000). The important landmark paths were also contributed to and created by the significant philosophers Daniel C. Dennett (1990, 1993, and 1995) and Douglas Hofstadter (1985). There was the Journal of Memetics (1997–2005), which published several meme-oriented books (Boyd & Richardson, 2005; Brodie, 1996; Distin, 2005; Lynch, 1996).

The act of memes carries symbols, cultural ideas, and practices that can be transmitted from one person to another. It can spread through various forms, such as gestures, writing, rituals, and another imitable phenomenon, by following the mimic theme. On the internet, memes started first in 1996; it was the first ever viral baby viral dance on 'cha-cha-cha'. It was a 3D dancing baby; it was very popular, and it became a meme to influence the people and their mindsets who viewed, followed, and shared that meme (Kashyap, 2019). Memes have the potential to focus on real-world issues, and when they are consumed and shared by the influencer, it leads to a large number of consumptions. Memes are defined as 'amplification by simplification' by McCloud (1998). It means that memes have the potential to condense complex and complicated facts into a brief, powerful, and effective way that can engage a large audience. Buchel (2012) defined memes as culturally defined jokes that gain

influence through online transmission. In the early era, studies have also shown that political memes increased the participation of citizens. It encourages them to express their political opinions and participate in the debates and discussions that can be done through various traditional mediums as well.

According to Dawkins "a unit of cultural transmission or unit of imitation". There are some examples, which include fashion trends, slang, style, religious ideas, and behaviours (Jhonson, 2007). Therefore, the 'internet memes' dock on context and text, drawing on the natures that Dawkins outlines for the memes. Internet memes are usually considered for humour and okes. Memes are very diverse in nature as well as persuasive. It contained text, images, illustrations, a gif, a video, multiple images, and more (Marwick, 2013).

Memes as a tool of communication

Dawkins, the biologist, coined the term meme as a form of communication. Though it is adapted in various disciplines that include philosophy, psychology, folklore, linguistics, and anthropology, During the time of media platform convergence, when content was transmitted from one medium to another, memes became significant in communication. According to Shifman (2013), the subject of memes has been the subject of constant debate, outright dismissal, and derision. In the vernacular discourse of the citizens, the phrase 'internet meme' is applied to describe the propagation of content such as rumours, jokes, videos, or websites from one to another. Internet memes are usually derivatives of user-generated content.

Memes have been a topic of discussion. There is criticism raised against it. There are some of the relevant contexts, as follows:

1. **Concept's ambiguity:** There is always a disagreement about the definition of memes and what precisely a meme is. It leads to different disciplines and difficulties in measuring and quantifying them.

2. **Analogy:** The metaphoric analogy is between its nature and cultural feeding. Hence, this field is criticized as materialistic, reductive, and ineffective in defining human behaviors, which are complex.

3. **Conscious selection:** According to the critics, mutation and dissemination have no added value to offer. Therefore, it doesn't offer any insights into any traditional discipline such as linguistics or anthropology (Benitez-Bribiesca, 2001; Chesterman, 2005; Rose, 1998).

According to Blackmore (1999), the controversies in memetics claim that people are now 'meme machines'; they produce and spread several memes. The spread of memes is based on perceptions and preferences. This is significant in the process of meme selection. Therefore, people act as active agents in the highly appropriate understanding of how memes travel with the help of a digital vehicle. The meaning of memes is dramatically altered in the course of diffusion (Aunger, 2000).

According to the new york times (2019), millennials and gen z tend to approach serious issues with humour and add layered jokes to discourse on any issue. it also added that "memes aren't inherently bad or good, but they do speak to a cultural moment. they take on the character of the people creating and consuming them. this was and is an international conversation, with both locals and even the desi diaspora, like Hasan Minhaj, getting involved."

Impacts of memes on society

In this society, videos and images establish regular physical events, and they spread easily through the internet. The impact of memes can be positive or negative on society. Therefore, these memes can portray real-life issues and social, cultural, ethical, and stereotypical norms of society humorously and funnily. Like political problems, for example, the ye bikgyihaigormint meme, the Panama case, etc. This is the voice of people in the picture to give the message that the government is not working, etc. Memes are also bringing social change to society in a certain way (Sharma, 2021).

Memes also provide an opportunity to connect with people through emojis, GIFs, and stickers in conversations. Memes are an easy way to connect and communicate. To convey our feelings and to express ourselves, people use memes that are relevant and relatable to them. Whenever social media users come across such content, they experience different emotions such as joy, sadness, happiness, fear, etc. Memes also encourage participation and sharing abilities on the social media platform. Many meme creators within culture produce and share worldwide on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. Today, memes highly influence modern language, slang, and culture. Internet users are sharing and tagging people in memes, making them popular. There are instances where people are transforming into nobodies to overnight fame through these popular memes.

According to Denisova (2019), memes became a mainstream phenomenon in the early 2000s in internet culture. It plays a significant role in setting digital narratives. Memes that have been shared widely on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube, etc. They have been propagating through the creation of memes and acting like 'meme generators. The virality of memes is certainly associated with the shares, reports, clicks, likes, and comments by a large number of internet users on different social media platforms (Harlow, 2013). The nature of memes is generally visually attractive and humorous. They generate currency through likes, shares, comments, and reposts of certain posts on social media platforms. The memes are usually a combination of text and pictures. It consists of the direct and indirect reference of current information related to the issues and relatable situations. Memes sometimes also derive from music, songs, film dialogues, folklore, and mythology (Ross and Rivers, 2017). These memes are commonly used as satires to convey messages through this kind of medium on social media. They sometimes also take up celebrity rumours and gossip. This kind of meme can be actively identified as directly attacking the subject and issues or passively by covertly highlighting the issues. Hans-CessSpeel (1996) has defined the term 'memeplexes'. Dawkins (2006) also explained the concept of 'co-adapted meme complexes. In this concept, there are two visuals, catchphrases, or slogans that can be juxtaposed to create a new, complex cultural and social meaning. Therefore, this leads to strengthening both ideas in the process.

Meme Culture In India

People are consistently using the popularity and fast circulation of memes, as well as the inbuilt meaning and cultural shorthand, to express their ideas. It engages others on issues regarding the societal importance of conventional channels of communication and their different frames of meaning (Burton, 2019). Social media facilitates the massive amount of information shared by people on a daily basis. This ecosystem of sharing and tagging information has been expanding. Social media has also become an important centre of information sources, knowledge, and entertainment. The Internet is exploding with the participatory meme communication culture. Social media is a powerful tool to share information, create content, share ideas, and connect people from all over the world. It also influences the lifestyle of society. Youth use these kinds of platforms for sharing pictures, healthy posts, videos, memes, and messages that eventually help to develop a strong and balanced society (Burton, 2019). Memes have become the new civic form of participation too. There is a direct relationship between the culture and the meme. (Shiftman, 2013; Nowak, 2013)

Internet memes

These internet memes are currently trending on social media. They are a reusable combination of graphics and text. There are lots of viral meme templates. People personalised it in their text speech as per the situation. These memes are somehow related to current events and issues, and these texts, images, and gifs can be reused if they're successful enough. Therefore, lots of memes break conventionality with unexpected memes, confusing interpretations, taboos, etc. This meme generation nowadays uses image and text templates to communicate (Costa, Oliveira, & Pinto 2015). Ideas that have the potential to impact the public's opinion, polity, culture, and profit (Weng et al. 2012) The ease of the information available on social media has outsourced the progress of modern engines. These video memes turn out to be the "buzz". A visual meme on social media is a short segment video that is remixed along with the report by one or the other significant This video-making required effort; reporting the video gets the stamp of approval and awareness rather than simply viewing the video, rating it, leaving a comment, or retweeting it (Xie et al.). Audience participation is the key feature in the meme culture, as internet memes also thrive by sharing and mutating. It encourages mass participation.

Hypothesis

H0 (Null Hypothesis): Memes influence and shape the opinions of people.

Research Methodology

This research studies the emerging trend of internet memes. People use memes as a medium of communication. This work explores the meme culture among people and the pattern of information consumption and sharing of memes by them. This study also examines the increasing popularity of memes over traditional media. This study will be quantitative research. A structured questionnaire will be a tool for surveying with the help of Google Forms. This study will take a sample of 100–120 people. The questionnaire will consist of 20 survey questions. The reliability test was done on the questionnaire with the help of a pilot survey of 15 people. It will be close-ended questions on the Likert scale. For data analysis, SPSS software will be used, and the chi-square test will be applied.

The reliability test is an important instrument for determining the level of stability and internal consistency of an instrument. To obtain the reliability value, a pilot study needs to be carried out. 15 people took part in the pilot study and associated this data with the SPSS software. The Cronbach alpha calculation was done. If the Cronbach Alpha value is 0.60 or below, it is considered unacceptable. If the value of Cronbach Alpha is in the range of 0.60-0.80, then it is considered moderate and acceptable. If the Cronbach Alpha is above 0.80–1.00, then it is a very good value. In this study, the reliability value lies at 0.712, which is considered acceptable and moderate.

Table - 1

Reliability Statistics		
Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.723	.712	12

Analysis and interpretation

Millions of users are sharing and tagging people and friends with memes on a daily basis. Majorly, it includes the youth as an online audience that actively participates in sharing, tagging, and generating memes, as well as other users from all over the world. The results of the study show that out of 103 respondents, 49 are males and 54 are females.

In this question, if people spend more time on social media, in response, 23 people strongly agree, 40 people agree, 20 people are neutral, 13 disagree, and 1 strongly disagree.

"I spend a lot of time on social media"
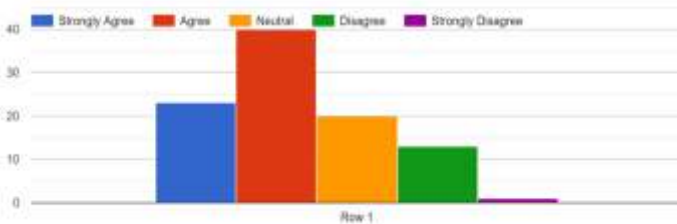
In this question of understanding of the meaning of 'Meme'. People responded with 54 people are Strongly Agree, 41 People are Agree, 7 people are Neutral and 1 person is Disagree.

I Understand the meaning of 'Meme'
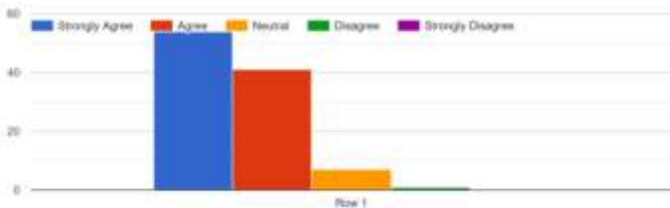
In this question if people watch memes on social media. People responded with 46 people are Strongly Agree, 39 people are Agree, 12 people are Neutral, 4 people are Disagree and 1 person is Strongly Disagree.

I watch memes on social media
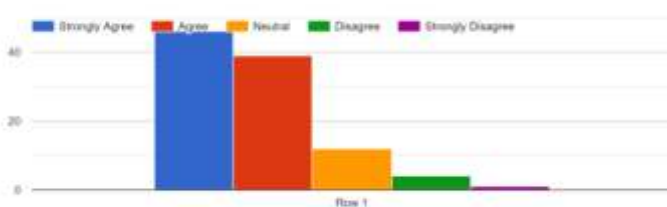
If people follow memes pages over on social media. In response, 35 people are Strongly Agreed, 33 people are Agreed, 16 people are Neutral, 15 people are Disagreed and 3 peole are Strongly disagree.

I follow memes pages on social media
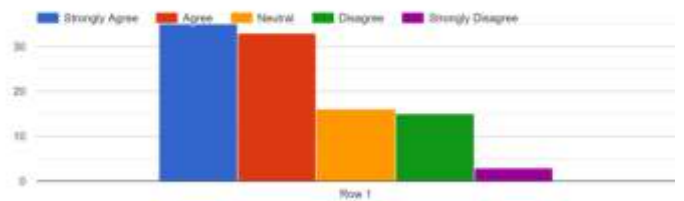
In this question if people often relate with the meme content. In response, 32 people are Agreed, 46 people are Agreed, 12 people are neutral, 9 people are Disagree and 2 people are Strongly Disagree.

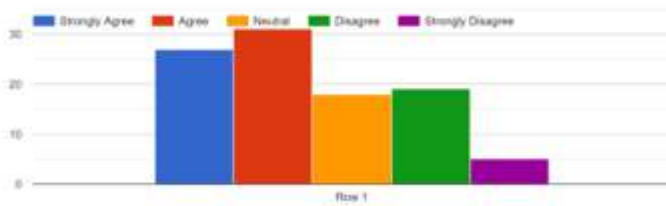I often relate with the meme content
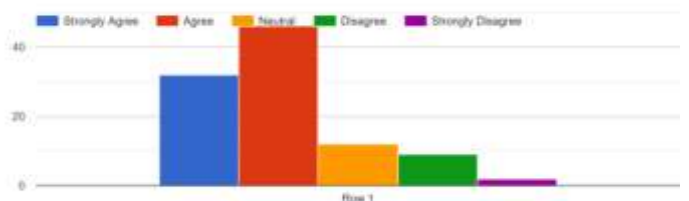
In this question, 25 people are Strongly Agree, 41 people are Agree, 13 people are agree, 19 people are Disagree and 2 people are Strongly Disagree about being update about current meme trends.

I am updated with current meme trends
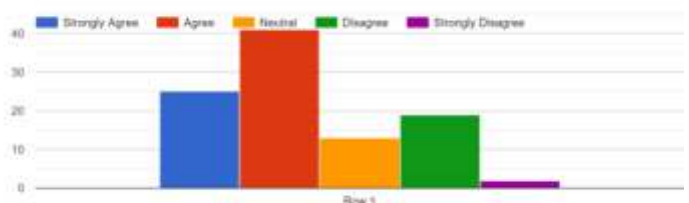
Here in this question, if people use meme as a medium of communication. In response, 27 People are Strongly agree, 31 people are agree, 18 people are Neutral, 19 people are Disagree and 5 people are Strongly Disagree.
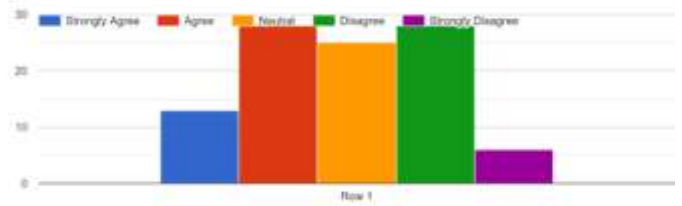
I use memes as a medium of communication

I get information through memes instead of traditional media.

In this question, if people trust the information that is delivered through the memes, In response, 12 people Strongly Agreed, 28 people Agreed, 25 people Neutral, 28 people Disagreed and 6 people Strongly Disagreed.

In this question if people believe meme as an accurate source of information. In response, 7 People are Strongly Agree, 16 people are Agree, 30 people are Neutral, 38 people are Disagree, and 11 people are Strongly Disagree.

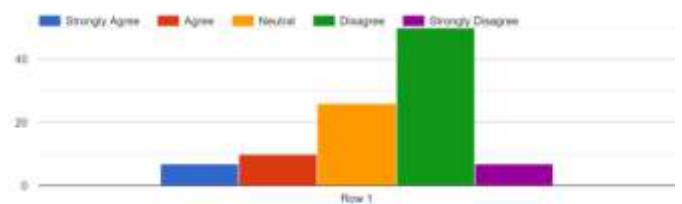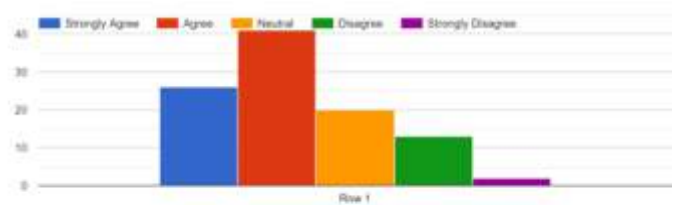I believe in memes as an accurate source of information

I trust information delivered through memes
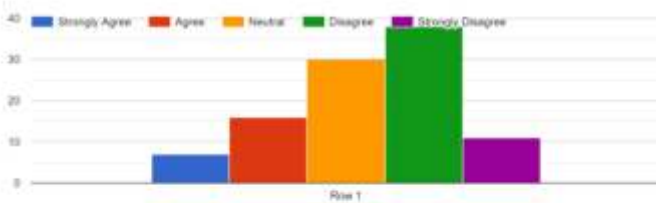
In this question if people trust on the information delivered through memes. In response,7 People are Strongly Agree, 10 people are Agree, 26 people are Neutral, 50 people are Disagree and 7 people are Strongly Disagree.
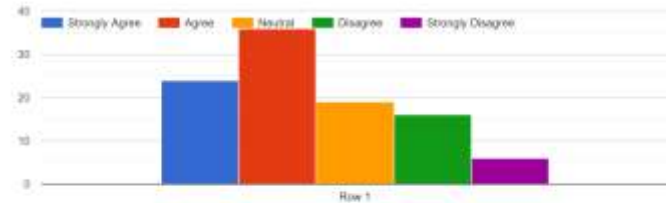
In this question if memes have strong impact on the society. In response, 26 people are Strongly Agreed, 41 people are Agreed, 20 people are Neutral about it, 13 people are Disagree, and 2 people are strongly Disagreed.

I often tag and share memes on social media

Memes have a strong impact on society

In this question if people get most of the information from the meme on social media instead of traditional media. In response, 13 people Strongly Agreed, 28 people Agreed, 25 people are Neutral, 28 people are Disagreed and 6 people are Strongly Disagree.
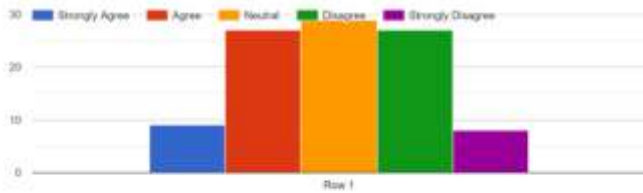
Here, in this question if memes influence and shape opinions of people. In response, 9 people are Strongly Agree, 27 people are agree, 29 people are Neutral about it, 27 people are Disagree, 8 people are Strongly Disagree.

Memes influence you and shape your opinions

In this question if people use meme to participate in social and political discussions. In response, 4 People are Strongly Agree, 20 people are Agree, 30 People are Neutral, 39 People are disagree, 6 people are Strongly Disagree.

I use memes to participate in social and political discussions
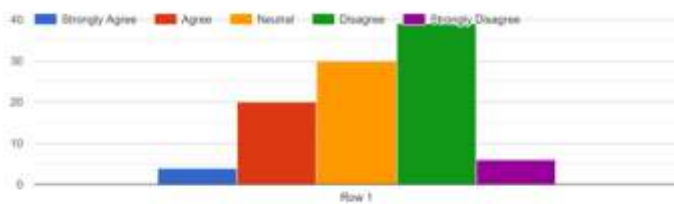
In this question if people create memes. In response, 4 people Strongly Agreed, 13 people are Agreed, 9 people are Neutral, 47 people are Disagree and 29 people are Strongly Disagreed.

I create memes
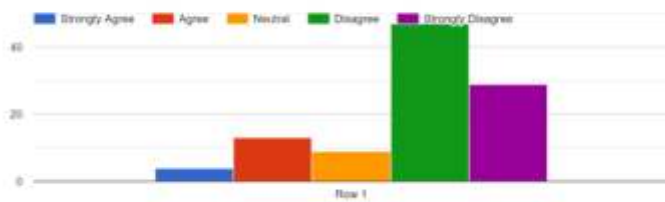
In this question, if understanding and sharing memes gives people social validation. In response, 8 People are Strongly Agree, 16 people are Agreed, 36 people are Neutral, 29 people are Disagree, 9 people are Strongly Disagree.

Understanding and sharing memes gives me social validation
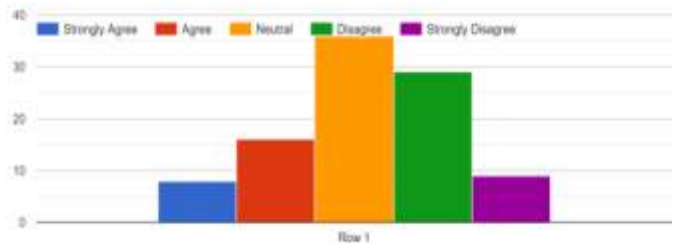
The Chi-Square test was done for the analysis in SPSS software. The Chi-square test is suitable for survey studying the response data. In this analysis, the P value is 0.054, which is below 0.005. So, here we can accept the Null Hypothesis. According to the analysis, we can say there is a significant relationship between memes and people's opinions, it influences their thoughts.

Table -2

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	9.297a	4	.054
Likelihood Ratio	9.898	4	.042
Linear-by-Linear Association	7.688	1	.006
N of Valid Cases	103		
a. 4 cells (40.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 3.81.			

Table -3
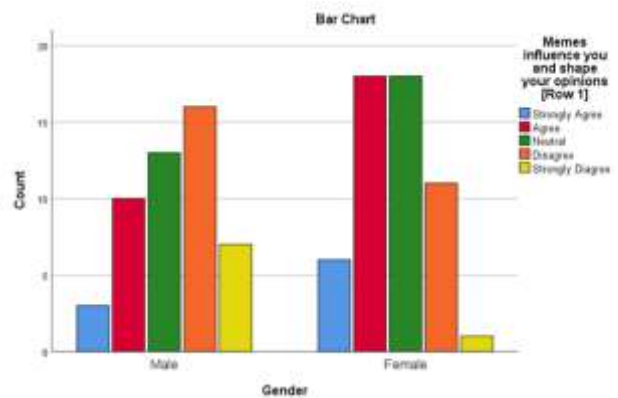
Conclusion

These memes on the internet offer various new insights into our perceptions of the world in general. Humour has been used as a significant tool against oppression for ages, and with digital technologies, it has gained prominence. People use online spaces with the use of memes to engage people in discussions. Through this act, it provides additional confirmation using popular, visual, and viral content by engaging the users about the current issues. These memes have the reach of viral spreadability (Jenkins, 2006). Ryan Frazer and Bronwyn Carlson (2017), in their paper, described that internet memes have largely taken over; they are a more performative approach and less prescriptive to online participation and activism. Besides providing information and engaging people, these memes also influence people and shape their opinions.

Therefore, a large number of people spend time on social media and watch memes. People do understand the meaning of memes and also follow various pages that create and share memes online. Individuals communicate through memes, as the origin of a meme is a biological term for the organism gene and how fast it spreads. This is finely correlated with the behaviour and idea that are successful. This meme has gained new prominence today as a piece of culture that is constantly tagged and shared by people. There are a large number of people who share thoughts, humour, and ideas. People find memes intriguing because they find them relatable, and due to this, they mostly stay updated with the current meme trends. Memes are a way of communication for lots of people. However, they get the information through memes on social media. Some find this information accurate and reliable, and some do not. But a large number of people get information through online social media instead of traditional media because it is fast and easily accessible to all. Memes also offer people the opportunity to participate in and discuss current issues. Memes have a strong impact on society, which gives them the power to influence and shape the opinions of people. It encourages people to have discussions about social and political issues. The act of sharing memes on the internet gives people social validation and influences their opinions.

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