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THE SOCIAL LIFE OF MEMES: CULTURE, COMMUNICATION, AND POWER IN THE GENERATIVE DIGITAL AGE

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ABSTRACT

This study conceptualizes the internet meme not merely as a form of vernacular cultural expression, but as a foundational social logic underpinning everyday life and one of the principal structuring forces of contemporary digital societies. Moving beyond its initial framing as a simple replicator, the meme is theorized here as a complex, multimodal, and intertextual communicative practice that performs critical social, political, and economic functions. The article examines the meme's dual role in shaping collective identities and sustaining digital communities, while also interrogating its profound ambivalence within the political domain: serving simultaneously as a tool for grassroots activism and resistance, and as an instrument of disinformation and radicalization within the framework of memetic warfare. The analysis further explores the epistemological consequences of memetic circulation, drawing on the concept of processing fluency to illustrate how, in post-truth environments, virality and emotional resonance supplant factual accuracy as perceived indicators of truth. This dynamic is further exacerbated by the algorithmic architectures of digital platforms that privilege engagement-driven amplification. Furthermore, the study examines the emergent domain of generative memetics, in which artificial intelligence (AI) reconfigures the production, mediation, and dissemination of memes, inaugurating a novel paradigm of AI-mediated cultural creation. The article concludes that memetic logic-defined by rapid diffusion, participatory recombination, and affective potency-is not a transient cultural trend but a persistent mode of expression that both mirrors and shapes the social and political realities of the digital era.

KEYWORDS: Digital, Digital Culture, Digital Society, Generative Artificial Intelligence, Generative Memetics, Internet, Memes.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the communication landscape of the 21st century—defined by continuous and accelerated information flows—the internet meme has emerged as a distinctively influential cultural form. While to the casual observer a meme may appear to be merely a humorous image, a viral video, or a repeatedly circulated catchphrase across online forums and social media platforms (Lestari et al., 2024), such a perspective overlooks its deeper sociocultural significance. Humor frequently functions as the primary vehicle for memetic diffusion, operating as a social lubricant (Lestari et al., 2024). Yet, beneath this apparent simplicity lies a complex communicative phenomenon with profound social resonance and considerable cultural impact. Memes have become omnipresent, altering interpersonal interaction, reflecting public opinion, and serving as powerful mediums for the expression of ideas, identity, and political allegiances (Milner, 2016; Shifman, 2014; Wiggins, 2019). As An Xiao Mina (2019) noted, it is challenging to fully capture the sheer ubiquity and pervasive influence of memes across all spheres of modern society. **Indeed, it is precisely their perceived triviality that renders them so effective**, their humorous and shareable nature often conceals intricate mechanisms of cultural transmission and social influence (Wiggins, 2019).

This study aims to uncover the multiple dimensions of the internet meme, arguing that it is not an incidental byproduct of digital culture but rather one of its foundational structuring logics and, simultaneously, one of its most revealing mirrors. The article's central claim is that the underlying logic of memetic activity—characterized by rapid dissemination, participatory recombination, and affective potency—has evolved into a primary organizing framework for collective behavior across diverse domains, including finance and geopolitics (Ho, 2022; Zhao et al., 2023). Far from being mere cultural artifacts, memes function as complex social agents that both reflect and actively shape contemporary social, political, and economic realities (Bastari et al., 2021). To disregard the systematic study of memes, therefore, is to overlook a critical communicative and social-cultural dynamic of our time, as memes play a pivotal role within the architecture of modern digital culture (Murfianti, 2019; Vitiuk et al., 2020).

This work is built upon a multidisciplinary framework, integrating perspectives from sociology (Bourdieu, 1986; Goffman, 2021), media studies (Jenkins et al., 2013; Shifman, 2014), political theory (Foucault, 1981), and cognitive psychology to

develop a comprehensive model of the meme's social ontology and communicative dynamics.

This paper presents a theoretical synthesis aimed at advancing the conceptual understanding of the social dynamics of memes. Adopting a non-empirical methodology, it undertakes a critical and integrative review of multidisciplinary scholarship. Relevant literature from sociology, communication studies, and media theory was systematically examined to identify theoretical gaps and establish linkages among otherwise fragmented academic discourses. Accordingly, the paper's contribution is primarily conceptual. Its originality resides in the critical synthesis and integration of existing theoretical constructs, culminating in the development of a novel and more comprehensive analytical framework.

We contend that the influence of memes derives not in spite of their apparent triviality but precisely because of it. Their humorous or seemingly mundane form enables them to function as Trojan horses for ideological critique, circumventing the critical scrutiny typically directed toward more formal modes of political messaging. This inherent tension between aesthetic form and communicative function positions memes as a significant object of study, particularly as digital artefacts that have a social meaning (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015).

This article undertakes a genealogical and multidisciplinary analysis grounded on a comprehensive review of relevant literature. It begins by tracing the conceptual genealogy of the meme, mapping its transformation from a biological metaphor into a socially embedded and digitally mediated tool. The discussion then examines the internal grammar of memetic culture, emphasizing its participatory dynamics and aesthetic conventions. Subsequently, the analysis addresses the social functions of memes in processes of identity formation and community building, their ambivalent role within the political domain as a tool of both activism and ideological contestation, and their entanglement within the broader economies of attention and affect. The research further explores the epistemological implications of memetic logic, drawing on the notion of processing fluency to explain its persuasive power within the context of a post-truth media environment. Attention is also given to the underlying power structures of digital platforms, including mechanisms of algorithmic amplification and content moderation. **The paper concludes with an analysis of a critical contemporary challenge**, the emergence of generative memetics—a novel paradigm of AI-

mediated cultural production that signals not only a new era of meme creation but also a potential crisis of authenticity, threatening to destabilize the vernacular and bottom-up nature traditionally associated with memetic culture.

2. FROM BIOLOGICAL REPLICATOR TO SOCIAL TOOL

A comprehensive understanding of the social significance of the internet meme needs an analysis of its conceptual genealogy. The term's evolution from a biological metaphor to a cornerstone construct of digital culture reflects a parallel transformation in conceptions of cultural transmission within the context of networked communication (Vitiuk et al., 2020). This evolution extends beyond a mere semantic change; it marks a profound reconfiguration of agency—from a model predicated on passive replication by a selfish replicator to one characterized by active, intentional participation, wherein human actors use memes as deliberate instruments of social expression and interaction.

The concept of the meme was first introduced by biologist Richard Dawkins (1976) in his seminal work, *The Selfish Gene*. Expanding upon his argument that the gene is the fundamental unit of natural selection, Dawkins proposed an analogous unit for the transmission of culture. He coined the term meme—derived from the Greek mimeme, meaning “that which is imitated”—**to describe this new replicator** a unit of culture, such as a melody, idea, or catchphrase, that propagates by transmitting itself from one mind to another (Kurup & Chandrashekhar, 2023; Wiggins, 2019). In Dawkins's original formulation, a meme persists through its capacity for successful replication, independent of its veracity or utility for its human carrier. **He thereby established a direct parallel to genetic replication.**

Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperm or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation (Dawkins, 1976, p. 192).

Within this framework, agency is ascribed to the meme itself; analogous to a selfish gene, it operates as the primary actor, using human minds as vehicles for its own dissemination. Psychologist Susan Blackmore (1999) expanded on this in *The Meme Machine*, arguing that humans function fundamentally as meme machines, with the human mind having evolved to enhance its capacity for imitation and memetic transmission. As Blackmore (1999) contends, “the design of our minds can be

understood only in terms of memetic selection” (p. 171). Classical memetics thus portrayed culture as an ecosystem of competing replicators, wherein human beings played a predominantly passive role as hosts and transmitters of memetic content.

This classical memetic model has been subject to substantial critique within the social sciences for its perceived reductionism and biological determinism (Bloch, 2001; Kuper, 2000). Scholars argued that such an approach overlooks the complexities of social context, human intentionality, and cultural innovation. Anthropologist Adam Kuper (2000), for instance, questioned the plausibility of reducing culture to discrete, gene-like units, emphasizing instead its inherently interconnected and fluid character. Similarly, Maurice Bloch (2001) challenged the depiction of humans as passive hosts of cultural information, contending that cultural transmission rarely involves straightforward replication. Instead, he maintained, it is a dynamic process of interpretation, adaptation, and active transformation.

Ironically, as classical memetics was waning within academic discourse, the concept of the meme was simultaneously gaining unprecedented vitality in digital culture. The online environment—particularly its capacity for near-perfect replication and instantaneous dissemination—seemed to provide an ideal ecological niche for Dawkins's original concept. However, this shift from the analog to the digital realm was not a mere transposition but rather a profound transformation—one that, in practice, addressed and reconfigured many of the theoretical critiques raised by social scientists.

Scholar Limor Shifman played a pivotal role in reconceptualizing the concept of the meme within the context of digital culture. Shifman (2014) observed that an internet meme should not be understood as a singular idea that simply spreads through imitation, but rather a multimodal artifact—combining image, text, and video—that is constantly remixed, reappropriated, and transformed by users. This participatory dimension is its defining feature. Accordingly, Shifman (2014) defines internet memes as “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users” (p. 41).

Meme creators function not as passive replicators but as active agents within a cultural dialogue, engaging with pre-existing memetic forms and using established formats to express new ideas. This conceptual progression from Dawkins's formulation

to Shifman's reconceptualization marks a paradigm shift in understandings of agency. Whereas classical memetics positioned the meme itself as the "selfish" agent, contemporary internet meme culture relocates agency to human users, who employ memes as versatile tools for diverse social purposes—including humor, critique, community-building, and political expression (Lestari et al., 2024). Although the concept may have originated within Anglophonic academic discourse, its digital life has seen it adapted and reinterpreted in countless cultural contexts, establishing the meme as a genuinely global vernacular form.

3. THE POLYPHONIC GRAMMAR OF PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

To decode the logic of internet memes, it is essential to examine their internal grammar, aesthetic conventions, and norms. Memes are not anarchic artifacts; rather, they operate as a distinct communicative system, a digital vernacular with its own grammatical structure, capable of enacting social functions across both local and global contexts (Jo et al., 2023; Vico & Clemente, 2022). This grammar is far from neutral, as it is deeply infused with ideological significance, and its structural mechanics are inextricably linked to broader social and political effects (Wiggins, 2019). As a complex symbolic system, a meme's multimodal nature—integrating image, text, and other media—demands an analytical approach that extends beyond conventional text-based messages (Bastari et al., 2021; Danesi, 2022).

Ryan M. Milner (2016) conceptualizes memes as a form of participatory logic sustained by the creative tension between individual expression and collective engagement. A meme does not exist as an isolated act of communication; its significance is contingent upon a collective cultural frame of reference. Milner (2016) describes memes as "multimodal texts that facilitate participation through reappropriation, balancing a fixed premise with novel expression" (p. 14). This cultural landscape is inherently polyvocal, or polyphonic, as the meaning of a meme is not contained within a single artifact. Instead, it emerges through its dialogue with other iterations, its intertextual relationship to preceding memes, and its connection to the communities that interpret and transform it (Milner, 2016). Participation is thus an act of cultural production, rendering memes a "dynamic digital language for the information society" (Jo et al., 2023, p. 523) that shapes and sustains countless online communities (Ferreira & Serpa, 2019).

This polyvocality is most evident in the use of

templates or formats, which operate as syntactic frameworks into which users insert new semantic content. However, as Wiggins (2019) argues, these structures are not ideologically neutral. Each template carries a distinct discursive history and internal logic, such that meaning is co-constructed through the interplay of the fixed visual element and the variable textual component. By selecting a particular template, a creator embeds their contribution within a pre-existing discursive framework, rendering meme grammar not merely a vehicle for ideology but an ideological practice itself. As Wiggins (2019) observes, "[...] internet memes are discursive units of digital culture and that these units of discourse indicate an ideological practice" (p. xv). The conventions of this grammar are neither universal nor static; they are culturally contingent systems of meaning-making that reflect specific political struggles, thereby challenging the notion of a singular, monolithic internet culture. For example, Latin American memes critiquing foreign resource extraction or Indigenous memes subverting colonial narratives illustrate how this grammar can be localized to articulate particular postcolonial and decolonial perspectives.

Meme formats can be conceptualized as "boundary objects", a notion from sociology of science describing artifacts that "are both adaptable to different viewpoints and robust enough to maintain identity across them" (Star & Griesemer, 1989, p. 387). These formats operate as flexible tools that sustain shared meaning within a community while remaining interpretable to outsiders, facilitating a process of negotiated humor that can bridge cultural divides. Understanding the cultural references embedded in a format—its in-jokes—is central to producing a successful or humorous meme. The skillful use of a format signals a user's membership within a particular in-group and their possession of its cultural capital. Accordingly, memetic grammar functions simultaneously as a bridge and a boundary—fostering communal inclusion while delineating the limits of exclusion.

The cultural ecosystem of memes is also defined by a distinct aesthetic, often characterized by low-tech production values and multiple layers of irony (Ntouvlis & Geenen, 2023). Phillips and Milner (2017) argue that this aesthetic is not incidental but fulfills important social and communicative functions. Irony, for instance, operates as a protective mechanism that enables users to engage with sensitive or controversial topics while preserving "plausible deniability—the capacity to dismiss criticism by framing the content as "just a joke"

(Phillips, 2015, p.32). Yet, this tactical ambiguity simultaneously creates a precarious discursive space in which harmful or exclusionary ideologies can be introduced, circulated, and normalized under the veneer of humor.

4. THE CONSTRUCTION OF DIGITAL IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY

Within the digital sphere, memes operate as powerful social connectors, serving as symbolic adhesives that bind together numerous online communities. Through their circulation and reiteration, memes become active agents in the construction, maintenance, and performance of both individual and collective identities (de Groot, 2025). **This dynamic, however, is inherently ambivalent** while it fosters bonds of belonging and collective solidarity, it simultaneously delineates boundaries of exclusion, often producing significant social and cultural repercussions (Daniels, 2018).

Belonging to a group that understands a particular meme signifies the possession of shared cultural capital—a concept developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1986) to describe the knowledge, skills, and cultural dispositions that confer social status and symbolic power. In digital contexts, this manifests as memetic literacy, a prominent form of digital cultural capital (Ntouvlis & Geenen, 2023). However, the accelerated lifecycle of memes introduces a crucial temporal dimension to Bourdieu's framework.

The value of memetic literacy is inherently unstable a meme that is culturally relevant today may become obsolete within days. This volatility gives rise to what may be termed “temporal cultural capital”, in which social status depends not only on what one knows but also on when one knows it. Such temporality embeds users in a perpetual cycle of cultural consumption and obsolescence, sustaining the attention of the economy and aligning seamlessly with the engagement-driven logic of social media platforms.

The circulation of memes can also be interpreted through the lens of Erving Goffman's (2021) dramaturgical theory, which conceptualizes social interaction as a form of theatrical performance. Within this paradigm, social networks function as the front stage—a public arena in which individuals consciously manage their self-presentation before an audience.

On this front stage, an individual “intentionally or unintentionally expresses himself” (Goffman, 2021, p. 1). The act of sharing a meme is, thus, a performative act, a deliberate means of constructing

and sustaining a desired digital identity through the curated management of one's online persona (Serpa & Ferreira, 2018). Importantly, this performativity extends beyond the individual level. Research demonstrates that memes can serve as tools for the collective negotiation of professional identity; for instance, medical interns use them to navigate the tensions between their personal and emerging professional selves, while simultaneously fostering solidarity with peers (Yang et al., 2025). Similarly, analyses of nursing memes reveal how they articulate broader cultural narratives surrounding the profession and the structural challenges it faces (Hubert et al., 2025).

This process of sharing and performative interaction generates not only internal cohesion but also “digital imagined communities”, a concept adapted from Benedict Anderson's (1983) work on nationalism. Anderson posits that nations are imagined because their members “[...] will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (p. 6). Similarly, online communities are not anchored in physical proximity but are created through shared symbolic repertoires, affective flows, and collective references that sustain a sense of belonging.

For example, international students navigating cross-cultural adaptation use memes as a medium of negotiation and identity work, with their shared practices reflecting an acculturation curve, progressing from the circulation of home-culture references to the creation of hybrid memes that fuse multiple cultural elements. In doing so, they perform and enact evolving forms of bicultural or transcultural identity within digital spaces.

However, wherever communities are formed, boundaries are inevitably drawn. The same communicative tools that foster in-group belonging can also be used to mock, marginalize, and attack out-groups (Phillips, 2015). Such internal cohesion is often sustained through external demarcation, rendering identity formation a zero-sum process in which the reinforcement of “us” depends upon the denigration of “them”. Extreme manifestations of this dynamic include the phenomenon of digital blackface (Farror & Lester, 2024; Matamoros-Fernández, 2020), the proliferation of misogynistic memes (Athoi, 2024; Sen & Jha, 2024), and the circulation of racist memes targeting Indigenous populations (Al-Natour, 2021). These cases illustrate how memetic grammar can be leveraged to enforce social boundaries and perpetuate existing power hierarchies within digital cultures.

5. THE AMBIVALENT AGORA: ACTIVISM, SATIRE, AND MEMETIC WARFARE

Over the past decade, memes have evolved from peripheral forms of entertainment into central instruments and arenas of political discourse (Dean, 2019; Humaini & Satyo, 2024). Their speed of circulation, expansive reach, and ability to condense complex ideas into emotionally charged and easily shareable formats render them ideally suited to political communication in the digital age. Yet, their influence is deeply ambivalent. On one hand, memes have democratized satire and provided a low-cost, accessible medium for grassroots activism. On the other hand, they have been appropriated as powerful channels for propaganda (Hyzen & Van den Bulck, 2024), disinformation, and what has been termed “memetic warfare” (Ho, 2022)—the strategic deployment of viral content to conduct cultural and political struggles within digital spaces. In such contexts, traditional weapons are replaced by symbolic and affective ones, as political actors deploy memes to shape public opinion, incite social polarization, and advance ideological agendas. Within this contested digital arena, attention and belief become the primary territories to struggle, transforming the online public sphere into a volatile agora where the power to define social reality is continually negotiated.

Michel Foucault’s (1981) theorization of discourse offers a critical lens for understanding the dynamics of memetic politics. Foucault contends that discourse is not simply a medium through which power struggles are represented, but rather the very arena in which power is exercised and contested. Within this framework, the creation and dissemination of political memes can be understood as a struggle over discursive capacity to shape regimes of meaning, frame public debate, and impose particular interpretations of social and political reality (Wiggins, 2019).

On one side of this discursive struggle, memes have emerged as vital instruments of political activism, providing accessible means through which ordinary citizens can challenge dominant narratives (Mina, 2019; Serpa & Kelly, 2023). Social movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter have strategically used memes to foster solidarity and critique systems of oppression (Foust & Weathers, 2020). In the case of Black Lives Matter, memes operate as a form of nontraditional digital activism, creating online spaces where black humor becomes a vehicle for resistance, simultaneously exposing systemic racism and reinforcing community bonds. These artifacts often transcend their original contexts,

shaping broader public discourse across cultural and geographic boundaries. Owing to their participatory nature, memes thus become “a means to transform established cultural texts into new ones, to negotiate the worth of diverse identities, and to engage in unconventional arguments” (Milner, 2016, p. 42).

On the other hand, the same attributes that make memes effective for activism—their speed, emotional resonance, and semiotic simplicity—also make them powerful instruments for propaganda and memetic warfare (Ho, 2022). Their visual immediacy and humorous framing allow them to circumvent the critical scrutiny typically applied to traditional forms of information, leading Niebuurt (2021) to describe them as the “leaflet propaganda of the digital age” (p. 1). Memetic warfare strategically exploits affective appeals, privileging pathos over reason by simplifying complex sociopolitical issues into cognitively efficient and emotionally charged narratives that reinforce existing worldviews (Spenillo & Borges, 2025). This mechanism proves particularly effective in the context of digital populism, wherein memes contribute to the construction of a collective identity of the those positioned in opposition to a corrupt or detached elite. Recent electoral contexts illustrate these dynamics vividly. In the 2024 Indonesian presidential election, the campaign of a candidate from a political dynasty effectively leveraged memes to craft a youth-oriented image and legitimize an otherwise controversial candidacy—demonstrating how a medium often associated with subversive, grassroots expression can be appropriated by elites to manufacture consent in illiberal settings. Similarly, analysis of the 2024 U.S. presidential election reveals the deliberate use of memes by competing factions to mobilize in-groups and attack out-groups.

The political function of a meme is not inherent to its form but emerges from its strategic deployment within particular political ecosystems. The architecture of digital platforms—engineered to maximize engagement—structurally privileges this mode of communication. Emotionally charged, affectively resonant, and polarizing content tends to elicit higher levels of interaction and is thus algorithmically amplified (Daniels, 2018). Consequently, the digital agora is not a neutral or egalitarian public sphere; rather, it is technologically biased towards pathos over logos, turning memetic warfare into a battle for emotional allegiance as much as for ideological persuasion.

The lifecycle of memes unfolds not in isolation but within the broader economic logic of digital platforms, which operate within the imperatives of

the attention economy. In this model, user attention is the primary commodity, and engagement becomes the key metric of value. Memes—by virtue of their brevity, virality, and emotional immediacy—serve as ideal instruments for capturing and sustaining attention, thereby functioning as the symbolic and affective fuel that propels the digital economy.

The virality of memes is fundamentally driven by their capacity for emotional resonance. Research by Berger and Milkman (2012) demonstrated that content eliciting high-arousal emotions—positive (such as awe) and negative (such as anger or anxiety)—is more likely to be shared. Digital platform algorithms, optimized to maximize user engagement and retention, are explicitly designed to prioritize this emotionally charged content. This interplay between affect and algorithmic visibility gives rise to what Zizi Papacharissi (2015) conceptualized as the “affective economy”—a system where emotions become a form of capital and are the primary driver of information flow. Within this framework, memes function as quintessential vehicles of affect, facilitating the emergence of “affective publics”, which Papacharissi (2015) defines as “networked public formations that are mobilized and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiment” (p. 125). Such publics are not organized around rational deliberation but are instead constituted through shared affective responses to cultural artifacts. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, memes served as collective mechanisms for processing trauma and anxiety, generating fleeting yet meaningful moments of communal solidarity and shared emotional relief (MacDonald, 2021; Moya-Salazar et al., 2025; Santos & Leite, 2021).

A central tactic within this affective economy is rage-baiting—the deliberate production of content intended to elicit outrage and other high-arousal negative emotions. Such content, by virtue of its strong affective charge, generates high levels of engagement and is therefore algorithmically amplified, receiving disproportionate visibility within digital ecosystems. This dynamic not only incentivizes the circulation of divisive material but also intensifies political polarization and normalizes vitriolic modes of public discourse.

To understand the economic dynamics of memes, the framework of “spreadable media”, proposed by Jenkins et al. (2013), provides a particularly illuminating lens. The authors distinguish between the older stickiness model—designed to capture and retain user attention within centralized platforms—and the spreadability paradigm, which emphasizes “the activity of consumers [...] in shaping the

circulation of media content” (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 3). Memetic culture is the epitome of this spreadability logic. Within this system, meme creators effectively function as unpaid digital laborers. Millions of users collectively invest their time, creativity, and cultural capital to generate effectively engaging content that fuels the attention economy. However, this vast reservoir of creative labor remains largely uncompensated in monetary terms. Instead, users accrue symbolic rewards in the form of social capital (likes, shares, and reputational visibility), while digital platforms appropriate the resultant economic value through the monetization of user attention and data flows.

6. VIRALITY, PROCESSING FLUENCY, AND THE POST-TRUTH CONDITION

A comprehensive understanding of their social and political functions requires recognizing memes as epistemological agents capable of profoundly shaping how individuals construct their understanding of the world. Within the post-truth era, memes function as highly effective vectors for the rapid dissemination of simplistic narratives and misinformation (Petrova, 2021; Wardle, 2017). A robust explanation for this phenomenon is the psychological principle of processing fluency. At its core, the principle of processing fluency posits that information perceived as easy to process is concurrently perceived as true. The human brain is wired for efficiency and predisposed to value mental shortcuts. When information is presented in a simple, familiar, or repetitive format—like a meme—it requires little cognitive effort to understand. The human mind often misattribution this cognitive ease to informational accuracy, thereby lowering critical scrutiny and fostering uncritical acceptance of the content (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009). The very structure of a meme is, by design, engineered for maximum processing fluency. Its combination of simple visuals, concise text, and familiar templates renders its message seemingly intuitive and correct, effectively circumventing critical filters.

The perceived validity of a statement, irrespective of its factual basis, is often enhanced through repeated exposure. This principle, known as the illusory truth effect, is a well-established psychological phenomenon and is strongly associated with the cognitive mechanism associated with the illusory truth effect under discussion. The foundational study by Hasher et al. (1977) demonstrated that “For both true and false statements, there was a significant increase in the validity judgments for the repeated statements” (p.

107). In the context of social media, when users repeatedly encounter the same meme or meme format, the message becomes more familiar and cognitively fluent. This enhanced processing fluency is then misattributed to the truthfulness of the content, therefore reinforcing belief in its plausibility over time. The effect is remarkably robust, persisting even when the information directly contradicts prior knowledge—a phenomenon termed “knowledge neglect”, wherein individuals rely on heuristics rather than retrieving and applying their existing knowledge base.

This dynamic leads to a fundamental shift in public epistemology. The architecture of the digital public sphere creates a systemic cognitive vulnerability, not because individuals have collectively abandoned concern for truth, but rather because the informational environment itself is engineered to exploit innate heuristics. Within such an ecosystem, familiarity and affective resonance become proxies for epistemic credibility, allowing misinformation to feel true even when it is demonstrably false. Consequently, the dominant epistemic question shifts from “Is it true?” to “Is it resonant/popular/spreading?” signaling a profound reconfiguration of how knowledge, belief, and legitimacy are socially constructed in the networked age.

Verification and source authority—the traditional epistemic foundations of truth—are increasingly displaced by engagement metrics and emotional resonance, the operative logics of virality. Within this environment, virality functions as a surrogate for truth, conferring epistemic legitimacy through popularity rather than accuracy. The contemporary crisis of truth is therefore less a product of collective moral decline than of a cognitive-environmental mismatch. Human cognition evolved in contexts where processing fluency typically correlated with truthfulness; yet, in today’s digitally engineered ecosystems, fluency is deliberately optimized for engagement rather than veracity. This inversion produces systematic and predictable epistemic distortions, rendering the digital public sphere a site of pervasive and structurally induced truth failure.

The social life of memes is structured by the largely invisible power dynamics embedded within the digital platforms that host them. **Two key forces govern their circulation:** algorithmic amplification, which determines what becomes visible, and content moderation, which determines what is rendered invisible. A complete understanding of memes requires, therefore, a shift from a purely content-centric perspective to a systemic one-one that

situates memetic production and dissemination within the broader infrastructures of digital power.

Algorithmic amplification is the process by which platform recommendation systems promote certain content, extending its reach well beyond chronological exposure. These algorithms are not designed to promote accuracy, civic good, or diversity of perspectives; their primary objective is to maximize user engagement—measured in likes, shares, comments, and view time—and, by extension, advertising revenue. **This optimization creates dangerous self-reinforcing feedback loop** that provokes strong emotional responses, such as outrage, anger, or euphoria, generates higher interaction and is therefore granted increased algorithmic visibility. Consequently, polarizing, extremist, and misinformative narratives are structurally advantaged within digital ecosystems, as they are often more intrinsically engaging than moderate, fact-based content. Daniels (2018) refers to this dynamic as the “algorithmic rise of the ‘alt-right’”, illustrating how engagement-driven dynamics can inadvertently facilitate pathways to radicalization by systematically privileging provocative and divisive content.

Content moderation functions as the countervailing mechanism to algorithmic amplification, encompassing the regulation of user-generated content to ensure adherence to platform policies and legal requirements. Moderating memes, however, presents distinctive and complex challenges. Humor is inherently subjective and culturally contingent; a statement perceived as innocuous by one audience may constitute hate speech for another (Phillips, 2015). Furthermore, the pervasive use of irony, sarcasm, and subcultural references makes it nearly impossible for automated systems to accurately interpret intent. This difficulty is epitomized by Poe’s Law, which posits that, online, it is often impossible to distinguish between genuinely extremist content and parodic exaggerations of such views (Phillips & Milner, 2017).

The challenges of content moderation are amplified exponentially by the rise of generative AI. The capacity to mass-produce novel content, the blurred boundaries between satire and malicious intent, and legal ambiguities create near-insurmountable difficulties for moderators. Platforms rely on hybrid systems combining AI-driven flagging with human review; yet, both approaches are fraught with limitations. Moreover, AI moderating tools are often trained on datasets skewed toward dominant Western cultures,

resulting in the marginalization or misinterpretation of non-Western memetic expressions. Ultimately, a meme's virality is determined not only by its cultural resonance but also by its algorithmic compatibility and its capacity to navigate a complex - and often contradictory - web of moderation policies.

7. THE RISE OF GENERATIVE MEMETICS

The field of memetics is currently experiencing a profound paradigm shift, driven by the proliferation of generative AI. This emerging era is transforming the creation, mediation, and circulation of memes, introducing novel ethical challenges and reshaping the broader digital cultural ecosystem. Generative memetics can be conceptualized as a mode of memetic production characterized by the AI-enabled generation, mediation, adaptation, and scaling of memes, extending beyond traditional human-centered remix practices.

This shift engenders a profound authenticity crisis. The foundational notion of the meme as a vernacular, bottom-up form of cultural expression is called into question. When memes are AI-generated, **questions arise regarding authorship and community affiliation** who can claim ownership and whose cultural identity does the meme represent? Such developments blur the boundary between genuine cultural expression and astroturfed propaganda (Hyzen & Van den Bulck, 2024), undermining the very social foundations of memetic circulation. The capacity to mass-produce and micro-target propaganda memes further risks saturating the information ecosystem (Nieuwbuurt, 2021), exacerbating the asymmetries inherent in memetic warfare (Ho, 2022). Additionally, technologies such as deepfakes, which produce hyper-realistic yet fabricated media, pose direct threats to electoral integrity and the broader epistemic trust of the public.

This emerging paradigm can be conceptualized as generative memesis a process in which memes are not merely discovered and remixed but are generated autonomously by AI, mediated and tailored for specific audiences or purposes. This development fundamentally transforms both the production and circulation of memetic content. Analysis of the 2024 U.S. presidential election indicates an asymmetric political deployment of this technology. Evidence suggests that Democratic-aligned actors predominantly employed AI-generated memes to foster in-group support and mobilization, whereas Republican-aligned actors more frequently used them for out-group denigration. Far-right movements have similarly

leveraged both manually produced and AI-generated memes to legitimize aggression and trivialize violence, with AI-generated content often used to construct mythologized, aspirational images of political leaders (Spenillo & Borges, 2025).

Perhaps the most disturbing implication of generative memetics lies in its capacity to manipulate not only public opinion but also individual and collective memory. Recent research indicates that AI-generated and digitally manipulated visuals can induce false memories, leading individuals to recall events that never occurred or to remember them in systematically distorted ways. These effects carry profound consequences for personal identity, the construction of collective historical narratives, and the reliability of legal testimony, highlighting the deep epistemic and ethical stakes of AI-mediated memetic production.

However, the relationship between humans and AI in meme production is not one of straightforward replacement. A recent study by Wu et al. (2025) on human-AI co-creativity reveals a more complex and symbiotic dynamic. While AI-only memes performed competitively on average, those created solely by humans outperformed others in generating exceptional humor, and collaborative human-AI memes distinguished by heightened creativity and shareability. AI thus functions effectively as an ideation engine, capable of reproducing successful patterns extracted from its training data to generate competent, though frequently generic humor. What remains beyond its current capacity are the cultural nuance, contextual sensitivity, and affective depth that underpin the most impactful forms of human creativity. These findings suggest that the future of memetic production may be fundamentally collaborative, with humans serving as curators, interpreters, and contextual mediators of AI-generated raw material.

Two distinct modes of memetic production can now be identified traditional, human-remixed memes and modern, generative AI-created memes. Traditional memes emerge through the process of remixing and re-captioning pre-existing templates or found media, practices that give rise to their distinctive low-tech, lo-fi, and sometimes "deep-fried" aesthetic. Their content is typically reactive and content-specific, often relying heavily on textual elements and characterized by a satirical tone. Strategically, such memes function as tools of real-time political antagonism, vehicles of in-group humor, and tools of grassroots critique, reflecting their embeddedness within participatory and vernacular modes of digital expression.

In contrast, generative memes are produced through AI systems capable of creating entirely new, synthetically generated media. This process yields a markedly polished aesthetic—often high-fidelity, photorealistic, or rendered in distinctive artistic styles. The content of generative memes tends to be more symbolic, generic, and mythologizing in nature, frequently eschewing text in favor of visual allegory. Strategically, their function shifts from the reactive and satirical tendencies of traditional memes toward the dissemination of aspirational narratives, the sanctification of political or cultural leaders, and, in some cases, the dehumanization of perceived opponents (Wiggins, 2019).

8. CONCLUSION

The central purpose of this article has been to demonstrate that internet memes, despite their apparent ephemerality and ostensible triviality, are artifacts of considerable complexity and far-reaching social, political, and economic significance. They embody a novel form of literacy—a global vernacular that simultaneously reflects and shapes the dynamics of contemporary digital culture (Sá et al., 2021). The analysis presented here suggests that memes are not merely objects of study but constitute an operative logic that has fundamentally reconfigured the modalities of communication, identity formation, and power relations in the digital age.

The evolution of the meme—from Dawkins's (1976) conception of a selfish biological replicator to Shifman's (2014) characterization of a participatory social instrument—marks a pivotal reassertion of human agency within digital culture. However, this agency remains profoundly ambivalent. In the political domain, memes have democratized satire and enabled new forms of grassroots activism (Mina, 2019); however, they have also become potent vehicles for propaganda, radicalization, and disinformation, facilitated by platform architectures that structurally privilege simplicity, emotionality, and division (Ho, 2022; Niebuurt, 2021). Epistemologically, the mimetic logic of virality—underpinned by cognitive mechanisms such as processing fluency—challenges and at times displaces traditional epistemic commitments to truth, thereby contributing to the broader conditions of the post-truth era (Hasher et al., 1977).

The examination of the social functions of memes reveals them to be a multifaceted communicative tool. Memes operate as mechanisms of identity formation and social cohesion, employing in-group humor and symbolic boundary maintenance in ways

consistent with Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital and Anderson's (1983) notion of imagined communities. As instruments of social critique, they employ irony and parody to destabilize and reconfigure dominant narratives, a process illuminated by Foucault's (1981) theorization of discourse and power. Politically, memes function as tools of mobilization, harnessing emotional intensity and narrative compression to generate affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015). Yet, through their viral circulation, they also contribute to epistemological erosion, as mechanisms such as processing fluency and repetition produce the illusory truth effect, blurring the boundary between familiarity and factuality.

The future of this digital replicator is characterized by profound complexity and contradiction. The meme has simultaneously democratized cultural production and polluted the information ecosystem; it has fostered participation in global communities while deepening social divisions and amplifying antagonism. As digital technologies continue to advance, the emergence of human-AI co-creation within generative memetics (Wu et al., 2025) represents a critical inflection point in this evolutionary trajectory. The meme's transformation from a “selfish replicator” to a “participatory social instrument” may now be entering a third phase—that of a potentially “automated selfish replicator”. In this new paradigm, the proliferation of deepfakes and the industrial-scale automation of propaganda pose unsettling questions about authenticity, agency, and control in the algorithmically mediated public sphere.

The trajectory of our future networked society may hinge upon our collective capacity to cultivate critical literacies attuned both to digital artifacts and to the platform architectures that structure their production and circulation (Domínguez Romero & Bobkina, 2021). The advent of generative memetics intensifies the urgency of this imperative. To adapt Dawkins's (1976) seminal observation, “We are built as gene machines and cultured as meme machines, but we have the power to turn against our creators. We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators” (p. 201). In the age of generative memetics, such rebellion can no longer be conceived as an act of individual resistance alone; it must take the form of collective, critical literacy—an epistemic and ethical competence to navigate an information ecosystem in which the boundaries between human creativity and algorithmic persuasion are increasingly, and strategically, obscured.

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