



SOCIAL COMMENTARY AS EXHIBITED THROUGH MEMES: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY ON THE DIGITAL CULTURE OF GEN Z

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Abstract: This paper discusses the internet memes in relation to the social commentaries among Generation Z's digital culture. Drawing on theoretical concepts of symbolic interactionism, cultural sociology, and digital media, this paper explores how Gen Z (born around 1997 to 2012) utilizes memes to express their political views, reflect upon their identity, highlight the issue of mental health, and resist the dominant culture. By performing a qualitative content analysis of more than 400 memes collected from Reddit, Instagram, and Twitter/X platforms between 2020 and 2024, in addition to conducting semi-structured interviews with 30 members of Gen Z, this research uncovers that memes serve purposes beyond entertainment. They constitute a complex system which acts as social critique, common consciousness, and identity construction of this generation. The results indicate that there are four main functions of the Gen Z's memes: (1) critique of politics and institutions, (2) normalizing of mental illnesses, (3) expressing economic anxieties, and (4) identity negotiation across varied identities.

Keywords: Memes, Gen Z, Digital Culture, Social Commentary, Symbolic Interactionism, Internet Culture, Youth Sociology, Digital Communication

I. INTRODUCTION

Cultural significance notwithstanding, the evolution of internet memes in 21st-century sociology is one of the least celebrated. As cultural units (Shifman, 2014) are progressively transmitted (Dawkins, 1976) and modified in the online realm, internet memes have survived image macros to become sophisticated tools that engage, critique, and redefine social realities for Gen Z. While previously mainstream media content was the primary intake for previous generations, Gen Z was nurtured in the digital era, where memes are the most distinctive format of digital culture.

In this context, this paper aims to assert the argument that memes are deserving of a more sociological discourse and study. They are, in fact, far from being 'meaningless' internet phenomena; they are what Geertz (1973) describes as 'thick description' and as such can be used to derive insights and explanations of the worries and frustrations that are political, as well as of the solidarity expressed

by a generation. Importantly, the brevity of a meme should not be mistaken for its superficiality. In an image-text format, a meme is an avenue of expressing cultural awareness, engaging in power relations, paradigm critique, and emotive group identification.

Generation Z currently exists in an interesting place in history. They have a unique experience compared to previous generations having been born shortly after the 2008 recession and growing up during the COVID-19 pandemic and the various social justice movements and the impacts of climate change. Having lived through a multitude of crises, and having developed a distinct sense of dark and cynical humor, especially in their memes, has led researchers to study the political implications of memes (Milner, 2016; Phillips & Milner, 2017), although no sociological research has been done to study Gen Z's social critique through memes.

This paper aims to start to fill that gap. By analyzing some Gen Z memes and integrating sociological theories, this research seeks to provide an understanding of the sociological consciousness of the post-millennial generation as expressed through their memes.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The goals of the present study are the following:

1. Analyze the use of Generation Z internet memes as a social commentary mechanism for political issues, mental health, economic issues, and identity.
2. Analyze the use of Generation Z internet memes as a social commentary mechanism, drawing on theories of interactionism, cultural studies, and digital media.
3. Analyze the perceptions of Generation Z regarding the use of internet memes as a social commentary mechanism for political issues, mental health, and identity.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of the meme was introduced by Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* (1976) as a culturally equivalent unit to the gene in biology. A meme is a unit of culturally transmitted information that is subject to change and replication. In contrast to Dawkins' biological-centered idea, researchers have used the concept within the digital context to analyze the flow of information on the internet (Blackmore, 1999; Auger, 2002). In 2014, Limor Shifman published *Memes in Digital Culture*, which is the first complete sociology-based research on the subject, and defined 'internet meme' as, 'digital items that share similar characteristics that are conscious of one another, and are created, circulated, and transformed by a particular group of internet users.'

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, memes (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934) are important cultural symbols that help people understand the meaning of social reality. The meaning of different memes, such as Distracted Boyfriend, Drake Pointing, and various Wojak memes, is not understood outside of the Gen Z social group. According to Goffman (1959), the use of memes is a form of impression management.

Another lens to take is Cultural Sociology from Bourdieu (1984) and studies of Cultural Capital and Field Theory. In the context of Gen Z, being able to interpret, produce, and utilize memes constitutes meme literacy and is understood as cultural capital. The individuals who possess a high level of meme literacy are seen as culturally competent and as possessing the ability to interact and form connections in the digital space. This is best represented by the distinction between those who interpret memes and those who do not.

The first wave of research involving political memes coincided with the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, in which the character Pepe the Frog gained widespread notoriety (Nagle, 2017; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Research jumped from addressing the role of memes in politics (Freelon et al., 2020) to the role of memes in the dissemination of (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) and the formation of political identities (Milner, 2016) participatory culture. Phillips and Milner (2017) argue that the dual character of memes situates them within the realm of both resisting and reproducing the hegemony of dominant social frameworks, thereby making it a challenging task to classify memes as progressive or reactionary.

As for Gen Z, there is a lot of political cynicism and irony evident in their online activities, as they present their political concerns through an ironic lens. While highly politically aware and possessing a great deal of concern for social justice (Twenge, 2017; Seemiller & Grace, 2016), they display a great deal of apathy and cynicism toward political institutions.

One of the most recent developments in Gen Z memes is the creation of “mental health memes.” Researchers such as Rathore et al. (2019), and De Choudhury et al. (2016), have studied the construction of spaces on social media where users share mental health stories and create peer support communities. While some researchers are concerned with the ironic form of mental health memes and their ability to trivialize issues (Lemaster et al., 2018), others have defended the use of irony as a way to destigmatize issues, form communities, and as a coping mechanism (Yim & Park, 2019).

The use of memes has assisted Gen Z in the ongoing construction of their identity. Gen Z is the most racially and ethnically, and in terms of gender and sexuality, the most diverse generation (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). Research on the Black Twitter movement (Brock, 2012), Latinx Internet (Florini, 2019) and LGBTQ+ movements (Cavalcante, 2018) have shown that marginalized, oppressed communities, through the use of memes and digital rhetoric, are able to contest dominant narratives, assert their identity, and create communities. This process typically leads to the creation of "cybertypes," a term that Nakamura (2002) uses to describe digital stereotypes that are created as a result of combining race and gender.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This research integrates qualitative content analysis and semi-structured interviews in a design framework situated in an interpretivist position. The design acknowledges the interaction of the meaning of memes in creator intent, text, the platform, and the audience in the context of meme culture.

4.2 Sampling and Data Collection

In content analysis, a sample of 420 memes was purposefully collected from the three primary platforms of Reddit (r/dankmemes, r/BlackPeopleTwitter, r/PoliticalHumor, r/antiwork), Instagram (using hashtags), and Twitter/X (using a trending hashtag analysis) between January 2020 and December 2023. The selected memes represent the four preliminary thematic categories of critique of politics and institutions, mental health, economic anxiety, and the negotiation of different social identities.

In the interviews, 30 Gen Z participants, aged 18 to 26, from a range of social networks, especially Twitter, and University social networks, were recruited. The participants were especially recruited to be diverse through presenting many forms of gender (14 male, 14 female, 2 non-binary), and from diverse geographic and social backgrounds. Semi-structured interviews of 45 to 60 minutes were conducted to explore participants' meme consumption, interpretation, and the social role they attributed to meme sharing.

4.3 Analytical Framework

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V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Memes as Political and Institutional Critique

The content analysis employed a two-step coding process. The first step involved coding of the formal elements of memes of type of format, visual, text, and platform. The second step involved coding to determine social commentary functions of the memes.

This also relied on Shifman's (2014) typology which has since been added categories created with inductive reasoning. Testing inter-rater reliability occurred through independent coding of a 10% subsample conducted by two researchers, achieving a Cohen's kappa of 0.78, showing substantial agreement.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to evaluate the interview data. This included multiple coding rounds to define predominant themes of participants' accounts on the use of memes and the meaning they attribute to them. To further strengthen validity of the drawn conclusions, triangulation was applied across the content analysis and the interviews.

Table 1: Distribution of Meme Categories by Social Commentary Function (n=420)

Category	No. of Memes	Percentage	Primary Platform
Political/Institutional Critique	160	38.1%	Reddit, Twitter/X
Mental Health Discourse	105	25.0%	Instagram, Reddit
Economic Anxiety	89	21.2%	Reddit, Twitter/X
Identity Negotiation	66	15.7%	Instagram, Twitter/X
Total	420	100%	—

5.2 Mental Health Memes and the Destigmatization Function

The 105 memes that represented 25.0% of the total sample were a unique and integral part of Gen Z meme culture.

These memes addressed a wide array of issues from depression and anxiety to burnout, trauma, and social isolation. These alluded to some of the darker elements of modern life. One popular format is Wojak/Feels Guy. This format allows a visual way to tackle issues that surround mental illness and the metaverse.

The interviews provided a mix of opinions and some that even seemed contradictory when it came to mental health memes. A large majority of those interviewed (73.3%) expressed that when they saw memes relating to mental illness it gave them a feeling of being 'seen' and less isolated when they were dealing with issues related to their mental state. One interviewee expressed that "seeing a meme about not being able to get out of bed is not funny in a trivial sense, it is funny because it is something that many people also feel, and it is true, and it actually makes it less shameful." This also suggests that when people adopt an ironic approach to issues mental health they are not necessarily trivializing it. In fact, they are addressing it and creating an opportunity to connect.

On the other hand, 46.7% of those interviewed had concerns. They expressed that the excessive number of mental health related memes begin to normalize less than healthy mental states, and even discourage those who are suffering from seeking the help that they need. This demonstrates the ongoing struggle that exists in the reality of mental health memes. While they may serve to lessen the stigma that exists surrounding mental health, they also may serve to perpetuate the normalization of suffering that is a part of the existence of being a member of Gen Z.

5.3 Economic Anxiety and the Aesthetics of Precarity

Thematic grouping of the economic anxiety memes (21.2%, n=89) focused on the material realities affecting Gen Z. There were many elements that contributed to the anxieties of the generation, including the burden of student loans, the cost of housing, the precariousness of gig jobs, and the struggle to achieve economic goals like homeownership or financial independence. In many respects, reaching these goals had become a foregone expectation for previous generations, and so the Gen Z members of these online communities often mimicked the format of memes that use bathos to juxtapose unrealized lofty goals with unsatisfactory (or in their case, tragic) material conditions.

The "antiwork" subreddit provided many examples of memes that reflected a particular kind of "sociological imagination" (Mills, 1959) with respect to the relation between work and economic conditions. In many cases, sentiments of individual frustration with work manifested themselves as critiques of systemic conditions. Based on the results of this study, it was evident that memes with economic themes tended to gain traction at particular moments of significant economic reporting, for example, reports on inflation and/or housing, suggesting that the memes provided a new lexicon with which to discuss economic conditions that reflected the lived realities of the members of Gen Z.

5.4 Identity Negotiation and Intersectional Meme Culture

Of the memes collected, 66 (15.7%) were identified as identity memes, with considerable variation and consolidation of themes of racial and ethnic identities, gender and sexual identities, neuro-diversity, and regional and national identities. Gen Z identity memes reflected an impressive degree of intersectionality, as the memes often included multiple identity aspects. Many memes built community and critique by modifying a popular meme to fit a specific community's experience, which is referred to as format adaptation.

With respect to their participatory imitation and transformation, Shifman's (2014) ideas of meme culture encompass these memes, which serve the intersectionality, representation, and solidarity of specific identity communities. Researchers interviewed many people in marginalized groups, and they found that identity memes act as "cultural touchstones." These touchstones help people separated by distance feel part of the same community.

VI. DISCUSSION

These findings broaden the view that Gen Z memes provide important digital social commentary, and there are a few key aspects of this trend that are important to discuss here.

First, it is reasonable to consider meme culture as what Habermas (1984) termed a "space of communicative action." This is a space of discourse in which the goal is understanding rather than domination. While memes certainly can be used for propaganda and misinformation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), a major finding of this study is that memes can serve to promote the formation of communities and the catalyzation of discussions regarding important social issues. Gen Z memes are often portrayed as being sarcastically detached, but rather, this is a version of Hutcheon's (1994) idea of "irony's edge," where, by maintaining a distance, the meme creator is able to engage with the social issue in a more honest manner.

Second, the framing of different memes is important, as the "dog in the burning room" meme can be applied to a myriad of social issues, including political, social and economic, and even personal mental health. This creates a unified framework within which multiple issues can be addressed. This may result in the creation of a "meme public sphere" (Milner, 2016) within which disparate social criticisms can be addressed and compared. This can be important from an intersectional perspective, as meme culture has the potential to bring together disparate social issues within the framework of Gen Z activism.

Third, we need to consider the importance of different social media sites in shaping varying meme cultures. Reddit and Instagram differ in the types of memes they host due to aspects of their design, as the former's voting system cultivates a particular form of humor in conjunction with a style of critique, while the latter's design gives rise to identity memes. Twitter/X promotes memes that connect with real world events, as its design promotes real time communication. There is a value to the design of each of these social media platforms, as they construct the form of critique that social media users can provide. The political economy of each social media platform that is dedicated to that form of critique should be the focus of future studies as they concern the digital public discourse and social media.

VII. CONCLUSION

The digital social commentary of Gen Z memes is the primary focus of this study. In conjunction with 30 interviews and a review of 420 memes, this study revealed the presence of four different forms of social commentary in Gen Z memes: critique of the political and social institutions, discourse on mental health, articulation of economic anxiety, and the negotiation of personal identity. These forms of social commentary do not exist in isolation in the majority of the memes, and the overlapping nature of these forms of commentary is reflective of Gen Z's advanced social consciousness.

It is clear from the data submitted that Gen Z's memes should be studied from a sociology-focused lens. Memes have the ability to capture, understand and portray the critiques and concerns of the digital age. With their ability to engage with their social and cultural reality, Gen Z's memes act as a means of social and cultural understanding, and simultaneously, a form of cultural agency.

This study has some limitations that should be addressed. Although a large sample of memes was included in this study, the sample of memes was not large enough to be comprehensive in its representation of Gen Z memes. Also, the interviews were conducted with a diverse and large sample, but the sample was limited to the constraints of a university-based recruitment.

Future studies should cover a wider area and employ larger, more systematically collected datasets. It would also be advantageous to conduct studies that track changes in meme-based social commentary over time and analyze meme cultures in different generations.

This research also has implications beyond academic sociology. A more in-depth understanding of Gen Z's communicative culture is beneficial to educators, mental health professionals, policymakers, and digital platform designers. This culture should not be dismissed as 'just memes' because there is a lot of social and emotional substance to this culture, especially when communicating with those in power and within their communities.

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