

Memes Can Have the Destructive Potential of Nuclear Bombs in the Information Age

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Memes have forever changed the culture of societies around the world, in fact, there is a term called meme culture, and the young people of today are absolutely enthralled with it. Almost every digital conversation can be replied to with a meme. In fact, memes have so infiltrated our society that there may be no hope of ever going back to just words. The impact is much like a nuclear bomb; they blow up quickly, and their result is lasting.

In many instances, pictures and video clips have all but replaced normal conversation. If you were to search on a topic online and add the word “meme” after it, you would most likely find results. But is there a downside to using memes for everything? I have found that the ease and convenience of using memes rather than typing out full responses have become the go-to method of communication for myself and many of my peers. What has this done to the art of conversation? How has this meme culture affected the attention span and mental health of the masses? What kind of damage can be caused when the meme is based on misinformation, prejudice, or harassment? How does the view of an authority figure change meme relentlessly bash them from every side and point out every flaw? While memes can be useful and are often funny and harmless, I believe that memes can have the destructive potential of nuclear bombs in the information age.

Richard Dawkins coined the term meme (which comes from the Greek word mimema, which means “imitated”). It was introduced in his book “The Selfish Gene” in 1976. (Rogers,

2023). According to Merriam-Webster.com (“Definition of Meme,” 2023), a meme is defined as “an amusing or interesting item (such as a captioned picture or video) or a genre of items that is spread wildly online, especially through social media.” While the meme is most commonly known as a digital phenomenon, “Humans have used memes to communicate for as long as they have used any symbolic system,” according to Professor Kirby Conrod of Swarthmore College. He also explains the concept of a meme (which he defines as a self-replicating chunk of information) by comparing it to an inside joke or an advertising jingle. These are the types of things that humans like to share and repeat. As he says, “When we repeat the joke or sing the jingle, that’s an instance of the meme reproducing itself” (Benveniste, 2022).

The meme came about as a side effect of the internet. Once people were able to use a digital form of communication, it opened the door to sharing information instantly. As Odra put it, “All that was needed was the availability of a platform for expression and publication (it was the internet) and tools for production (personal computers and editing programs).” One of the first widely recognized internet memes was an animated 3D baby dancing to the beginning of the song, “Hooked on a Feeling.” This video, also known as “Baby Cha-Cha,” according to Rachel Scherman, “was originally used to promote animation software, but it was rapidly spread through a company email chain, then shared outside the company chain, and from there, it quickly gained popularity across the internet” (Scherman, 2017). It was so popular, in fact, that it was promptly used in the popular TV show “Ally McBeal.” Whitney Friedlander explains, “The Dancing Baby became the industry meme to know even if the word meme was not yet part of common vernacular. It was sent as email attachments, used as screensavers and, according to another Times story, evoked parodies like “Psycho Baby, Rasta Baby, Car Crash Baby, and even Drunken Baby, which shows the corrupted digital infant smoking, drinking beer, and urinating.”

Robert Lurye, who was an animator at the time, said, “It was symbolically part of the birth of the internet, the birth of memes, the birth of YouTube” (Friedlander, 2020b).

Since the dancing baby, memes have become ubiquitous. On the website Knowyourmeme.com, there are six main categories of memes with 116 sub-categories, and this is only from one website. There are so many types of memes that it’s hard to narrow it down to be able to describe them. However, I have picked out a select few to expound upon, based on my own personal experience:

1. The Funny Meme

These memes are usually creative and based on a topic of personal interest. Since humor is subjective, these are typically opinion based. These are generally relatable (especially between friend groups). As with many memes, they are often based on trending or popular topics. Here is an example of one such meme:



2. The Cringe Meme

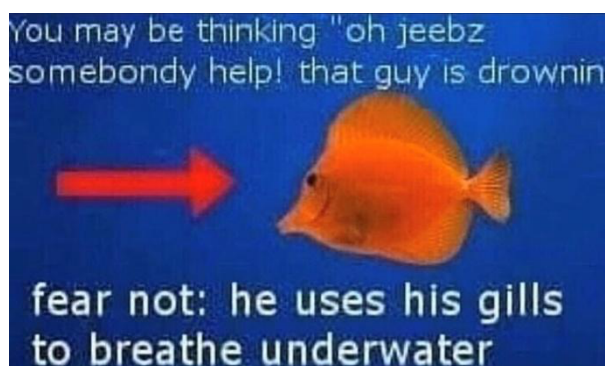
These memes make you physically or mentally flinch. They might include cruel pranks,

jumpscares or other loud sudden noises, pain-related or gross content. Here is an example of a cringe meme:



3. The Deep-Fried Meme

These memes consist of bottom of the barrel content containing images that have been compressed, stretched, brightened, or altered in some other way. They contain text that makes little to no sense or just describes something normal in a really stupid way. To quote my mother after having viewed such a meme, "I'm dumber now." Here is an example of a deep-fried meme:



4. The Political Meme

These memes can be about any political topic, person, or agenda. When campaign season strikes, so do the memes. Often times political figures are ridiculed and mocked for any little thing they might do or say. Here is an example of a political meme:

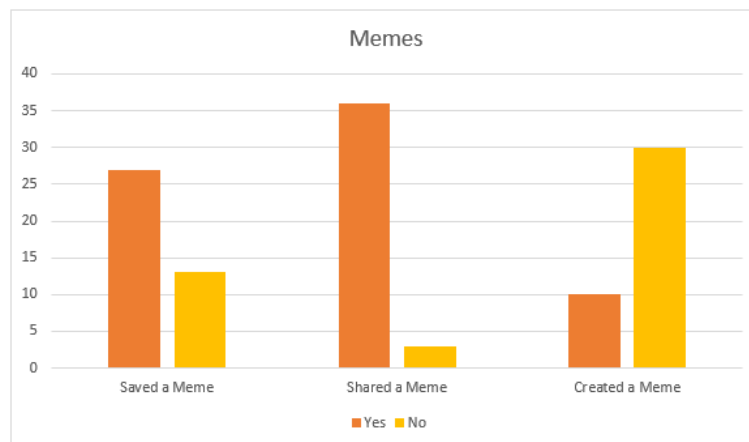


Social media ties into memes immensely. It is the main way memes spread around and get shared, acting as the breeding ground. Social media is used by people of all ages, and with the easy access and people constantly utilizing them, they share a powerful role in day-to-day life. All day long, people are wasting time scrolling through their feeds and getting blasted with memes nonstop. Helen Brown puts it as such, “They are arguably the wallpaper of our social media feeds and often provide us with a few minutes of idle, amusing fodder for procrastination during our day.” It’s easy to see how this could be correct, as later in the article, she mentions that “Researchers at Facebook showed in a study in 2014 just how widely memes posted on the social media site can spread and evolve. In one example, they found 121,605 different variants of

one particular meme posted across 1.14 million status updates.” It’s hard to imagine how many more memes are shared now that it’s 9 years later. In fact, Brown also mentions that “According to the social media site Instagram, at least one million posts mentioning “meme” were shared every day in 2020” (Brown, 2022). Being that memes are so pervasive on social media, their influence is difficult to deny. The old adage, “A picture is worth a thousand words,” rings true when it comes to memes. The human brain processes images much faster than text. One article refers to memes as “Fast food media”, and says, “Due to their high visibility and humor, memes serve as fast-food media. They are like cheeseburgers – highly tempting in color, smell, and texture but low in nutritional value. They feed you up a bit (on the news agenda), but you really need a decent meal (or reading a respected newspaper) to nurture your body and mind.”

(Knowing Meme Knowing You - How Memes Influence Our Society | University of Westminster, London, n.d.)

Speaking of fast food, I have personally seen fast food restaurant ads using memes as part of their marketing strategy. Additionally, I have seen all types of brands use memes to interact with users on popular social media platform, Twitter. To quote Odra, “Like countless other cultural phenomena, memes are being absorbed into the capitalist machine, and agencies are discussing “memetic marketing” in annual advertising conferences and summits” (Odra, 2020b). In a society where instant gratification rules supreme, memes fit the bill for a quick and easy bite of information. Social media users ingest a steady diet of memes every time they scroll through their feeds. In fact, in a poll taken on Facebook (see chart below), most adults from ages 30 and up had either saved or shared a meme on social media. I believe if I had taken this same poll with people under 20, all categories would have had more yes than no answers.



The vast reach of memes does not stop at advertising or casual use but has also dived headfirst into the realm of politics. Who has not seen the classic image of Bernie Sanders and his mittens at Joe Bidens presidential inauguration? In fact, I used it earlier in this paper (see above). With the ability of memes to reach such a wide audience, politically based memes can influence people's perceptions regarding political events, policies, and candidates. This can lead to a shift in public opinion, which can ultimately impact political outcomes. People who would not normally watch political content on television or participate in campaigns or even follow a particular candidate might find themselves being influenced by political memes on social media. Helen Brown refers to two researchers in the US who explored Facebook memes during 2016 Presidential Election. She states, "The authors suggest that grassroots meme-culture allows everyday people to bypass the mainstream media, which has historically been a "gatekeeper" of political themes and discourse in presidential campaigns. Now, creators of memes (both citizens and candidates) have the power to share ideas with a vast online audience, shape political conversations, and ultimately, influence voting decisions" (Brown, 2022b).

Memes can quickly reach voters and influence public opinion. This has led to a rise in the use of social media by politicians, who are increasingly using it to connect with voters. The influence of memes on politics can also be seen in their ability to engage younger generations. Younger people are more likely to view information through social media. This makes memes a powerful tool for political candidates to reach young voters. In fact, a study by the Pew Research Center found that 55% of Americans aged 18-29 use social media as their primary source of political news (Shearer, 2020). It only makes sense that political campaigns would use social media and memes to engage the younger, more impressionable voters. This could put the impact of political memes into more dangerous territory. In Helen Brown's article, she states that "One perspective put forward by Joshua Niebuurt, who studies misinformation and disinformation at the University of Maryland in the US and the University of Okinawa in Japan, is that memes can be regarded as a modern digital equivalent of the propaganda leaflet" (Brown, 2022c). This makes the meme the perfect vehicle for spreading misinformation. Not only do memes have the ability to spread misinformation, they can also have long-term, devastating effects on individuals, families, corporations, and even entire countries.

Even before the rise of social media as we know it, memes were causing issues. Gyslain Raza, aka, "The Star Wars Kid," was a 14-year-old high school student who recorded a video of himself swinging a golf ball retriever in place of a lightsaber when he was trying to help a classmate work on a video. He left the tape in the AV room, and some classmates found it several months later and posted it to the internet. According to an article written by Philip Drost, "'Star Wars Kid' became the first viral video in internet history which led to online hate." (Man Who Became Famous 20 Years Ago as the "Star Wars Kid" Says Your Digital Shadow Shouldn't Define You | CBC Radio, 2022). As a result of the video going viral (without him

knowing or wanting it to be posted in the first place), he was teased, mocked, and ridiculed by his classmates and numerous other people on the internet. On top of this, the news picked it up, and he and his family were hounded by the media, with them going so far as to even come to his house and try to take pictures through his windows. He was even kicked out of school due to “bad publicity,” and had to be tutored at home and finished his final exams in a high school affiliated with a psychiatric unit in a hospital. It took him a decade after his video to emerge in society again, and he promoted awareness of cyberbullying. Thankfully things worked out for him as an adult, but he had to endure years of suffering as a result of this one video. As Mike Tunison put it, “Lots of memes or internet jokes can end in this kind of cruelty, even if that’s not fully the intent of the ones sharing them.” (Tunison, 2020).

There are other negative side effects of meme culture. Some of these include anxiety and depression, violence and hate speech, distraction from more important things, and taking in fake news. Young people nowadays are so consumed with the feedback they get from others online. If a meme has negative language in it, it can be triggering for people with certain mental health conditions. Things like (society’s definition of) racism, sexism, violence, obscenity, fat shaming, horror or sexually based content, and political opinions might bring about feelings of anxiety or depression, especially in people who are susceptible to these conditions. The more they are exposed to these things, the more likely they are to struggle with these negative emotions. Devastating images put into a comedic light can make people desensitized to the reality of the impact those images have. As Meg Thoma put it, “Empathy has practically disappeared on social media, leading to less empathy off the screen.” She also goes on to mention she has found herself laughing at these memes, but she explains that “The reason behind this laugh is a bi-product of joking about suicide, death, and other serious topics – all of which have been completely

normalized by today's society." (Thoma, 2018). I, too, in my own experience, have seen multiple memes about death, violence, and hate speech on my social media feed, and whether it be a racist joke or a meme about throwing bricks at homeless people, I sometimes find myself letting out a small chuckle.

In his article, "The Menace of Memes," Ira Hyman states that, "Memes are menacing because they are particularly effective at getting people to adopt ideas." He goes on to explain that memes are effective because they are repeatedly seen and shared. The problem is, "Even if it is a false statement, you may see the meme multiple times. And repeating any statement, whether true or false, can make people more likely to believe the statement." (Hyman, 2019). Teenagers are especially susceptible to not only believing what they see on social media but doing the things that they see as well. Take for example, the "Tide Pod Challenge," a viral trend that started on TikTok that consisted of teens filming themselves eating Tide laundry detergent pods, despite the fact that it would be hazardous to their health. Doctor Claire McCarthy explains that "The media coverage, actually, is part of the problem. But the real problem is the adolescent brain." She goes on to say, "Basically, teens are quick learners without a whole lot of insight or judgment, and risk-takers." (McCarthy, 2018). In a CBS news report, it says, "Nineteen-year-old Marc Pagan, who did it on a dare, told CBS News he knew better, but did it anyway." (CBS News, 2018).

Kim Bellware says, "TikTok challenges commonly grow from a silly dare or an attempt at a memorable reaction – like the Milk Crate and Frozen Honey challenges – into a viral trend in which participants try to outdo already outlandish feats (often against the pleading of medical professionals)." (Bellware, 2021). Since then, there have been a multitude of memes surrounding the challenge, including this one that was widely shared:



Another destructive trend that came from TikTok was the “Devious Lick.” This trend started shortly after schools opened back up after Covid-19 closures. Students were encouraged to record themselves stealing or vandalizing school property and then posting the video online. Nothing was off limits. Everything from exit signs, soap dispensers, intentionally clogged toilets, and stolen school trophies, was affected. This amounted to thousands of dollars worth of damages, stressed-out faculty, and overworked custodians in many schools. To quote several people from a podcast transcript:

- Alex Helton, Teacher:

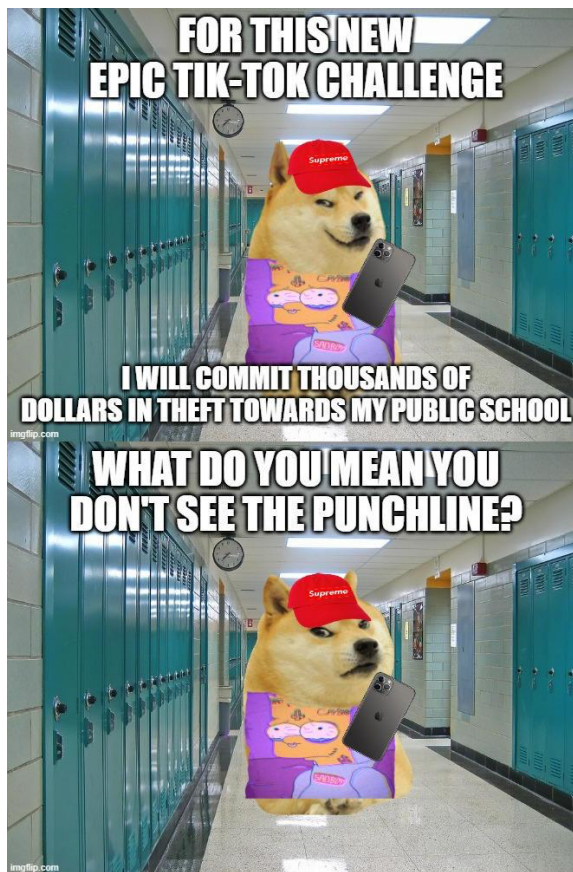
“My classroom had pretty much been destroyed. There was like, posters torn off the wall. The kids had taken books that I’d personally bought. And they took the books and they, like, took them, took a paper cutter, and, like, cut the covers and pages of the book.”

“To be completely honest, from the teacher perspective, that just kills a person’s spirit, to see that level of disrespect.”

- Kennedy Scott, Student:
“Our school has decided to close the bathrooms down and only open one bathroom for each gender, so that they can monitor the bathrooms.”
- Andrea Salazar Lopez
“Schools already have a small budget to begin with to be spending money on fixing damages. If this is the way we want to protest the school system, it’s making it really hard for people to take us seriously.”

(Viral TikTok Challenge Encourages Kids to Steal From School, 2021)

This trend was also taken into meme culture. Here is an example of one of the many memes about Devious Lick:



Clearly there is cause for concern when it comes to the culture surrounding memes and social media trends. Professor Nick Flann, who gave a talk at Utah State University titled, “Meme Menace; How Disinformation Spreads on Social Media,” says, “Memes can be jokes that emerge and evolve organically by social media users or they can be architected using AI techniques to trick people into trusting the information and sharing it across their networks. Disinformation delivered via memes becomes more sinister when we start changing our behavior. It has tremendous power to influence the future.” (USU Editor, 2022).

Memes are not all bad. The usual intent being to uplift spirits, to get a quick laugh, or as a tool for a creative outlet. However, the use of memes as a means for political gain, the detrimental effect it can have on mental health, the fact that people take serious topics and try to make them look like a joke, and the overall abundance of mind-numbingly stupid and senseless images that clog the internet and social media outweigh the positive aspects.

The internet should be used as a space for creativity, encouragement, the distribution of truthful knowledge, and watching funny cat videos. Using memes in the wrong way leads to pain and misery and makes society a worse place. But it goes even deeper than that. In Kristen Munson’s article, “The Dark Side of Memes,” she writes about Professor Flann that he, “believes that dangerous memes are no longer something that can be shrugged off and that without some type of intervention, humankind may be on a slow march toward an Orwellian future considering the invisible strings pulling on our society.” She also quotes him as saying, “Our free will could be taken from us without any need for force or torture, it could be taken from us through the process of these memes that are taking over our mind planting ideas and taking over our behavior,” he said during his presentation last fall. “The remarkable thing about it is, it is so subtle. In fact, we would not even know it was happening to us, and yet it could happen.” (USU

Editor, 2022). What he says resonates with me, as I have seen our society turn into distracted zombies from what has become a parasite in our hands. It is terrifying to ponder what lies ahead for future generations if things continue down the same road. We could find ourselves wiped out from the nuclear blast of memes.

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