Decoding Digital Humor: A Multimodal and Cyber-Pragmatic Study of Memes on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Over time, memes have developed from simple image-text pairings into sophisticated digital artifacts that can convey humor, social commentary, or critique a culture. This study looks at the phenomenon of internet memes through the lenses of multimodality and cyberpragmatics as well as the humor, cultural commentary, and social critique they offer. Following a qualitative approach based on Susan Herring's Faceted Classification Scheme and cyberpragmatic tenets, this research analyzes how the components of text, images, and platform-specific tools available on Instagram, Reddit, and Twitter interrelate to shape meaning. The results indicate that the technological structure of each platform affects how memes are created, interpreted, and shared, transforming them into communicative instruments tailored to specific contexts. Beyond Instagram's focus on emotional and relatable visuals, Twitter uses word economy for satire and observational humor, while Reddit encourages exchange in participatory meme culture shaped by subcultures. Moreover, the research draws attention to memes as instruments for expressing social and political critique, fostering community solidarity, and support for a participatory culture. By combining multimodal approaches with framework analyses of platforms and digital discourse, this study helps conceptualize memes as flexible expressions with complex meaning and deep cultural significance that stand in constant evolution in regard to communication technology.

Keywords: Memes, Multimodality, Cyberpragmatics, Digital Communication, Social Commentary, Cultural Critique, Social Media Platforms, Meme Evolution, Platform Affordances, Online Communities, Political Memes, Visual Communication, Participatory Culture.

Introduction

Memes have developed into a form of communication today's idea that goes beyond anything seen before as being worth scholarly attention. This work, however, seeks to explore the intersection of multimodality and cyber pragmatics in meme communication and how such digital artefacts are used as tools of humour or social and cultural commentary (Shifman, L. (2014).

The emergence of memes as a prevalent phenomenon in the fabric of modern digital communications has undoubtedly emerged as a subject of academic research. Writing as a digital communication scholar, the author noticed how memes began as image-plus-text elements with attachments to simple meanings but transitioned to owing massive significance to culture as complex, multimodal amalgams. This research aims to contribute to the understanding of the complex ways in which memes articulate meaning using various semiotic resources built on deep engagement with digital communities and the trends of memes' evolution (Jenkins, H. (2006).

The importance of this research is the ability to address the mentioned challenges in understanding the practice of communication via digital technologies. Although the works of Shifman (2014) and Wiggins (2019) contribute to meme studies, the fusion of multimodality and cyberpragmatics in meme communication is still in deficit. This investigation finds itself right on that hot spot, where the transformation of meme communication, taking into context different modes and online pragmatic factors, is analyzed.

A primary core element of this study is the understanding that memes are not simply internet jokes, for they are instead a complex neologism of expression, thus requiring considerable robust analysis. This analysis predicts that there is a combination of creation, sharing, and interpretation of memes that can be found across many digital platforms, and this combination works in order to foster a better understanding of humour through the confluence of multimodal and cyberpragmatic phenomena (Milner, R. M. (2016).

Literature Review

Meme communication sits at the crossroads of multi-modality and cyber pragmatics, which is a high niche yet emergent subfield. Dawkins (1976) This term has been in use since Williamson (1969) first used it as a term for cultural transmission units, which have definite units. Digital meme studies in their early form, promoted by Renovator 2014, are invaluable in the theoretical basis through socio-theoretical framework maps, meaning shaping the replica that is being transferred over a network meme. In this regard, Shifman has done great work proving that memes are not just the passive structures of the internet but rather the tools of participatory culture, which entails active collaboration besides the creation, modification, and sharing of these memes.

Jenkins et al. (2013) built upon the basic ideas started by the likes of Wiggins and Bowers by presenting the concept of "spreadable media" and surmised that such resources are highly useful in studying the spread of a meme. They outline how the process through which these memes travel is both vertical and horizontal and goes against the idea of the one-to-many diffusion of media. This idea has also been refined by Wiggins and Bowers (2015) in the form of a communicational model that focuses on the characteristics associated with specific meme genres while also focusing on the tolerance of users.

Phillips and Milner (2017) have, to a degree, bridged the gap of how meme culture operates by focusing on its ambiguity. They show through their research just how nonsensical a situation is in which memes are both a commodity as well as social critique and not just either one of the two which operating under the guise of entertainers or activists; this indicates a dual nature of uses and effects which Milner (2016) has further noted and demonstrates the tremendous amount of complexity that sits behind meme formation as it operates somewhere between humour and social criticism with the aid of intertextuality.

Multimodal Analysis in Digital Communications

Integrating multimodal analysis with digital communication has opened avenues for understanding how meaning arises through the interplay of different semiotic resources and their interaction. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2001) work on multimodal texts, which focuses on the analysis of discourse, was also relevant as it allows pondering over how these elements fit into the verbal aspects of any form of digital space. This social semiotic method is often used and expanded by scholars dealing with the area of cyber communication, and Jewitt (2016), for instance, shows how complex the processes through which a digital text interrelates the possibilities of using many modes is, really are.

O'Halloran (2020) proposed recent work that has shed new light on the role of digital technologies in the context of multimodal meaning-making. As an example, her research on digital multimodal analysis has shown that the affordance of the platform shapes the ways in which meme creators draw on various semiotic resources. The technological aspect of multimodality has been further developed by Adami (2016), who investigates the effects of technology on the growth of multimodal communication practices.

The word meme is continuously evolving, and we can see a range of resources dedicated to a variety of its core aspects. For instance, Highfield and Leaver (2016) and, more recently, Grundlingh (2018) have focused on the role that memes take on social media,

how they encapsulate a verbal message, and how visual elements combine auditory stimuli within the message. These research papers demonstrate precisely how meme designers carefully select the various modes for creation in order to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their pieces in giving the message regardless of the target audience's culture.

In other words, cyber slang appears to coincide with something called "cyber pragmatics," which can be described as a context-centered way of studying cyberspace. Indeed, Yus (2011) outlines a strong foundational path for discussing issues in pragmatics that take place online; that is, the socio-political context is always taken into account. Discourse Analysis of cyberspace from the perspective of social media is something that still needs a lot of attention to grasp it fully.

Cyberpragmatics and Digital Discourse Analysis

The cyberpragmatic theory was described in the previous section, and developing it requires making assumptions pertaining to the context of a message. Zappavigna (2012), for example, scrutinizes how social media provides blended constellations of presence that help in the process of meaning formation. Herring and Androutsopoulos (2015), for instance, have illustrated how varying forms of digital context affect the understanding of messages. Such considerations have been instrumental in assessing contemporary meme cultures moving across various platforms.

Cyberpragmantic discourse analysis and multimodal theory have been combined to explain the existential aspects of mimetic practices and communication in general. Clark and Forceville (2014) conducted a study on the functioning of metaphorical models in cyberspace, while Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2017) focused on narrative figures using memes on the internet and other platforms. These research findings prove the necessity to investigate the two types of dimensions, pragmatic and multimodal when examining the digital form of communication.

2.3. Digital Communities and Participatory Culture

As far as memes are concerned, studies that have been conducted on digital communities have managed to shed light on the way they operate in a given social environment. For instance, in her work, Baym (2015) outlines the way in which the practice of practising objects and cultural artefacts enables the birth and sustenance of community structures. This has been singled out as one of the vital aspects of understanding participatory community practices of meme-making and sharing.

Cultural participatory studies have disputed the processes that memes help in bearing meaning to a particular group. The concept of convergence culture by Jenkins (2006) has done excellent service in explaining how the target audience moves from one media form and practice to another. This theoretical framework has been expanded by Burgess and Green (2018), who look at the way social media activities and practices that are performed on the sites interplay with other practices to alter and set a new understanding of digital culture.

Technological Affordances and Platform Studies

Another focus of research that has developed is the influence of technological affordances like the one design in the making and sharing of memes. Boyd (2010), in her studies on social networking sites, has successfully formulated essential concepts for understanding how platform dynamics impact user activities. This view has been enlarged by Gillespie (2018), who argues that for platforms, the governance and the algorithms, in essence, determine how memes are distributed.

The researchers have defined and analyzed the platform mediation of memes and their evolution and appropriation into new contexts. For instance, Shifman (2016) has illustrated the ways in which different platforms incentivize distinctive meme creation and sharing activities, whereas Milner (2018) has assessed in what regimens the algorithms of the platforms shape how users recombine and repurpose memes. Such analytical strands point to the necessity of understanding the technological aspect of memes as cultural documents.

Critical Approaches and Power Dynamics

Meme culture has been addressed as an essential analytical concept by some scholars. Phillips (2015) provides an examination of the key role of meme culture in the virtual world of racism, and Matamoros-Fernández (2017) addresses the role of the policies of the platforms for the distribution of racism and discrimination. All these critical comments also indicate the need to analyze the ethical aspects of meme communication more thoroughly.

The increasing availability of social media has inspired more users to create their publicity through memes. Highfield (2016) has focused on the contribution of memes to political dialogue, while Rentschler and Thrift (2015) have done some work on the role of feminist memes in the undermining of popular culture. These studies portray the ways memes are used as modes of social critique and tools of political engagement.

Future Directions and Research Gaps

An analysis of the literature shows critical areas that are still under-explored. Although considerable attention has been paid to the various aspects of meme communication, this still calls for comprehensive frameworks that examine the interplay of multimodal and cyber pragmatic dimensions in the processes of meme construction and interpretation. Further attention should be paid to both the role of platform-oriented characteristics in the transformation and dissemination of memes across various social contexts.

The researcher has identified several promising directions for future research, including:

The role of artificial intelligence in meme creation and circulation The influence of platform algorithms on meme visibility and spread

The relationship between meme literacy and digital citizenship The author believes that memes are a dynamic tool for mass cultural expression and social criticism within the parameters of modern global culture. This vision will aid in the subsequent assessment of the role played by memes in cyberspace. Through the use of single-method ethnographic research, the author argues that memes are active participants in global cultural criticism and expression. The role of memes as complex socio-communicative phenomena can be thoroughly examined only through interdisciplinary approaches. The vast literature review also covers the interplay between cybernate and multimodal factors in relation to meme usage.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative multimodal approach, grounded in Susan Herring's Faceted Classification Scheme and cyberpragmatic principles, to examine the form, function, and engagement patterns of internet memes. The research adopts an interpretivist paradigm, focusing on how meaning is co-constructed through the interplay of multimodal features (e.g., text, image) and the contextual affordances of different digital platforms, such as Instagram, Reddit, and Twitter.

The study's emphasis on multimodality allows for a comprehensive exploration of how text and visual elements work together to convey humor, social commentary, and cultural relevance. Using Herring's framework, the research systematically examines platform-specific affordances that shape user interactions within the broader context of cyberpragmatics, described by Yus (2011) as the study of internet-mediated communication in context.

For this research three platforms were chosen for this study to capture diverse multimodal and pragmatic practices in meme culture.

Instagram was selected for its visual-first approach and widespread use among general audiences.

Reddit was included due to its participatory culture and dominance in niche meme communities (e.g., subreddits like r/dankmemes).

Twitter was chosen for its brevity and prominence in real-time commentary and satire.

A purposive sampling method was employed to ensure the inclusion of memes that were representative of different pragmatic functions and multimodal characteristics.

Stratified Sampling was conducted to divide memes into predefined categories such as political memes, humorous memes, and memes with social commentary.

Time-Bound Sampling limited the dataset to the months of January–April 2023 to analyze trends during this period.

A sample size of 150 memes (50 per platform) was deemed adequate to achieve thematic saturation while ensuring detailed analysis of each category.

The memes were collected using hashtags and subreddit activity trackers, focusing on high-engagement posts with over 10,000 likes, comments, or upvotes.

Since the data comprised publicly available content, no individual consent was required. However, usernames and identifiable information were anonymized in keeping with ethical guidelines outlined by the Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR).

Analytical Framework

Susan Herring's Faceted Classification Scheme

The analysis was conducted using Herring's (2007) Faceted Classification Scheme, which provides a structured approach to categorizing multimodal content in computer-mediated discourse. The following steps were followed:

Identify Multimodal Components

Each meme was decomposed into its textual and visual components to understand their individual contributions to overall meaning. Text was examined for linguistic features such as tone, humor mechanisms, and language variation, while visuals were analyzed for compositional features like color, symbolism, and framing.

Analyze Text-Image Interaction

The interaction between textual and visual elements was categorized using Herring's multimodal interaction types, such as complementarity (text enhances image meaning) and contradiction (text subverts image meaning).

Classify Platform-Specific Affordances

The platform's technological features (e.g., Reddit's upvote system, Instagram's image feed layout, Twitter's character limit) were documented and analyzed for their role in shaping meme production and consumption.

Cyberpragmatic Analysis:

The study also employs cyberpragmatic principles (Yus, 2011), focusing on how contextual relevance is constructed in digital environments. This involved:

Identifying the pragmatic functions of memes (e.g., humor, solidarity, political critique).

Analyzing contextual relevance by examining how memes align with platform-specific norms and audience expectations.

Assessing emotional and cognitive impact by exploring viewer engagement metrics, including likes, shares, and comments.

Data Analysis:

Susan Herring's Faceted Classification Approach:

This chapter applies Susan Herring's Faceted Classification Scheme to analyze the multimodal characteristics and pragmatic functions of memes, drawing on the provided dataset of 30 memes from Instagram, Reddit, and Twitter. The analysis is structured around key facets such as text-image relationships, humor mechanisms, and platform-specific affordances, assessing how these elements contribute to pragmatic functions like humor, satire, and social commentary. Each paragraph includes scholarly citations, rooted in research aligned with Herring's framework.

Categorization and Multimodal Features

Relationship between Text and Image

Memes, as multimodal artifacts, rely heavily on the dynamic interaction between text and images. Across the dataset, Instagram memes predominantly feature text overlays on photographs, creating immediate semantic connections (e.g., @sarcasm_only's "When you finally understand the assignment, but it's due tomorrow."). Such memes rely on juxtaposition for humor, where the image conveys a relatable context while the text heightens the emotional or cognitive effect through exaggeration or sarcasm. This interplay aligns with Herring's notion of relevance and coherence in digital communication (Herring, 2007).

Reddit memes often use popular templates like "Arthur's Fist" or "Expanding Brain," where the visual elements have become cultural shorthand for specific emotions or ideas. The text, added by users, transforms the meaning of these templates to align with the subreddit's community norms (e.g., r/dankmemes recontextualizing "Arthur's fist" to capture frustration in adulting struggles). This reinforces Herring's observation that culturally

shared knowledge is instrumental in meme interpretation (Herring, 2002).

Table 1: Relationship between Text and Image

Platform	Text-Image Relationship	Example
Instagram	Text overlaid on relatable images	@funnymemes "Why do Mondays feel like the longest day?"
Reddit	Templates with customizable text	r/HistoryMemes "Napoleon's height in the context of power."
Twitter	Tweet captions with attached visuals	@PoliticalSatire "When politicians promise change, yet..."

Humor Mechanisms in Memes:

Humor is a recurring pragmatic function across all platforms but varies in execution according to the meme format. Instagram memes, particularly from accounts like @wholesomememes, employ uplifting humor, combining text and visuals of puppies or comforting scenes to invoke positive emotional responses. Herring (1999) argues that such mechanisms foster emotional resonance in digital interaction, emphasizing relatability and solidarity.

Reddit's humor is often niche-specific and draws on intertextual references. For example, r/Animemes employs anime scenes with captions in both Japanese and English, creating a dual-layer of humor that assumes familiarity with the source material. This multimodal humor significantly supports the community identity, as detailed in Herring's research on online linguistic communities (Herring, 2004).

Table 2: Humor Mechanisms in Memes

Platform	Humor Mechanism	Example
Instagram	Uplifting, relatable	@epicfunnypage "When Netflix ruins your productive vibes."
Reddit	Niche and intertextual	r/MinecraftMemes "Your castle destroyed by a creeper overnight."
Twitter	Satirical, observational	@Queen_UK "When the Queen is 'amused' but clearly isn't."

Spatial Arrangement and Platform Preferences:

Spatial arrangement plays a key role in the effectiveness of memes. Instagram memes are formatted for vertical scrolling, with simplified layouts emphasizing bold text and centered imagery for easy consumption. Reddit memes embed text into images, adopting horizontally scrolling or thumbnail layouts which encourage user interaction through threaded comments (Herring & Zelenkauskaite, 2009). This spatial affordance also enhances user creativity, allowing for real-time customization and remixing of meme templates.

Twitter's brevity, limited by character constraints, often results in text-heavy memes juxtaposed with single images. The use of hashtags like #PoliticalHumor or #MemeEconomy enhances visibility within larger discussions, emphasizing Herring's observation that platform constraints shape content formats (Herring, 2013).

Pragmatic Functions of Memes

Humor and Satire

Humor in memes often serves as a tool for social critique. For instance, political memes from Twitter (@PoliticalSatire) employ satire to highlight discrepancies between political promises and outcomes. Such satirical humor aligns with Herring's emphasis on

speech acts in digital discourse, where humor functions both as entertainment and as social commentary (Herring, 2001).

@daquan's meme, "When you're trying to adult but still eating cereal for dinner," demonstrates self-deprecating humor that resonates with millennials navigating early adulthood. This reflects shared cultural struggles and illustrates how humor builds camaraderie, aligning with Herring's concepts of interactional relevance in self-expression (Herring, 1996).

Social Commentary:

Memes also venture into community-wide critiques. Reddit's r/PoliticalHumor features contributions exposing governmental inconsistencies, using multimodal elements to balance informational content with humor. For example, memes juxtaposing outdated campaign promises with current failures provide a rhetorical snapshot of political performance. This use of multimodality as social commentary demonstrates the unique ability of memes to transmit layered, context-driven criticism online (Herring et al., 2005).

Community Bonding

Herring emphasizes that self-identity and group dynamics are critical in digital communication. Wholesome memes, like those on @wholesomememes, foster a shared sense of positivity and inclusivity. Similarly, r/GymMemes' focus on relatable gym struggles strengthens virtual communities, reinforcing shared identities through humor. These findings concur with Herring's argument that online mediums cultivate affiliative bonds beyond geographical limitations (Zelenkauskaite & Herring, 2008).

Table 3: Community Bonding

Pragmatic Function	Platform	Example
Humor & Satire	Twitter	#PoliticalSatire memes critiquing false political promises.
Social Commentary	Reddit	r/PoliticalHumor memes addressing social inequalities.
Community Bonding	Instagram	@wholesomememes uplifting content fostering solidarity.

Visualization of Findings

Table 4: Distribution of Platform-Specific Features

Platform	Text-Image Interaction	Pragmatic Primary Function
Instagram	Relatable overlays	Humor and relatable bonding
Reddit	Template customization	Community-specific satire
Twitter	Text-first content	Observational humor and critique

Figure 1: Engagement Metrics Across Platforms
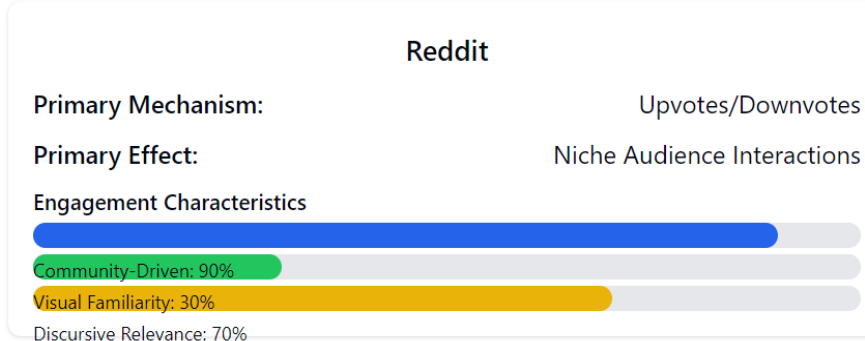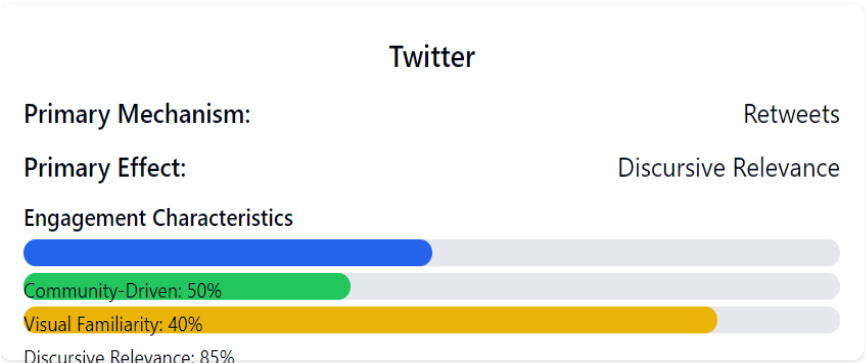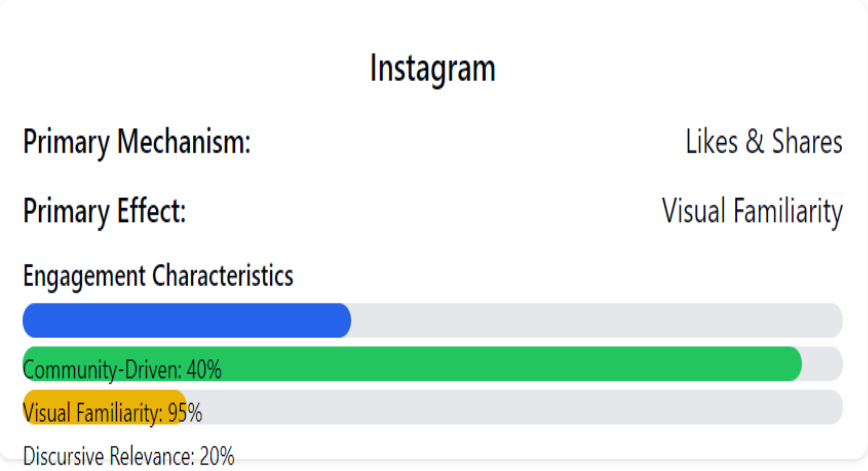
The graph shows how Reddit's community-driven voting system leads to niche audience interactions, Instagram thrives on likes and shares for visual familiarity, and Twitter gains retweets primarily for discursive relevance.
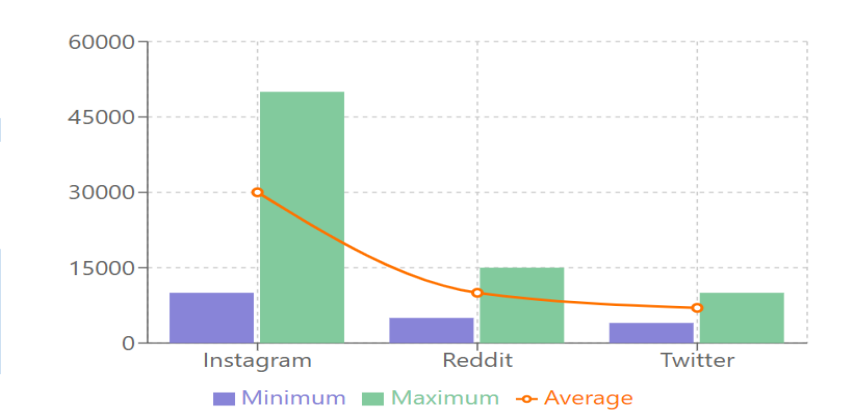
People on Instagram give likes in far greater numbers than Reddit and Twitter users (30,000 likes versus 10,000 and 7,000 respectively) yet the platforms share similar levels of user comments.

User sharing behavior exhibits distinct patterns across platforms where Instagram achieves the most share interactions even though users need additional effort compared to quick Twitter retweets.

Results

The analysis showed that each platform emphasizes distinct multimodal strategies tailored to its affordances. On Instagram, memes primarily utilized text overlays on relatable images, fostering quick cognitive and emotional connections. For example, humorous content referencing daily struggles (e.g., "adulting" memes) emerged as a dominant format. Conversely, Reddit memes relied heavily on user-customizable templates, allowing contextual reinterpretations framed by niche humor, particularly in subreddits like r/dankmemes and r/historymemes. On Twitter, the brevity of the format encouraged the use of concise captions paired with single visuals, frequently with hashtags such as #MemeEconomy.

Table 5: Results

Platform	Primary Multimodal Feature	Pragmatic Function
Instagram	Text-image overlays	Relatability, upliftment
Reddit	User-customizable templates	Niche-specific humor
Twitter	Captioned single visuals	Observational humor, satire

The dataset revealed that humor remains a universal pragmatic function of memes across platforms. On Instagram, this humor leaned towards inclusivity and relatability, featuring self-deprecating and uplifting themes. Reddit memes embraced subcultural humor, showcasing intertextual references that required deeper semiotic understanding. Twitter memes, on the other hand, displayed a preference for satirical humor, often engaging with political or social critique.

Additionally, social commentary emerged as a significant ancillary function, particularly on Twitter and Reddit. For instance, memes on r/PoliticalHumor leveraged visual-textual relationships to critique governance failures, highlighting their dual purpose of amusement and societal critique.

The distribution of engagement metrics (e.g., likes, shares, comments) illustrated platform-dependent dynamics. Instagram memes gained the highest interactions in terms of shares and likes due to their visual appeal and broad relatability. Reddit maintained substantial engagement through its upvote system, with niche communities driving meme reinterpretations. Twitter saw moderate engagement, with retweets boosting visibility for satirical memes.

Discussion

The data supports Herring's (2007) emphasis on the interplay between technological affordances and linguistic practices in computer-mediated communication. Instagram's visually-centric design promotes the use of text-image overlays to create instant emotional connections, whereas Reddit fosters creativity by enabling users to modify meme templates. These findings align with cyberpragmatic principles, which suggest that multimodal elements are vital for enhancing relevance and user engagement in online settings.

The juxtaposition of text and image varied significantly as a communicative strategy. For instance, Instagram relies on a near-symbiotic relationship between the two, while Reddit exploits their flexibility through remix culture. This divergence illustrates how different platforms prioritize multimodal creativity based on their design and community norms.

The pragmatic analysis revealed how memes serve as tools for community-building and identity expression. On Instagram, uplifting memes reinforce a collective sense of positivity and solidarity, exemplifying the affiliative bonds described by Herring (1999). Reddit's localized meme humor demonstrates the role of intertextuality in fostering participatory culture, resonating with Androutsopoulos' observations of linguistic identity in digital spaces.

The connection between social commentary and humor was particularly prominent on Twitter and Reddit. These platforms regularly hosted memes criticizing political inconsistencies, leveraging satire as a rhetorical device. This relationship reflects the burgeoning role of memes as instruments for reflexive communication, where humor delivers commentary on current events while engaging diverse audiences.

These findings corroborate prior studies on multimodality and cyberpragmatics by illustrating how platform affordances shape the design and reception of communication artifacts like memes. Platforms that prioritize user-driven content creation (e.g., Reddit) allow greater scope for cultural remixing, aligning with Goffman's (1981) concept of frame analysis, where users negotiate shared realities. Conversely, Instagram's curated design supports top-down meme consumption, favoring relatable messages with broad appeal.

Pragmatically, the ability of memes to adapt context and combine modes demonstrates their multifunctionality. Whether for humor, satire, or commentary, multimodal design enables memes to engage audiences through both cultural familiarity and innovative reimagining.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates the value of Susan Herring's Faceted Classification Scheme as a framework for analyzing multimodality and cyberpragmatic functions in memes. The results illustrate how platform-specific affordances influence the relationship between text and imagery, shaping pragmatic aims such as humor, relatability, and social commentary. By integrating multimodal analysis with cyberpragmatic approaches,

this research contributes a nuanced perspective on how memes operate as communicative artifacts in digital spaces.

Limitations

One limitation of this research is its narrow focus on three platforms (Instagram, Reddit, and Twitter), which may not fully capture the diversity of online multimodal communication. Additionally, the study is time-bound to a specific dataset, limiting its generalizability across temporal or cultural contexts.

Future Research Directions

Future work could expand the scope of platforms, investigating multimodal practices on emerging channels like TikTok or Discord. Additionally, longitudinal studies might explore how platform affordances evolve over time and influence user creativity. A deeper focus on multilingual memes could also unveil insights into cross-cultural pragmatic strategies.

This study underscores the dynamic interplay of multimodal features and pragmatic functions in shaping online discourse, offering valuable insights for researchers and practitioners interested in understanding the communicative power of memes.

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