

Meme Culture in Mongolia: Examining It's Positive and Negative Impacts on Society

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Issue Details

Issue Title: 3(1)

Received: March 1, 2025

Accepted: April 30, 2025

Published: May 16, 2025

Pages: 29 - 44

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ASIAN STUDIES in Mongolia

Abstract

Due to the influence of digital evolution, meme culture has developed, allowing individuals to creatively express their ideas, foster social awareness, and ultimately build public relationships. This paper explores the dual impacts of meme culture by examining its positive contributions to contemporary society through the lens of 20th-century socio-cultural theory and its negative consequences through philosophical and ethical frameworks. The rise of meme culture, driven by the digital revolution, has transformed communication, enabling individuals to creatively express ideas, foster social awareness, and build communities. This research will examine meme culture as a contemporary form of interpersonal communication and discourse, drawing on the socio-cultural theories of Jean Baudrillard and Marshall McLuhan. While memes are recognized as a significant cultural phenomenon of the digital age, their pervasive nature presents substantial ethical challenges for society. Consequently, this study will integrate modern philosophical concepts to critically assess ethical issues associated with the spread of misinformation, stereotypes, and harmful ideologies. This analysis aims not only to elucidate the primary functions of memes but also to evaluate the positive and negative perceptions they foster within the public sphere. Ultimately, the research will conclude with an examination of several popular memes that have emerged among Mongolian internet users in recent years, with a particular focus on the common ethical concerns they raise.

Keywords

Digital Communication, Mongolian Meme Culture, Sociological Issues, Hyperreality, Cultural Discourse

Research aims and purpose

The primary aim of this research is to explore the positive and negative impacts of meme culture on Mongolian society, with a particular focus on its sociological and cultural dimensions. This study seeks to understand how memes, as a prominent form of digital communication, influence societal attitudes, values, and behaviors within the context of Mongolia. The research will

investigate how memes influence public discourse, social norms, and cultural identity in contemporary Mongolian society, examining how they both reflect and challenge existing social structures. Additionally, this paper aims to explore both the positive and negative impacts of meme culture on society, highlighting how memes shape public opinion, influence behavior, and play a central role in modern digital discourse. Through analyzing the constructive contributions of meme culture as well as its detrimental effects, this research seeks to provide a balanced perspective on its role in contemporary society.

Research Methodology

This research aims to explore the positive and negative impacts of meme culture on society, specifically from a sociological and cultural perspective. In this context, the methodology focuses on qualitative approaches rooted in sociological research methods, such as ethnography, discourse analysis, and comparative cultural analysis. The study will rely on secondary data, literature reviews, and the analysis of online meme content, rather than direct interviews or large-scale surveys. This approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural and social implications of memes in the Mongolian context.

An ethnographic approach will be employed to explore how meme culture is embedded in the everyday lives and practices of Mongolian internet users. This method involves immersive observation within online spaces where memes are created, shared, and discussed. The researcher will engage with social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and local meme pages, observing how users interact with memes, how memes reflect social issues, and how they shape cultural conversations. By examining the social behaviors and group dynamics in these virtual communities, the research will offer insights into how memes function within the wider Mongolian society.

The researcher will pay particular attention to how memes address cultural identity, societal values, and social taboos in Mongolia. The ethnographic method allows for an in-depth understanding of the role that memes play in shaping everyday interactions and reinforcing or challenging social norms. By participating in these digital spaces, the researcher will gain a deeper understanding of the underlying cultural dynamics and how meme culture can either reinforce or subvert existing sociocultural structures.

Discourse analysis will be a key component of the research methodology. This approach focuses on examining how language and visuals in memes contribute to the construction of meaning, power, and social norms within Mongolian society. The researcher will analyze the content of memes to identify recurring themes, stereotypes, and narratives, such as those related to gender roles, politics, ethnic identity, and social hierarchy.

By deconstructing the messages encoded in memes, discourse analysis will help to understand how memes function as tools for social commentary, satire, or even political activism. Additionally, it will allow the researcher to explore the potential harmful effects of meme culture, such as the perpetuation of negative stereotypes or the trivialization of serious social issues. Through this method, the researcher will be able to identify how memes contribute to or challenge the dominant cultural discourse in Mongolia, providing both positive and negative social effects.

A comparative cultural analysis will be used to understand the unique aspects of Mongolian meme culture in relation to global meme trends. This method involves comparing the characteristics

of memes in Mongolia with those from other countries, particularly in terms of their cultural references, humor styles, and the ways they address societal issues. By exploring how memes reflect local Mongolian culture, the research will highlight the extent to which global meme culture has been adapted or reshaped in the Mongolian context.

The comparative analysis will also consider how meme culture in Mongolia aligns or contrasts with other countries in terms of social and political implications. For instance, how do memes in Mongolia address political corruption, social inequality, or youth activism? This comparative approach will provide a broader understanding of how meme culture functions within different sociocultural environments and offer insights into the unique ways in which memes serve as both reflections and agents of social change in Mongolia.

In this article, cultural criticism will also be a vital aspect of the research. This method involves critically assessing the societal impacts of memes in terms of their cultural significance and their contribution to both positive and negative aspects of social change. The researcher will examine how memes interact with traditional Mongolian values, such as community, respect for elders, and collectivism, and whether meme culture challenges or reaffirms these values.

Literature review

The study of meme culture and its impact on society can be contextualized within several theoretical frameworks and contemporary discussions surrounding media, communication, and cultural identity. One of the foundational theories that can be applied to this research is Marshall McLuhan's media theory, particularly his famous concept that "the medium is the message". McLuhan argued that the medium through which information is communicated fundamentally shapes the way in which society perceives and processes that information (McLuhan, 1964). In the case of memes, this theory is particularly relevant as it highlights how the unique characteristics of memes—being visual, humorous, and often viral—shape public discourse and influence social norms. According to McLuhan, the rise of digital media, including memes, has transformed human communication, creating new ways of constructing reality and shaping collective consciousness.

Another relevant concept is hyperrealism, a theory advanced by Jean Baudrillard, which examines the ways in which reality is increasingly mediated by representations and simulations. Hyperrealism is particularly applicable to the study of memes because they often blur the line between reality and fiction, presenting exaggerated or distorted versions of societal issues that are consumed by audiences as both humorous and reflective of reality. It abandons "the real" for the hyperreal by presenting an increasingly real simulation of a comprehensive and comprehensible world. This heading points the way toward Baudrillard's "hypertelia," that fated catastrophe when the sophistication of a model outdoes the reality it attempts to comprehend (Nunes, 1995, 314). Memes can be seen as hyperreal in that they both reflect and shape social constructs, distorting the truth while simultaneously reinforcing or challenging cultural norms.

In recent years, scholars have increasingly focused on the cultural impact of memes. Limor Shifman is one of the most influential scholars in meme studies. Her work emphasizes how memes function as a new form of cultural expression in the digital age (Shifman, 2013). In her book *Memes in Digital Culture* (2013), Shifman explores how memes foster social movements, political activism, and how they contribute to the construction of group identities. Shifman's analysis of memes as "new forms of public discourse" offers valuable insights into understanding how memes serve as both social commentary and a form of entertainment in different cultural contexts.

Another emerging scholar from a cultural perspective on digitalization is Ryan M. Milner. The scholar has explored how memes serve as a form of “participatory culture” where individuals contribute to and consume digital content within online communities. On his book titled *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media* (2016) Milner emphasizes how memes allow for collective expressions of identity, humor, and resistance, which resonate particularly with younger generations in digital spaces.

In the Mongolian context, the study of meme culture is relatively recent. Currently, there is a lack of research on this subject from the perspectives of sociology and cultural studies. However, a notable contribution is the thesis titled “МЕМЕ (МИЙМ) МАРКЕТИНГ ХЭРЭГЛЭГЧИЙН ХУДАЛДАН АВАХ ЭРМЭЛЗЭЛД НӨЛӨӨЛӨХ ХҮЧИН ЗҮЙЛСИЙН СУДАЛГАА: Z ҮЕИЙНХНИЙ ЖИШЭЭН ДЭЭР (2024)” —this research, conducted by Dulguun and Urandelger, investigates the influence of memes on consumer behavior, focusing on how memes affect the purchasing intentions of Generation Z in Mongolia. Their work highlights the powerful role that meme culture plays not only in shaping social attitudes but also in influencing marketing strategies and consumer behavior, particularly among the younger demographic.

Introduction

The term “meme” originates from the ancient Greek word *mimēma*, meaning “imitated.” Later, the biologist Richard Dawkins adopted this term in his work *The Selfish Gene* (1976), where he used it to describe cultural phenomena. Today, the meme culture we know has become a significant part of 21st-century digital culture. In short, a meme refers to images, videos, or texts with humorous qualities that are rapidly copied and spread by internet users, often with slight modifications or variations. However, some scholars, such as media researcher Limor Shifman, did not view meme culture solely as humorous captioned images. Instead, she emphasized that it refers to various types of images, videos, and texts that spread rapidly in the online environment (Shifman, 2013).

In recent years, meme culture has become an integral part of the internet age, with its ability to spread rapidly across social media platforms, often blurring the lines between humor, commentary, and political expression. Originating from simple images or phrases, memes have evolved into powerful tools of communication, creating new ways for people to interact and share ideas. Similar to genes, memes are considered replicators that go through processes of variation, competition, selection, and retention. At any given time, numerous memes vie for the attention of their audience; however, only those that align with the sociocultural context are able to spread effectively, while others fade away (Chielens & Heylighen, 2005). However, the impact of meme culture on society is not one-dimensional. On the one hand, memes can serve as a source of entertainment, education, and social connection, fostering communities and enabling individuals to express themselves in innovative ways. On the other hand, the dark side of the meme culture can perpetuate harmful stereotypes, spread misinformation, and contribute to negative social behaviors.

As online communities continue to grow, memes have evolved into a language of their own—creating a new form of digital vernacular that facilitates connection and expression. This transformation reflects the broader shift in communication patterns enabled by the digital age, where speed and virality often dominate over traditional modes of discourse (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). While memes offer a myriad of benefits, such as fostering social connection, promoting political activism, and acting as a form of creative expression, they are not without their drawbacks. The rapid spread of misinformation, the reinforcement of harmful stereotypes, and the facilitation of cyberbullying are just a few of the negative consequences associated with meme culture (Burgess, 2009).

The positive impact of meme culture on society is most evident in its ability to create online communities, provide a platform for social movements, and democratize access to humor and creativity. Memes have proven to be particularly powerful in terms of fostering social connection. They often serve as a tool for collective identity, bringing together individuals who share common interests, values, or experiences (Milner, 2013). For instance, political memes have become a vital form of expression for social justice movements, allowing activists to convey complex ideas quickly and accessibly (Miltner, 2014). Memes also have the unique ability to bridge generational gaps, making them an effective tool in both youth culture and broader societal discourse (Shifman, 2014). However, the darker side of meme culture cannot be overlooked. Despite their playful and often innocuous nature, memes can contribute to the spread of harmful ideologies, misinformation, and negative online behavior. Memes have been shown to propagate false information at a speed and scale that traditional media outlets often cannot match, with significant implications for public opinion and behavior (Friggeri et al., 2014). Additionally, meme culture can perpetuate stereotypes, trivialize serious issues, and even facilitate online harassment, particularly through "trolling" or cyberbullying. In the context of global political events, memes have been weaponized to further polarize society, often simplifying complex issues into divisive sound bites (Miltner, 2014).

Rethinking the History of Meme Culture

A quick search on the internet reveals that the term "meme" is commonly used to describe ideas or phenomena that are catchy and widely shared. Marketing strategies from the late 19th century can be retrospectively understood in terms of selling memes to consumers. In modern advertising, the term "viral marketing" is used to refer to campaigns that successfully capture widespread attention. However, limiting the concept of memes solely to marketing strategies overlooks the broader potential of this concept for understanding shifts in mindsets, new forms of power and social processes, social participation and activism, and the creation of distributed networks of communication and relationships—among other significant social phenomena (Blackmore et al., 1999).

The diverse perspectives on memes found in the literature often emphasize their distinctiveness, suggesting that memes possess a certain boundedness or discreteness. Scholars in the field of memetics commonly refer to memes as "units," "patterns," "ideas," "structures," or "sets," which implies that memes have identifiable "edges," even though these edges can be somewhat fluid in practice. This aligns with the perspective presented in this chapter, where memes are viewed as recognizable, bounded entities that have tangible effects in the world and can be systematically analyzed. Dawkins's original examples of memes—such as tunes, good ideas, catchphrases, fashion trends, or methods of crafting pots or building arches—remain useful references for identifying and studying memes.

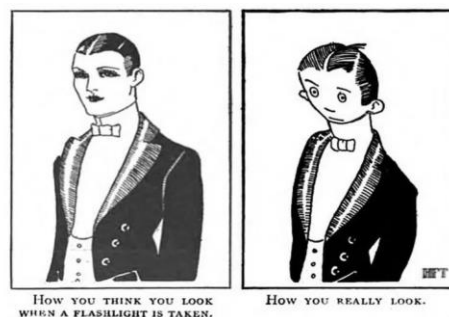


Figure. 1. This comic titled *Reality vs Expectation* published in the 1921 issue of *The Judge*, a magazine published by the University of Iowa, caught the public's attention.

Today, we perceive and understand memes as more media and information-centered. The contemporary information landscape is filled with a variety of entertaining media projects and products. These include TV talk shows, game shows, movies, television series, popular cinema, cartoons, literature, video games, and social media, all of which captivate today's audiences. Recently, a new form of information product has emerged, further fueling people's desire for games, entertainment, and online communication in an age of consumerism. The development of Web 2.0 technologies, introduced by Tim O'Reilly and O'Reilly Media, gave rise to the second generation of the Internet, incorporating services like Web Mash-ups, Ajax, Google Suggest, Google Maps, Gmail, and others (Polishchuk, Vitiuk et al., 2022). These innovations led to a range of media services and sites such as Quintura, Pligg, del.icio.us, Digg, and Net, where individual consumers became active participants in the digital culture. With the introduction of platforms like YouTube, MySpace, and Flickr, Web 2.0 technologies reshaped the information space and established new forms of interaction among users.

This transformation marks a significant shift in the relationship between consumers and the Internet, as creative consumers became the new center of symbolic value production. They gained the ability to generate and share their own content online, fostering a new dynamic of information exchange and collaboration between firms and users. By publishing various messages on the Internet, consumers are now able to interact with a wide range of individuals, some of whom are familiar and others who are not. This represents a novel form of communication (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger, & Shapiro, 2012). As Hakobyan on *Digitalization of Communication and the Spiral of Silence Theory* (2020) states, "digitalization of communication enhanced information and opinion sharing opportunities and provided a space for open and horizontal communication".

The ongoing development of Web 3.0 technology (as introduced by Jason Calacanis and Netscape.com) will likely accelerate the intensity of these changes. To keep pace with the evolving dynamics of modern society, researchers must examine how the online environment is shaping contemporary life (van der Werff, Real, & Lynn, 2018). It is crucial to recognize that the evolution of user interaction with modern web technologies could lead to unforeseen impacts on everyday life, extending beyond professional responsibilities. The Semantic Web, for instance, has the potential to not only transform the scope of information activities but also significantly alter the creation and distribution of symbolic values. The fundamental desire for communication and interaction forms the foundation of social symbolic production and exchange. In this context, the widespread popularity of social networks has become a defining feature of the information society.

If we look back at the writings of the researchers who first popularized the term 'meme,' such as Dan Sperber, Susan Blackmore, Daniel Dennett, Mogens Olesen, and Richard Dawkins, they all argue that a meme should be viewed as a distinct informational 'unit of transmission' that replicates through imitation. They highlight three key characteristics that contribute to a meme's success: longevity, fecundity, and copy fidelity (Castaño, 2013, 85). A notable feature of internet memes, as information products, is that they exist as symbols or images—ideas captured in specific electronic formats. These memes may take the form of visuals or an integrated visual and audio presentation. They are ephemeral objects, sustained by web technologies and internet resources.

In recent years, scholars have proposed a different perspective compared to earlier researchers. One key factor contributing to meme culture is urbanization. People living in cities, particularly in megacities, often encounter an overwhelming amount of visual stimuli in both their work and leisure environments. Moreover, traditional values—such as the family unit, religious beliefs, and

national-cultural traditions—are no longer always effective in alleviating the stress of modern life. As a result, internet resources and social networks have become sources of social stability, created through the symbolic production and exchange within contemporary society. In this context, internet memes serve as a way for many residents of cities, especially megacities, to cope with the internal discomfort they experience in their daily lives.

According to Limor Shifman, there are nine distinct types of memes in the digital world. These include Reaction Photoshops, Photo Fads, Flashmobs, Lipsyncs, Misheard Lyrics, Recut Trailers, LOLCats, Stock Character Macros, and Rage Comics (Shifman, 2013, 74). Reaction Photoshops involve altering images to respond humorously or satirically to a specific situation, while Photo Fads are viral trends where individuals replicate a certain photo or pose. Flashmobs refer to large groups of people who suddenly gather in a public place, often performing coordinated activities, typically shared through social media. Lipsync videos showcase individuals or groups miming to popular songs or dialogues, creating comedic or entertaining content. Misheard Lyrics are memes that arise from people humorously interpreting song lyrics incorrectly, often resulting in absurd or comical meanings. Recut trailers involve re-editing movie trailers to convey a different genre or tone, adding a new layer of humor or irony. LOLCats are images of cats paired with humorous, often grammatically incorrect text, conveying human-like emotions or behaviors. Stock Character Macros feature repeated use of particular characters in meme formats, often with exaggerated expressions or situations. Lastly, Rage Comics are simple, cartoon-style illustrations depicting humorous or relatable expressions of frustration and anger. These diverse meme types reflect the creative and rapidly evolving nature of online culture, where humor and communication are continually reshaped.

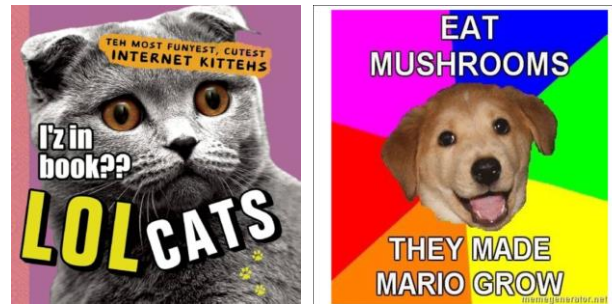


Figure 2. According to Limor Shifman, these images represent the initial phases of meme culture.

As we see, meme culture has evolved from a simple concept of idea transmission to a powerful force shaping communication, identity, and social interaction. As the internet continues to advance, especially with the rise of Web 3.0, the role of memes in cultural and societal dynamics will only grow. The ongoing transformation of how we create, share, and interpret memes offers a unique lens through which we can better understand the intersection of technology, culture, and human behavior in the digital age.

Sociological and Cultural Perspectives on Meme Culture

The sociological and cultural foundations of meme culture have been a subject of growing interest among scholars, as memes increasingly shape how individuals communicate and form social connections in the digital era. Dawkins proposed that memes, like genes, are cultural units

that replicate and spread through imitation. He suggested that memes evolve over time and influence human behavior and culture, laying the foundation for the study of how ideas and cultural phenomena are transmitted within societies. This idea laid the groundwork for understanding how cultural elements, including memes, function within societies.

Susan Blackmore (1999), in her book *The Meme Machine*, further expanded on Dawkins's theory, emphasizing the role of memes in human cognition and socialization, suggesting that memes not only transmit ideas but also shape individuals' thoughts and behaviors. In the context of modern internet memes, Limor Shifman provided a comprehensive analysis of how digital memes are used for social interaction and cultural participation. Shifman identifies meme culture as a platform for self-expression and social commentary, illustrating how memes allow individuals to engage with and critique contemporary issues. Meanwhile, scholars like Mihai Gherghina and Andrei S. Zorila (2017) examine how memes serve as tools for political mobilization and social movements, with internet memes acting as vehicles for political discourse and satire. Memes, they argue, have a unique capacity to both reinforce and challenge dominant cultural narratives.

Moreover, the rise of meme culture reflects larger social shifts, such as the decline of traditional media institutions and the increasing decentralization of content production (Brodie, 1996). In sociological terms, memes serve as symbolic forms that transcend traditional boundaries of communication, creating new avenues for interaction and the formation of shared cultural identities. They facilitate a form of cultural exchange that is informal, often humor-driven, and accessible to a global audience. This growing body of research underscores the pivotal role memes play in shaping modern culture and society.

Thus, why is meme culture spreading so rapidly within society? What are the primary influences driving this phenomenon? A singular response, such as "it is the result of our world becoming digital" may not fully capture the complexity of the issue. One of the primary reasons for this rapid spread is the widespread accessibility and use of the internet, particularly through social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. These platforms have allowed for the easy creation, sharing, and dissemination of memes across global audiences, making them viral in nature. The instantaneous nature of online communication enables memes to spread faster than ever before, reaching millions of people in a matter of hours or days.

Another key factor is the evolution of the internet itself, particularly the advent of mobile technologies and the increasing use of smartphones. These devices provide immediate access to online platforms, making it easier for people to consume and create memes on the go. The portability and convenience of smartphones have helped embed meme culture into the daily lives of individuals, further cementing its role in shaping communication. Additionally, memes often thrive on their relatability, humor, and ability to condense complex ideas into easily digestible formats. This makes them particularly appealing in a fast-paced, information-saturated society, where people seek entertainment, emotional release, and a sense of belonging. Memes allow individuals to participate in global conversations, expressing shared emotions or experiences, which strengthens social bonds and creates a sense of community, even among strangers.

If we are to analyze meme culture in detail, it is necessary to elaborate on humor. Humor plays a crucial role in human interaction, functioning as both a social bonding mechanism and a way to navigate complex social dynamics. If humor is considered the most significant factor representing

meme culture, then this research should also highlight the relationships within the group that provokes this humor. Several theoretical frameworks have been developed to understand humor's role in social interaction. We shall now direct our attention to the following key theories. 1. *The incongruity theory*, which is one of the most widely accepted theories of humor, suggests that humor arises when there is a discrepancy between what is expected and what actually occurs. This theory has been used to explain how humor facilitates communication by allowing individuals to play with and reinterpret social norms, expectations, and conventions in a lighthearted way (Morreall, 1983). This can promote social flexibility and make communication more dynamic. 2. *The relief theory*, proposed by Sigmund Freud (1905), posits that humor functions as a release of psychological tension or pent-up emotions. According to Freud, humor helps individuals relieve societal constraints and personal anxieties, which can lead to a more relaxed social interaction. 3. *The superiority theory*, proposed by philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1651), also contributes to the understanding of humor in social contexts, explaining how humor can alleviate social tensions and enable individuals to express feelings of superiority or collective triumph in specific situations. In this perspective, humor frequently emerges from observing the misfortunes or errors of others, enabling individuals to experience a sense of superiority in contrast.

Based on the theories of the aforementioned scholars, meme culture itself grows and expands within organic social communication, particularly relying on humor and sarcasm, which are natural phenomena in human interactions.

In addition to explaining memes from the perspective of social influence and communication, we must not forget that it is inherently a cultural element in itself. Upon further analysis, memes themselves contribute to the establishment of cultural hegemony. As a communicative medium, memes play a pivotal role in shaping prevailing cultural narratives and influencing societal norms. The concept of cultural hegemony, as articulated by Antonio Gramsci (1971), refers to the dominance of certain cultural, ideological, and social norms, which are maintained through institutions like the media, education, and political systems. In the context of meme culture, this hegemony is reflected in the way certain ideologies, social values, and cultural symbols are reproduced and spread through digital platforms. Thus, how does memetic language assist in enacting culturally disruptive practices? To answer this question, let's think of memes as "cultural viruses" that spread through society, much like a virus that subtly infiltrates a healthy system. At first, the virus (metaphorically meme) may seem small and harmless, but over time, it infiltrates deeper and begins to challenge the immune system (or the dominant cultural norms). Memetic language, with its humor, irony, and satire, serves as the "infection vector" that subtly disrupts the status quo. As it spreads, it exposes weaknesses in established cultural structures, much like a virus revealing vulnerabilities in a body.

In general, the darker side of meme culture reveals significant challenges. Despite their humorous and playful appearance, memes have the potential to perpetuate social inequality, stigmatization, and polarization. *Critical media theory* suggests that the media, including digital content like memes, can perpetuate dominant ideologies by framing issues in a way that supports the status quo and marginalizes dissenting voices (Althusser, 1971). Memes often reinforce harmful stereotypes, spread misinformation, and fuel negative social behaviors such as cyberbullying and trolling (Burgess, 2009). Sociologists argue that digital spaces, while promoting freedom of expression, can also amplify negative social behaviors through anonymity and the dehumanizing nature of

online interactions (Turkle, 2011). The "infodemic" phenomenon—where misinformation spreads faster than facts—can be observed in meme culture, especially in the context of political events or health crises (Friggeri et al., 2014). Moreover, memes often trivialize complex issues, contributing to the desensitization of sensitive topics and weakening social empathy (Burgess, 2009). Thus, the negative aspects of meme culture are numerous. However, does this culture have any positive impacts? To clarify this, it will be explored in more detail in the following section.

The Rise of Mongolian Meme Culture: Examining the Positive and Negative Impact on Society

The rise of meme culture has also helped bridge generational gaps, creating a shared space for laughter and connection in a rapidly modernizing nation. Through memes, Mongolians have found a way to preserve their cultural identity while participating in global digital trends.

In the contemporary era, an entire generation is emerging, utilizing meme imagery as a means of entertainment and leisure. From the standpoint of multiculturalism theory, this phenomenon can be understood as an organic development within society. However, the expansive reach of internet culture, coupled with its lack of regulation, necessitates a critical reassessment of this cultural trend. In other words, there is a growing need to explore the ethical issues embedded within meme culture in greater depth.

The ethical considerations surrounding the use of images in meme culture are a critical aspect of modern digital media. Memes often rely on images, videos, or other media to convey messages, and the ethical implications of using such materials without permission or consent have been widely discussed in academic literature. According to Lievrouw (2014), digital culture and online communication practices raise important concerns about intellectual property, the ownership of digital content, and the implications of using copyrighted or private images without proper attribution. Furthermore, ethical challenges related to privacy are exacerbated when personal images are taken and shared widely without consent (Binns, 2018). Such practices can result in the invasion of privacy and the misrepresentation of individuals, further blurring the lines between public and private spheres. From the following image, we can observe an ethical distortion within meme culture. The image contains content that distorts the meaning of human rights and racial prejudice within its context.



Figure 3. In the first row, there is an image of a well-known Mongolian celebrity with the caption, "I became rich by selling slaves in the 1800s". In the second row, there is another image of a man, recognized on Mongolian social media, with the caption, "My black friend who came with me". Due to ethical concerns around showing faces, additional edits have been made to the meme images.

Memes often use humor to distort the original meaning or context of images, which can lead to harm when the subject of the image is not a willing participant (Marwick & Boyd, 2014). It can be concluded, that as digital platforms continue to develop, the urgency for establishing ethical guidelines for the use of images in meme culture grows, particularly in a world where images can be easily altered and shared without sufficient protections.

From a *multiculturalism perspective*, memes can serve as both tools of social commentary and cultural expression. They allow individuals from different cultural backgrounds to share their experiences, perspectives, and humor. As Cohen (2007) argues, multiculturalism fosters an environment in which diverse identities and experiences are validated, and memes can become an avenue for exploring cultural diversity. For instance, in nations such as Mongolia, where traditional cultural values merge with global influences, memes often combine local and international elements, fostering a distinct platform for cross-cultural communication. However, this fusion of cultures also presents ethical dilemmas, especially regarding the representation and interpretation of various cultural symbols and norms in the online space.

One of the most pressing ethical issues in meme culture is *cultural appropriation*, where elements of one culture are used in memes without proper understanding or respect for their origins. This can lead to the commodification or distortion of cultural symbols, which might offend members of the appropriated culture. Memes that trivialize or stereotype certain ethnic or cultural practices risk perpetuating harmful prejudices and reinforcing existing inequalities (Finkelstein, 2019). Multiculturalism, in its ideal form, advocates for a more inclusive society where all cultures are treated with respect, yet memes that perpetuate stereotypes or make light of serious cultural issues often contradict these values. In this regard, social media platforms must grapple with the responsibility of curbing such content without stifling creative expression.



Figure 4. An example of a meme image that distorts and exerts a negative influence through cultural appropriation. Source: alimhansmeme. ". Due to ethical concerns around showing faces, additional edits have been made to the meme images.

Additionally, the issue of consent in meme culture is an ethical dilemma that is exacerbated by the viral nature of social media. Images, videos, and personal moments are often used in memes without the consent of the individuals depicted. In many cases, these representations can mislead viewers, distort context, or invade privacy. From an ethical standpoint, this raises concerns about the right to privacy and the ownership of personal content. The speed at which memes spread across platforms, combined with their anonymous or pseudonymous nature, makes it difficult for individuals to control how their images and likenesses are used. For multicultural communities, where identities can be particularly vulnerable to exploitation, these issues become even more critical. The ethical question arises: should individuals be afforded greater control over how their images and personal data are used, even in a meme context?

Moreover, the power dynamics present on social media platforms also have ethical implications. While memes can be a form of resistance or social critique, they can also reinforce societal inequalities, particularly in how they represent minority groups. The meme as satire can be a double-edged sword; although it may provide commentary on political or social issues, it may also perpetuate harmful narratives or trivialize serious matters. For example, when memes target marginalized groups—such as women, indigenous peoples, or sexual minorities—they can further entrench harmful stereotypes or foster hostile environments. Memes that mock or belittle these groups often lack the critical engagement needed for genuine social change, and instead, they may simply serve to reinforce the status quo (Suler, 2004).



Figure 5-6. On the left, a meme image with a derogatory meaning targeting individuals in the social welfare group. On the right, an image of a woman who has been bullied on social media and publicly labeled as the "pressured lady". Due to ethical concerns around showing faces, additional edits have been made to the meme images.

The role of platform regulation is also vital when discussing the ethical implications of meme culture. Social media platforms have the power to moderate content, yet the degree to which they do so varies. Ethical issues related to freedom of expression, censorship, and the responsibility of platforms to monitor harmful content often arise. Multicultural societies face the challenge of determining what constitutes acceptable content, especially when memes are shared across borders where cultural norms differ. What may be acceptable in one cultural context could be seen as offensive in another. Therefore, social media companies must balance freedom of expression with respect for diverse cultural sensibilities and prevent the spread of harmful content.

Is meme culture inherently a phenomenon that fosters negative emotions and attitudes towards society, or can memes also have a positive impact?

Memes, through their engaging and relatable format, can serve as a tool for simplifying complex concepts and making learning more accessible. In educational settings, memes have been used to enhance student engagement, facilitate discussions, and encourage critical thinking. For instance, educators have incorporated memes into lessons to explain historical events, scientific concepts, or social issues, making these topics more relatable and memorable (Davison, 2012). Furthermore, memes can serve as a form of social commentary, allowing students to reflect on societal issues such as inequality, climate change, and human rights, which are often incorporated into educational curricula (Shifman, 2014).



Figure 7. A meme that portrays the major issue of "air pollution" in Mongolian society through satirical commentary.

The positive influence of meme culture on the education system should not be underestimated. For instance, faculty members in the Department of History and the Arts Studies program at the National University of Mongolia are incorporating memes as a pedagogical tool to enhance student engagement and facilitate a deeper understanding of course material. The widespread use of memes among students also reflects a shift in communication styles, suggesting that educational systems may need to adapt to new modes of learning and expression. However, the integration of memes into education must be approached with caution, as the potential for reinforcing stereotypes or spreading misinformation exists.

Meme culture, while often lighthearted, has a positive impact on society by serving as a tool for social change, raising awareness of critical issues, and promoting human rights. Memes have the ability to convey complex social and political messages in an easily accessible and relatable format, making them powerful instruments for mobilizing public opinion. For instance, memes have been used to address issues like climate change, gender inequality, racial justice, and LGBTQ+ rights (Shifman, 2014). By reflecting social and political realities, memes create spaces for marginalized voices to be heard, fostering solidarity and encouraging activism (Burgess & Bruns, 2015). Additionally, memes can challenge dominant narratives, providing a platform for countercultural movements to flourish. They act as a modern form of resistance, where humor and satire serve to critique oppressive structures and highlight societal flaws (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). However, as with any medium, the positive impact of memes relies on their creators and consumers using them responsibly, ensuring that they contribute to meaningful social discourse rather than reinforcing harmful stereotypes.

Conclusion

The examination of meme culture in Mongolia reveals both its positive and negative impacts on society. On the positive side, memes serve as a powerful tool for social commentary, raising awareness of pressing issues such as human rights, social justice, and environmental concerns.

By simplifying complex topics into easily digestible content, memes foster critical thinking and encourage public discourse, helping to mobilize social change. Additionally, meme culture has found its place within the educational system, where it enhances student engagement and aids in the deeper understanding of academic subjects. However, the negative aspects of meme culture, such as the potential for reinforcing harmful stereotypes or perpetuating misinformation, cannot be overlooked. When used irresponsibly, memes can contribute to the spread of negativity and division within society. Therefore, while memes hold considerable potential for positive impact, it is essential to approach them with a critical mindset, ensuring that their use encourages constructive dialogue and social progress.

To further explore the influence of meme culture in Mongolia, an effective research methodology would include observational methods alongside content analysis and surveys. Since interviews were not used in this study, the observational approach would be crucial in understanding how memes are produced, disseminated, and consumed within the context of Mongolian society. Observational research would involve monitoring social media platforms, meme-sharing websites, and online forums where memes are frequently posted and discussed. This would allow researchers to track the evolution of meme trends, the spread of specific memes, and the reactions they generate among users.

The content analysis would focus on identifying the recurring themes, symbols, and messages within the most popular memes, paying attention to how these reflect or critique social, political, and cultural issues in Mongolia. The analysis would also consider the demographic profiles of meme creators and their audiences, providing insight into which groups are most engaged with meme culture.

Surveys could complement these observations by measuring the broader societal impact of memes. By gathering data on public attitudes toward memes and their influence on social or political views, researchers can assess whether memes are shaping public opinion or encouraging social action.

Incorporating observational methods alongside these techniques provides a well-rounded approach to studying meme culture, ensuring that researchers can capture both the active participation of individuals in meme creation and consumption, as well as the broader societal context in which this phenomenon occurs. This methodology will enable a nuanced understanding of how memes function as a tool for social expression, education, and potentially social change in Mongolia.

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