

Credibility and Persuasiveness of Memes in Social Interactions among Social Media Users in Benin City

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ABSTRACT

Memos speak a lot about the social context where we live. No matter which era people live in, they always need a way of expression and confession about the unspoken or repressed truth. This study, therefore, evaluated the effectiveness of memes in social interactions, with a limited scope to social media users in Benin City. The objective was to examine the perception of social media users on the extent of usage, credibility, persuasiveness as well as the functionality of memes in social media interactions. The theoretical foundation of this work was laid on the symbolic interactionism theory of mass communication. The study adopted the survey research design. The population of the study consisted of social media users in Benin City, Edo state. The study sample size of 400 respondents was derived from the stated population using Roger Wimmer Sample Size Calculator, with purposive sampling technique employed as the sampling procedure. The instrument for data collection was the questionnaire and data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics of frequency distribution tables and simple percentages. Findings of the study revealed, amongst other things, that; majority of social media users in Benin City are regular users of memes in their social media interactions, especially in their informal interactions. It was also found that memes are persuasive due to their ability to influence the meanings; although, its credibility cannot be ascertained. The study recommended that social media users should include their social media handles as copyright information on memes they create before sharing them and they should continue to explore the functionality of memes beyond its widely-recognised humour appeal in order to ascertain other vital areas of visual communication that memes can be effectively and efficiently applied.

KEYWORDS: Memes; Social Media; Credibility; Persuasiveness; Social Media Interaction; Symbolic Interactionism.

INTRODUCTION

The maxim arguable credited to Fred Barnard that “a picture is worth a thousand words” has never been more accurate at any point in history than in the present age of digitisation. The advent of digital social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, TikTok, YouTube, etc, and their audio-visual potentials has lent credence to shared meanings between parties involved in communication cycle more than ever before. This is because of the avenue presented to social media users to create their own visual contents to communicate across distance and time. However, the visual components of the social media has transcended moving pictures (videos) and still

images (pictures) to now incorporate another category of visual elements of communication known as memes. On memes, Dawkins (1976, p. 250) said that:

“When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme’s propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell”.

In Dawkins’ thesis, a meme is a symbolic feature of culture that can spread through imitation and replication, with the potential to represent different things from tunes and ideas to pottery methods and fashion (Dawkins (1976). What we have termed memes (or Internet memes) today are basically, not the creation of the digital era; they are a simplification of Dawkins’ description of cultural memes (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006; Shifman, 2011; Shifman, 2014). Specifically, memes signify a narrow kind of amateur audiovisual material or images and graphics with or without superimposed text (Davidson, 2009; Milner, 2012). Memes (or Internet Memes) are usually used to denote the dissemination of images and ideas that have the potential to mirror and shape social mindsets of people within a given communication context (David, Glantz, & Novak, 2016, Shifman, 2014). Hakoköngäs, Halmesvaara and Sakki considered memes as a specific form of communication which employs multimodal combinations of various elements (e.g., text and images) and different registers of speech (e.g., humour and dissemination of information) to persuade and mobilize the audience. The motivation behind the utilisation of memes is to achieve persuasion and mobilisation of members of the social media community and the general public in a humorous manner. Niebuurt (2021) added that internet memes occur in a wide range of media although it generally takes the form of animations, GIFs, videos, images, and image-macros which have made it virtually difficult to escape in the social mediasphere for registered users who are constantly exposed to these memes due to their audio-visual forms and ability to aid meanings. Niebuurt (2021, p.3) asserted that:

Unless one abstains from Internet and social media use internet memes will indubitably be something one has come across. They pervade Facebook timelines, creep into Instagram posts, serenade the Twitterverse, make the nightly news, and have become a staple of digitally based communication.

The popularity of memes in social interactions amongst social media users cannot be overemphasised. Guilmette (2008) affirmed that when memes are used on social media platforms, there is a possibility to satirise issues and events within a social context by using laughter as a means to collective cope with issues and news of public interest. This is because memes serves as message-enhancement and persuasive tool by bringing humour or satirising serious business in order to enhance the acceptability of the message.

However, the acceptability of memes in social interaction is closely linked to its potential to aid meaning in a social interaction context on social media platforms. Statistics have showed that in 2019, memes were second among the types of content most likely to be shared by Generation Zed (Gen Z) and Millennial Internet users. Tankovska (2021) found that majority of this demographic reported that they were either somewhat or very likely to share memes online, while 54% of this group affirmed that they were likely to share memes they had created themselves (Tankovska, 2021). Additionally, memes became a viable communication tools during the COVID-19 pandemic as users used them to cushion pandemic-related stress (Myrick, Nabi, & Eng, 2021) as well as to mitigate or trivialise the effect of risk messages thereby gaining a sense of control during the

pandemic (Flecha-Ortiz, Santos-Corrada, Lopez, & Dones, 2021). In Nigeria, for instance, memes have been one of the most shared contents among all demographics, a trend that became popular by the COVID-19 pandemic. These trends could explain why memes now spread faster and wider than any other non-meme online content (Beskow, Kumar, & Carley, 2020). In fact, some misinformation campaigns on social media have specifically used memes to spread similar falsehoods (Reuters Fact Check, 2021; Sapienza, 2021; Spencer, 2021) and therefore it is important to examine the role of memes in social interactions.

From the foregoing, it could be seen that memes have diffused rapidly within online social interactions, and it has become important to examine the related dynamics among social media users in order to ascertain the credibility attached to these memes and the extent to which it persuades the social media users in Benin City in an online social interaction context.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Memes, which often comes in forms of humorous videos, pictures, and collages for sharing, have become an indispensable elements of social interaction amongst social media users, even though studies have shown that the rhetorical effects of memes are still largely unexplored (Davis, et al., 2016; Jenkins, 2014). Meanwhile, there have been an increase in the number of people who use the internet, social media platforms, as well as websites for their different activities within the social context (Nowak, 2016), as such, people are continuing to get exposed to this new medium of communication especially because the contemporary texts and writings are fading out.

Nowadays, social media users no longer want to read but they prefer to take a few seconds to view a meme and make a simple comment or adjustment to it and resend it to another destination, whereas reading a text story will take them some time to finish. That is why social media users are increasingly adopting the use of memes in their social interactions in order to speed up their interactionism. However, the credibility and persuasiveness of the social media memes is a challenge to social media users. While most memes are from unverified sources, their potential to unconsciously sway the receivers cannot be underestimated. The problem with meme is that while some users affirmed that they are useful in creating shared meaning between a sender and a receiver in a social media interaction context, others are of the view that memes are usually untraceable, derogatory and condescending, even though the overriding meaning is to elicit humour as well as entertain and persuade the receiver to take a decisive course of action.

Therefore, this study sets out to examine the credibility and persuasiveness of memes in social interactions among social media users in Benin City, Edo State capital in order to ascertain the extent of usage, believability, credibility as well as persuasion of memes in a social interaction.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Generally, this study examines the credibility and persuasiveness of memes in social interactions amongst social media users in Benin City. Particularly, the study seeks to:

1. Establish the rationale of memes usage in social media interactions among social media users in Benin City.
2. Determine the roles of memes in social interactions context among amongst social media users in Benin City.

3. Find out the extent to which memes are applied in social interactions amongst social media users in Benin City.
4. Ascertain the credibility and persuasiveness of memes in social interactions among social media users in Benin City.

CONCEPTUAL DISCOURSE AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Memes: Nature and Concept

As noted by Nieuburt (2021) internet memes are one of the latest inventions associated with social media and an effective tool in digital persuasion. This is because nowadays, there is relative ease in how memes find their way into social media across multiple platforms and their territory is global. Due to the ease of creation, and their ability to constantly reaffirm obvious ideas, they have become an adroit tool allowing social media interactions across borders (Nieuburt, 2021). Despite the popularity of internet memes, their etymology often escapes the average social media user. The origin of the word “meme” pronounced (meem) is traceable to Greek “mimesis” relating to the way in which art imitates life (Mimesis, 2020). However, contemporary internet memes can trace their origin to Dawkins (1976) descriptions of memes in his seminar work, *The Selfish Gene* (1976). In Dawkins’ view, nearly everything cultural – from architectural styles to song – is a meme; Blackmore (1999) took this even further by claiming that humans are essentially passive vessels through which memes replicate.

However, the word as it has come to be applied to a specific type of internet ephemera, implies human behaviour that is far from passive. This is because Internet memes must be able to be read and understood by their target audience to have an effect. Ross and Rivers (2017) argue that it is not only the language that matters, but also the culture, worldviews, emotions, and feelings of the audience that propels them into the broader social consciousness. Hence, all of these pieces are found to be combined in internet memes, allowing them the possibility of virality power within a given context. Therefore, Ross and Rivers (2017, p.1) describe internet memes as, “artefacts of participatory digital culture” aptly describing their functional use. Shifman (2014) argued that internet memes can be defined as distinct from other memes. Specifically, internet memes are (a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users (Shifman, 2014). In other words, an internet meme consists of many texts or items that are united by a common theme or idea.

Their ability to be created, used, disseminated, and remixed by anyone with Internet access opens doors to previously unfounded participation in regards to both societal and political issues (Anderson & Lee, 2020). In essence, each computer, smartphone, or tablet becomes a readily available tool of conveyance; distributing ideas that could potentially spread across the globe. Nieuburt (2021) noted that memes occur in a wide range of media but generally, they take the form of animations, GIFs, videos (including those found on WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube), images, and imagemacros. Nieuburt added that of these forms, image macros are the commonest form of memes due to their ease of creation, transmission, and adaptability. However, due to the multiple volumes of memes created daily, it is difficult to ascertain the exact number of internet memes in circulation at a given time. With this in mind, according to one of the most popular internet meme sites, www.knowyourmeme.com, there are

currently 5,743 confirmed archetypes/genres of imagemacro memes officially listed between 2003 and 2022 (Confirmed Entries, 2022). In a nutshell, memes using the imagemacro form use a static image and superimposed text; both the image(s) and the text play a role in the understanding of the meme.

CONCEPTUALISING SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media are forms of information and communication technology disseminated through social interaction. It is a social instrument of communication that consists of computerized, interactive, networked information and communication. The term, social media, refers to the means of interactions among people who create, share, and exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks (Ahlqvist, Bäck, Halonen & Heinonen, 2008). It is an Internet-based application that depends on mobile and web-based technologies to create and exchange user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Abrams, Schiavo and Lefebvre (2008) define it as media based on the use of digital technologies like the Internet, digital video and mobile devices. Social media is therefore viewed as new media with a social networking focus.

Social media is a two-way method of communication that grants people access to interact with friends or engage in complex social, economic and political discourse. It integrates technology, social interaction and content creation to collaboratively connect online information. It is a highly interactive platform that enables individuals and communities to create, share, discuss, and modify information, which transforms users from being content-consumers to content-producers. Chou cited in Harris, Snider and Mueller (2013), noted that unlike traditional media, social media are lower cost, reach a more targeted audience, and facilitate dialogue between senders and recipients of information. Social media technologies take on many different forms, including Internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, micro blogging, wikis, social networks, and podcasts.

The most common form of social media is mobile-based social media. Mobile social media run on mobile or handheld devices. According to Kaplan (2012), mobile social media applications can be differentiated by space-timers, which is the exchange of messages with relevance for one specific location at one specific point-in time; space-locator which deal with exchange of messages, with relevance for one specific location; quick-timers (only time sensitive), which involves the transfer of traditional social media applications to mobile devices to increase communication speed and slow-timers (neither location, nor time sensitive) which concerns the transfer of traditional social media applications to mobile devices. Therefore, it is evident that the use of social media has grown rapidly. While Facebook is very popular among users, daily usage of Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok has also increased. These are also considered popular social media that are widely used by most young people in Nigeria for information sharing, interaction and transaction. Accordingly, they could be easily explored for effective information, education and communication, including awareness, and development purposes. Social media has also facilitated professional networking and information sharing among people, the world over, irrespective of space, distance and time.

MEMES AS VISUAL COMMUNICATION

The research on visual communication has already been carried out in various disciplines like communication, psychology, art and science etc. due to its wide applicability in different domains (Hellberg, 2015). Since the visual communication transmits information and ideas by using symbols and imagery, it has the potential to influence media audience either affectively (emotionally) or cognitively (logically) or both reactions simultaneously (Hellberg, 2015; Fahmy, Bock, & Wanta, 2014). According to Sharma, Bhosle and Chaudhary (2012), 75% of all information processed in human brain is from visual communication., They further explained that when information is transmitted through images using a particular medium, the receiver's brain processes the images and then interprets and understands through personal filters which are made up of personal experiences, cultural and social backgrounds as well as attitudes. Previous studies have shown that visual communication with more information and without any cognitive loads are found to be more persuasive than verbal communication as it conveys large information instantly (Muñoz & Towner, 2017; Sharma, Bhosle & Chaudhary, 2012). Although, Svensson and Russmann (2017) noted that the combination of both visual and verbal communication seems to get best responses from the audience. In addition to it, the impact of visual communication is essentially connected to individuals' personal inclination which further influences audience behaviour, attitude, and recall (Swann Jr. & Gill, 2007). Therefore, the study of visual communication is essential in the realm of social media, especially the analysis of the visual contents such as memes which induces reactions among social media users presently.

Visual content in social interactions have always been associated with user engagement. It is used as one of the best strategy for stimulating online engagement (Hollebeek, 2011) and this has been even accelerated with the development of social media applications for mobile and hand-held devices and smartphones. According to Sashi (2012), the effective engagement can be achieved by creating persuasive visual contents. As huge amount of information are available on social media, it becomes time consuming for the users to go through all hence they prefer messages with visual contents to save time. According to Kimball (2015), social media like Facebook or microblogging sites like Twitter have changed the way of giving information to people online by enabling shorter pieces of content embedded into a moving or still graphics known as memes. Therefore, due to this emerging trend, microblogging has increased dramatically. Since visuals are consumed and shared with others the most, it has led to the rise of various social media such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok etc. Therefore, by engaging users with visual contents can enhance understanding and engagement as well as strengthening the bond between senders and receivers (Bowden, 2009).

Persuasiveness and Credibility of Memes in Social Media Interaction

Although research in social media usually classifies sharing, commenting, and liking as measures of engagement, studies have shown that these actions are also capable of persuasion. Studies have also revealed that credibility and persuasion are related (Smith, De Houwer, & Nosek, 2013; Wasike, 2017; Westerwick, 2013). According to Preston (2005, p. 294) persuasion is any type of message that will "cause a person or group to adopt as their own a product, person, idea, entity, or point of view that the person would otherwise not support" while Barker (2005, p. 376) added that "any non-coercive inducement of individual or collective choice by another". Credibility, on the other hand, refers to how audiences deem a source to be believable and trustworthy and the extent to

which they deem the message communicated to be accurate and valid (O’Keefe, 1990; Rice & Atkins, 2001).

For instance, social media influencers also actively persuade others, not just by posting information in general, but specifically by liking and sharing memes created by others (Weeks, Ardevol-Abreu & Gil de Zuniga, 2017). Therefore, how a user frames a social media meme affects both the credibility and persuasiveness of the message (Wasike, 2017). Like any other form of communication, social media content, including memes, may depend on its credibility and persuasion (Housholder & LaMarre, 2014). Research also shows that expert sources elicit more credibility than novice or non-expert sources (Lin, Spence, & Lachlan, 2016; Sohn & Choi, 2019). Therefore, users who perceive themselves to be more aligned with others within their social media group are more likely to share this information with others (Sohn & Choi, 2019). Likewise, users who see themselves to be like the source (of a message) based on online characteristics such as the avatar, may perceive more credibility from an accompanying message (Spence, Lachlan, Westerman, & Spates, 2013).

User-generated content is a unique characteristic of Internet-based media (Wunsch-Vincent & Vickery, 2007). Sharing online content such as memes falls under a class of participatory behaviour called participant sharing. This is when users not only consume media, but also generate their own content and share it. Additionally, the quality of the content may affect such sharing (Dedeoglu, 2019). Therefore, user-generated content (UGT) and participatory sharing (PS) are uniquely important feature of memes because users may edit photos, images, and videos to create customized memes to share with others (Dickerson, 2016; Drakett Rickett, Day & Milnes, 2018; Durham, 2018).

Research also shows that perceptions of credibility on meme can lead to behaviour such as increased meme use and increased online expression (Neo, 2021). This means that as users share more of meme that they deem credible, they may become more expressive about their opinions on related issues. While the Neo study focused on political content, it is within reason to suggest that users may share more of memes they trust and even use them to express their opinions on issues. This would be easy to do given the abundance of memes and the ability to edit memes to suit one’s stance on issues (Enberg, 2021; Tankovska, 2021).

Empirical Review

Taecharunroj and Nueangjamnong (2015) analysed the communication process of humorous memes on Facebook. Using quantitative and qualitative content analysis, one thousand memes shared on a Facebook page were analysed to ascertain the effect of various styles and types of humour on the virality of memes. It was found that condescending and self-defeating memes are the most effective style of humour although it is not the most frequently used. By applying the typology used in the context of broadcast and print media, this study found that although sarcasm and silliness are the two most prevalent types of humour used in Internet memes, no obvious differences can be observed in the effects of seven types of humour—comparison, personification, exaggeration, pun, sarcasm, silliness, and surprise—on virality. Nevertheless, the authors develop the framework for humorous memes in social media communications by combining established communication models with the concepts and theories of humour and virality. Therefore, findings show that affiliative and aggressive styles of humour are the most prevalent in Facebook memes.

Similarly, Segev, Nissenbaum, Stoloro and Shifman (2015) investigated the relationship between cohesiveness, uniqueness, and quiddity concreteness of internet memes. The study employed a large-scale quantitative analysis to reveal structural patterns of internet memes, focusing on two forces that bind them together: the quiddities of each meme family and the generic attributes of the broader memetic sphere. Using content and network analysis of 1013 meme instances (including videos, images, and text), the authors explored memes' prevalent quiddity types and generic features, and the ways in which they relate to each other. Consequently, the study found that (a) higher cohesiveness of meme families is associated with a greater uniqueness of their generic attributes; and (b) the concreteness of meme quiddities is associated with cohesiveness and uniqueness.

However, Laineste and Voolaid's (2016) study primarily examined how the carriers of Internet humour, that is, memes and virals, travel across borders, to a smaller or greater degree being modified and adapted to a particular language and culture in the process. According to the authors, the inter-textuality emerging as a result of adapting humorous texts is a perfect example of the inner workings of contemporary globalising cultural communication. Having analysed a corpus of 100 top-rated memes and virals from humour-dedicated web sites popular among Estonian users, it was found that humour creates inter-textual references that rely partly on the cultural memory of that particular (i.e. Estonian-language) community, and partly on global (primarily English –and Russian language) cultural influences, thus producing hybrid cultural texts. It was also found that the more interpretations are accessible for the audience, the more popular the text becomes, although the range of interpretations depends on the openness of the cultural item to further modification.

From the foregoing, it can be seen that literature is replete with scholarly works (both theoretical and empirical) on the subject of memes and its functionality in communication. While some of these studies have focused on specific areas of memes applicability and functionality such as in language and culture process (Laineste & Voolaid, 2016), others studies have inquired into the structural patterns of internet memes (Segev, et al., 2015) as well as its humorous appeal in the communication process (Taecharunroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015), among others.

While these studies have provided the foundation on which the current study is built in terms of the nature, scope and functionality of internet memes as a form of visual communication, they did not examine the persuasiveness and credibility of internet memes in social media interaction amongst social media users who are the largest community of memes users in the present digital age. Therefore, this is the gap that this study sets out to address subsequently.

Theoretical Framework

Symbolic Interactionism Theory

Symbolic interaction is one of many theories in social sciences. According to Asemah, Nwammuo and Nkwam-Uwaoma (2017), the theory developed from the work of Charles Horton Cooley and George Herbert Mead in the early part of the twentieth century. The foundation of this theory is meanings. Blumer as cited in Nelson (1998) claims human forms “meaning” in two ways:

- i. Meaning is something attributed to objects, events, phenomenon, etc.
- ii. Meaning is a “physical attachment” imposed on events and objects by human

Blumer believes that meaning is a condition that emerges as a result of the interaction of group members and not an intrinsic feature of the object (Tezcan, 2005). Consequently, meaning is created as a result of the interaction between people, and meaning allows people produce some of the facts forming the sensory world. These facts are related to how people form meaning. Thus, there are three core principles in symbolic interaction perspective of Blumer: Meaning, language (language provides means [symbols] for debating meaning) and thinking principle.

Therefore, symbolic interaction theory acknowledges the principle of meaning as the centre of human behaviour. Language provides a meaning to humans by means of symbols. It is symbols that differentiate social relations of humans from the level of communication of animals. Human beings give meaning to symbols and they express these things by means of language. Consequently, symbols form the basis of communication. In other words, symbols are indispensable elements for the formation of any kind of communication act. However, the principle of thinking in the symbolic interaction perspective emphasises that thinking changes the interpretation that individuals ascribed to symbols (cited Nelson, 1998). Symbolic interaction is based on three basic propositions according to Blumer as cited in Stryker & Vryan (2003);

- i. Humans develop their attitudes towards things according to the meanings that things propose to them.
- ii. These meanings are inferred from the interaction of one of them from its addressees.
- iii. These meanings change within an interpretive process.

In applying this theory to this study, social media users ascribe different meanings to symbolic elements such as memes in their social interactions based on the representation of the memes and the context in which it is used in social media interactions. While some memes might be capable of more than one interpretation, the meanings decoded from such memes are closely linked to the experience of credibility and persuasiveness of such memes in previous social media interactions by individual users. Therefore, it can be understood, humans form meaning as a result of their own experiences. These experiences are not random or unrelated.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the survey research method as the research design and structured, self-administered, questionnaire as the instrument for data collection. The population of the study comprises of the registered social media users who are residents of Benin City, the Edo State capital, which is a infinite population. However, the overall population of Benin City, which according to the population projection by the National Population Census (2018) Enumeration Area Demarcation (EAD) Data, was 1,496,000. Therefore, sample size of 400 was obtained using RogerWimmer Sample Size Calculator at 95% confidence level and 5.0% margin of error.

Meanwhile, respondents were administered the questionnaire within Benin City metropolis, using the purposive sampling technique. The research instrument was administered on the respondents through direct contact. Out of the 400 copies of questionnaire administered, 387, representing 96.8% were retrieved and valid. Data gathered from the field were, therefore, presented and analysed, using simple percentage and frequency distribution tables.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Respondents’ Perception of Why They Use Memes in Social Media

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
They are funny	155	41.1
They are easy to use	83	21.4
Helps in condensing a large idea into a single message	42	10.9
They are more effective than texts, sounds and images	55	14.2
They can be used to secretly encode message	31	8
All of the above	21	5.4
None of the above	0	0.0
Total	387	100

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Data presented above shows that the respondents have different reasons for using memes in their social media interactions. However, most of the respondents affirmed that humour remains the major reason for using memes. Therefore, this shows that all the respondents have reasons for using memes in their social media conversations, although, majority said they use memes because of its potential to elicit humour and they find memes amusingly funny, hence, they use them.

Table 2: Respondents’ Perception of Functions of Memes in Social Interaction

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
To aid understanding	94	24.3
To entertain	86	22.2
To reinforce meanings	35	9
For emotional appeal	41	10.6
To simplify the message	57	14.7
To invoke certain reactions or expressions	23	5.9
All of the above	51	13.2
None of the above	0	0.0
Total	387	100

Source: Field Survey, 2023

The implication of this data is that all the respondents affirmed that the functionality of memes in social media interaction is in different spectrums which are determined by the users. While some of the respondents perceived that memes functions to entertain, others are of the view that it aids understanding, reinforces meanings and invoke certain reactions, amongst others. This implies that memes serves different functions in social media interactions

Table 3: Respondents’ Extent of memes usage in social media interactions?

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
To a small extent	59	15.2
To a large extent	273	70.5
Undecided	55	14.2
Total	387	100

Source: Field Survey, 2023

As presented above, it can be seen that the extent to which memes are employed in social media interaction by social media users is large. This implies that memes usage is part and parcel of social media conversations in the present era amongst social media users.

Table 4: Respondents' on whether memes in social interaction increase its credibility

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	160	41.3
No	227	58.7
Total	387	100

Source: Field Survey, 2023

From Table 3, it is seen that respondents are divided on the issue of whether the use of memes in social media interactions increases its credibility. In this regard, majority of the respondents affirmed that memes increase credibility of messages while others are of the view that it does not increase the credibility of messages. The import of this is that majority of the respondents believed that memes usage in social media interactions does not enhance the believability and credibility that the users attach to messages disseminated with memes.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Our study found that the respondents have different reasons for using memes in their social media interactions. This is normal, because memes as a form of visual communication usually attracts attention whenever it is used. Hence, the respondents stated that they use memes because they are funny, easy to use, helps in condensing a large idea into a single message, more effective than texts, sounds and images and can be used to secretly encode messages. However, none of the respondents stated that they did not know why they use memes. Therefore, this implies that there are different reasons that social media users use memes in social media conversation which is primarily due to potential for humour, amongst other reasons. This confirms the study of Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015) and Segev, et al., (2015) study that humour appeal is the primary reason for using memes in social media interaction.

Also, findings revealed that the respondents, who are social media users, have an understanding of the communication function of memes as the respondents highlighted that memes aid understanding, entertains, reinforce meanings, emotional appeal, simplify the message and invoke certain reactions or expressions in a social media interaction. This, of course, is not strange because one of the things visuals do is to expand the scope of a message with vivid images that will enable receiver to have a better understanding of the messages they receive. This confirms previous studies on the myriads of functions that memes can perform such as identity building, public discourse, and commentary (Kuipers, 2002; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Milner, 2012) as rhetoric (Anderson & Sheeler, 2014), and Miltner (2011) study found that some memes are shared to express emotions because emotion is an important motivator for sharing memes (Guadagno, et al., 2013).

Another important finding of this study relates to the extent of respondents' memes usages in social interactions. Majority of the respondents affirmed that they use memes to a large extent. The reason for this could be linked to the fact that memes are user-generated contents that could be created by the individual users at the comfort of their smartphones and handheld devices or computers and be

shared and /or used at their convenience to interact with other social media users, hence making the memes easily go viral. *Virality* is one of the means of *replicability* of memes in the Digital age as it makes it easy for users across borders to adapt such viral memes applicable to their own culture, language and larger society idiosyncrasies. Tanskova (2021) study had found that memes constitute the most widely used contents on social media among the younger demographics, which conforms to the findings of the study. This also supports the study of Laineste and Voolaid's (2016) that found that the more memes' adaptations and interpretations are accessible for the audience, the more popular the memes becomes, although the range of interpretations depends on the openness of the cultural item to further modification.

On the question of whether there is any relationship between a message's credibility and persuasiveness and the use of memes, findings shows that while majority of the respondents affirmed that memes is capable of persuading them by influencing their perception of a message, its credibility is, however, in doubt. This mirrors the findings of Huntington (2017) and Kasirye (2019) studies which reveal that memes are capable of persuading social media users who are exposed to them unlike those who are not exposed to such memes shared on social media. Many of the respondents are of the opinion that memes usage in social media interaction does not enhance the believability and credibility of such messages. This could be linked to the fact that memes are not verifiable as they are user generated contents that are used as a means of expression, depending on what the user wants to communicate. This is contrary to the finding of Neo's (2021) study that shows that perceptions of credibility on meme can lead to behaviour such as increased meme use and increased online expression.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has shown that social media users in Benin City are regular users of memes in their informal and formal social interactions for myriads of reasons, based on individual differences and intentions. This study has also confirms that thrust of the symbolic interactions' perspective that symbols are one of the most effective forms of visual communication that can communicate across cultural and linguistic lines, especially with the advent of social media and its user-generated contents such as memes in any of its forms.

Hence, it can be deduced that the memes play significant roles in social media interaction, especially as a persuasion tool, even though it lacks credibility. This is borne out of the conviction that memes are user-generated contents that are usually applicable to informal interactions due to its humour appeals and absurdity that characterises *imagemacros* memes on social media platforms. Although, its persuasiveness is linked to its ability to influence the perception of users on messages, its credibility and believability is difficult to ascertain in social media interactions as the onus is on the respondents to choose to either believe the message sent via memes or discard them altogether.

From the foregoing, we can conclude that memes speak a lot about the social context where we live; especially the *millennials*. No matter which era people live in, they always need a way of expression and confession about the unspoken or repressed truth. Therefore, memes are a way to express something hard to speak out and in time to come, we might develop another expression beyond languages and images to criticise, express and to speculate about the digital world we are living in. Based on the findings and conclusions reached, the following recommendations are made:

1. To enhance its credibility, social media users should include their social media handles as copyright information on memes they create before sharing them on social media; this will make it easy for memes sources to be ascertained and verified.
2. Social media users should only use memes that are unambiguous and concise in their social media interactions in order for it to retain its persuasiveness.
3. Social media users should continue to explore the functionality of memes beyond its widely-recognised humour appeal in order to ascertain other vital areas of visual communication that memes can be effectively and efficiently applied.

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