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Memes as a New Mode of Cultural Expression in English: A Study with Reference to India

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Abstract

With the rise of digital media, memes have evolved from simple humorous visuals into potent tools of cultural communication. This research delves into the use of English-language memes in India, investigating their role in reflecting and shaping societal values, popular sentiments, and everyday experiences. Through the lens of digital culture, the paper examines how memes serve as platforms for identity expression, political commentary, and linguistic creativity. It highlights the intersection of global digital language—primarily English—with local cultural elements, illustrating how memes act as participatory narratives in India's vibrant and diverse socio-cultural environment.

Keywords: digital media, memes, cultural communication

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Memes as a New Mode of Cultural Expression in English: A Study with Reference to India

Introduction

Over the past decade, internet memes have emerged as a dominant form of digital communication, especially among younger demographics. Initially conceptualized by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* (1976) as cultural units that replicate and evolve, the term “meme” has taken on a new dimension in the digital age. Today, it encompasses humorous images, short videos, or textual formats that are rapidly shared across social media platforms, often carrying layers of cultural, political, or social meaning.

In a country as linguistically and culturally diverse as India, the meme has taken on unique forms. With the English language occupying a prominent space in Indian education, media, and digital platforms, English-language memes have become particularly influential. These memes often blend Western internet culture with distinctly Indian themes, resulting in content that is both globally understandable and locally resonant.

This paper seeks to explore how memes in English function as a contemporary form of cultural expression in India. It analyses their use in humour, identity construction, socio-political engagement, and linguistic play, all while reflecting the changing face of Indian digital society.

The Role of English in Meme Culture in India

India’s relationship with English is complex. As a colonial legacy, English continues to function as a language of administration, education, and upward mobility. It also serves as a lingua franca in urban, digital spaces where diverse linguistic communities converge. Within the meme ecosystem, English often becomes the default language due to its widespread use among internet-savvy youth and its ability to connect across regional divides.

English memes in India are frequently bilingual—combining English with Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam, Bengali, or other local languages in what is often called “Hinglish” or “Tamlish.” This hybrid form not only makes the content relatable but also mirrors the lived linguistic experiences of urban Indians. Such memes might feature Bollywood or cricket references, family stereotypes, or political critique, all expressed in witty, colloquial English with a peppering of local language for flavour and context.

Cultural Functions of Memes in India

Humour and Relatability

Humour lies at the heart of meme culture. Indian English memes often target universally relatable themes such as overbearing relatives, traffic chaos, student life, and arranged marriage. For example, a meme showing an image of a strict teacher captioned “Attendance is more important than education” reflects the shared experiences of Indian students navigating rigid academic structures.

These memes use exaggeration, irony, and sarcasm to comment on daily realities, offering both comic relief and social critique. The use of English in such memes often adds a layer of irony, especially when juxtaposed with culturally Indian images or behaviors. This creates a shared space where audiences laugh not just at the joke but at their own participation in these cultural scenarios.

Political and Social Commentary

English memes in India increasingly serve as platforms for political satire and critique. From poking fun at policy failures to mocking politicians’ speeches, memes have become a way for citizens to express dissent creatively. During the demonetization period in 2016, memes mocking long ATM lines and cash shortages spread rapidly, often captioned in English with visuals of Bollywood characters or political figures.

Similarly, during the COVID-19 lockdown, memes commented on panic-buying, work-from-home fatigue, and government communication gaps. English, in these cases, acts as a tool of

mass appeal and as a subtle shield—allowing criticism without overt confrontation. Memes also become viral during election seasons, targeting party manifestos, campaign speeches, or political scandals.

Intertextuality and Pop Culture Fusion

One of the most interesting aspects of meme culture is intertextuality—the ability to reference and remix content from various cultural sources. Indian English memes often blend global and local references. For instance, a meme might feature Thanos from Marvel’s Avengers with a caption referencing Indian elections or a classic Bollywood trope.

This fusion of global imagery and Indian context is made accessible through English, which bridges these cultural worlds. This intertextual playfulness enhances meme relatability and engages viewers who are familiar with both Western pop culture and Indian narratives.

Identity, Youth Culture, and Belonging

Memes are a crucial part of digital youth culture in India. Urban youth, in particular, use memes to articulate their identity—be it as students, gamers, feminists, introverts, or cinephiles. English-language memes offer a way to align with global trends while preserving local relevance. Meme pages tailored to specific regions (e.g., “Hyderabad Meme Community”) or subcultures (e.g., “Desi Dark Humour”) create online spaces of belonging.

Through shared jokes, jargon, and themes, individuals form communities based not on geography but on shared sensibilities. The meme thus becomes both a cultural text and a social glue—unifying diverse users in a virtual commons.

Case Studies

Instagram and Meme Pages

Instagram meme pages such as AndheriWestShitposting, ScoopWhoop Memes, and RVCJ Media are popular among Indian users for their English memes that incorporate hyperlocal content. A typical meme may feature a still from Sacred Games with a caption like “When you tell your boss you’re ‘working from home’ but Netflix is judging you.”

These memes critique work culture, poke fun at social conventions, and engage with current affairs—all through

Case Studies and Examples

Instagram Meme Pages

Instagram pages like AndheriWestShitposting, ScoopWhoop, and SarcasmLOL exemplify English meme content rooted in Indian culture. These pages often generate satirical content on dating, education, and politics. One meme, for instance, compared “Job Hunting in India” to a reality TV elimination round, using English captions with Bollywood images—emphasizing the stress of job markets humorously.

Memes During COVID-19

The pandemic witnessed an explosion of memes that used English to critique lockdown rules, vaccine hesitancy, and home life during quarantine. These memes provided comic relief, social solidarity, and at times, constructive criticism of government responses.

Political Figures as Meme Icons

Politicians like Narendra Modi, Rahul Gandhi, and Arvind Kejriwal have often been meme subjects. Whether it’s Modi’s “Mitron” speech or Kejriwal’s muffler look, English-language memes use these images to satirize political personalities, shaping public perception in subtle but impactful ways.

Challenges and Criticisms

Digital Divide

While memes in English reach urban, educated users, rural populations and non-English speakers remain largely excluded from this cultural exchange. This digital-linguistic divide can reinforce existing inequalities.

Misuse and Misinformation

Memes can spread stereotypes, misinformation, or fake news under the guise of humor. Political propaganda and hate speech sometimes circulate as “funny content,” blurring the line between expression and harm.

Ephemerality and Authorship

Memes are often anonymous and short-lived. Their viral nature means they can be misattributed or lost in the digital clutter. This raises questions about authorship, intellectual property, and the long-term cultural value of memes.

Conclusion

English-language memes in India represent a fascinating fusion of linguistic play, cultural commentary, and collective humour. They are not just entertainment—they are digital folklore, capturing the spirit of the times. As tools of expression, memes help individuals and communities navigate the complexities of modern Indian society. Whether it’s poking fun at politics, dealing with generational trauma, or celebrating cultural quirks, memes serve as a mirror and amplifier of contemporary life.

To understand the future of digital expression and public discourse, it is essential to take memes seriously—not just as jokes, but as legitimate cultural texts.

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