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THE INFLUENCE OF INTERNET MEMES ON THE COGNITIVE STRUCTURES OF INFORMATION PERCEPTION IN ADOLESCENTS

Abstract: Internet memes are a common part of online communication among teenagers. They are short, visual and easy to share, so they spread quickly across social media and private chats. At first, memes may look like simple jokes but they can also shape how teenagers notice, understand and evaluate information. This article examines how memes influence the way teenagers think about information, especially attention, interpretation, emotional reaction and critical judgment. This paper uses a literature review approach and draws on studies about meme communication, social media use, adolescent cognition, advertising literacy and media and information literacy. The review shows that memes can make communication faster and more relatable but they can also make complex topics too simple. Because memes often use humor and familiar templates, teenagers may react to tone and social meaning before they evaluate accuracy or source credibility. At the same time, memes can support emotional expression and group identity. The article argues that memes should be studied not only as entertainment but also as a form of information framing. Media literacy education should include meme analysis as part of everyday digital learning.

Keywords: internet memes, teenagers, information processing, social media, media literacy, meme communication

Today, many teenagers get information not only from articles, videos or school materials, but also from memes. Memes are common on Telegram, Instagram, TikTok and in private chats. They spread fast and people usually understand them in a few seconds. Because of this, memes are more than online humor. They are also a way to react to news, express emotions and share opinions. This makes memes an important topic for research. Teenage years are a period when thinking skills, emotional control and social identity are still developing. At the same time, teens spend a lot of time online and Pew Research Center reports that social media and online platforms are a major part of teen life. In this environment, the form of information matters, not only the message itself. Researchers note that internet memes are not just random images with text. [1] describe memes as connected forms that spread in families and networks, often through repeated features and recognizable elements. This helps explain why users can identify meme formats quickly and understand the “point” with little explanation. A meme usually combines a picture and a short caption. It often uses a familiar template so users can understand the idea very quickly. This speed is one reason memes are popular. But the same feature may also affect how information is processed. If a message feels funny, relatable and easy to recognize, a person may accept its meaning faster and question it less. Another important point is that memes are now used in many areas, not only entertainment. They are used in advertising, political communication and social campaigns. A study by [4] shows that meme-based advertising can affect adolescents’ advertising literacy, especially when teens understand the sales intent

but do not clearly identify the sponsor. The aim of this article is to examine how internet memes may affect how teenagers think about information. In this paper, this includes how teenagers pay attention, interpret messages, react emotionally and judge whether information is trustworthy.

This article is a literature review and does not describe an original experiment. It analyzes published studies and institutional reports related to internet memes, teenage media use, social media cognition and media literacy.

The sources were selected from peer-reviewed articles and reports by recognized organizations. The review focused on five themes:

- what memes are and how they spread
- how people understand and share memes
- teenage social media use and online behavior
- memes in persuasive communication (for example, advertising)
- media literacy and critical thinking in digital environments

Priority was given to peer-reviewed sources because they provide stronger academic support. This paper uses studies on meme structure and networks [1], meme sharing and cognitive appraisal [2], adolescent meme comprehension [3], meme-based advertising and adolescents [4] and broader work on social media and cognition [5]. It also uses institutional materials from [6–8]. This review has limitations. Direct studies that connect memes, teenagers and information processing are still limited. Some available studies focus on specific populations or contexts. Because of this, the conclusions in this paper are interpretive and analytical, not strict causal proof.

1. Memes support fast recognition and quick interpretation

One of the strongest features of memes is speed. A meme usually presents a message in a compressed form: a familiar image, a short caption and a clear emotional tone. Because many memes use repeated templates, teenagers often recognize the format first and then understand the meaning. Research on meme families and recurring elements supports this idea of quick recognition through repeated forms [1]. This can be useful. Memes make communication efficient. For example, a teenager can describe exam stress, embarrassment or frustration with school in one meme and friends understand it immediately. In this sense, memes work like shortcuts in communication. However, the same shortcut can reduce deeper thinking. If a meme feels familiar and socially accepted, a user may react automatically. Instead of asking, “Is this accurate?” the first response may be, “This is relatable.” So the meme frame can become more important than the details of the information.

2. Humor and relatability can shape judgment

Humor and relatability are central parts of meme engagement. [2] found that meme appraisals are linked to cognitive and motivational processes, including relatability, comprehensibility, humor and sharing behavior. In simple words, people do not only “understand” memes, they also evaluate whether a meme feels close to their own experience. For teenagers, this is especially important because peer belonging and group identity are very strong during adolescence. When a meme reflects a teen’s everyday problems or emotions, it can feel true even if it simplifies reality. This does not mean the meme is always false. The problem is that emotional agreement may come before critical evaluation. Humor can also reduce resistance. A message presented as a joke may look harmless so users may not analyze it carefully. This helps explain why memes can be effective in persuasion and marketing.

3. Meme understanding is not automatic for all teenagers

Teenagers use memes often, but this does not mean all teenagers understand them in the same way. Meme comprehension depends on language level, background knowledge, social context and the ability to

understand implied meaning or irony. [3] examined meme humor comprehension in adolescents and reported differences across groups, including adolescents with language disorders or hearing loss. The study also suggests that visual support alone does not automatically solve comprehension difficulties. This is an important point because adults often assume image-based content is always easier. In reality, memes can be cognitively demanding. A teenager may understand the joke but miss the deeper message, stereotype or persuasive purpose behind it.

4. Memes work inside a larger social media environment

Memes do not influence teenagers alone. They are part of a larger digital environment that rewards fast reactions, repeated exposure and emotional engagement. Research on social media and cognitive development in children and young adults shows mixed results, but it also highlights important domains such as attention, memory, executive function and language development [5]. This broader context matters because memes fit social media logic very well. They are short, emotional and easy to share. Over time, this may support habits of quick reaction and social confirmation instead of slower source checking. [8] on children and mis/disinformation also emphasize that misleading information spreads quickly online and that children are part of this environment.

The reviewed literature suggests that memes influence how teenagers think about information not only through content, but also through format. Memes shape first impressions. They package ideas in a form that is easy to recognize, emotionally clear and socially meaningful. As a result, teenagers may react before they evaluate. One useful way to understand this is the idea of a “frame-first” reaction. A teen may see a public topic first as a meme and only later read a longer explanation. If the first frame is strongly ironic, emotional or biased, later information may be interpreted through that frame. So the meme becomes a filter, not only a joke. At the same time, it would be too simple to describe memes only as dangerous. Memes also help teenagers express feelings, build group identity and talk about social issues in a language that feels natural to them. This is why the goal should not be to reject memes, but to teach teenagers how to read them more critically. UNESCO’s media and information literacy materials [7] are useful here because they emphasize critical engagement with information, safe navigation of online environments and evaluation skills. In practice, meme literacy can include simple questions: What feeling does this meme create first? What information is missing? Who benefits if it is shared? These questions are easy but they can build stronger habits of critical thinking.

Internet memes are now part of how teenagers meet and process information online. They can support quick understanding, emotional expression and social connection, but they can also encourage fast judgments based on humor, familiarity and group approval. Their influence becomes stronger when they are treated as “just jokes” and not as a form of information framing. For this reason, meme analysis should be included in media literacy education. If we want to understand how teenagers think and learn online, we need to study not only what they see, but also the forms through which they see it.

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