

MEMES AS CULTURAL TEXTS: COLLECTIVE IDENTITY AND IDEOLOGY IN VISUAL DISCOURSE

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Annotation. This article examines memes as cultural texts embedded in the social, political, and ideological dynamics of digital communication. Moving beyond their humorous surface, memes are positioned as semiotic artifacts that perform identity work, negotiate cultural power, and structure collective meaning-making within online communities. By drawing on multimodal discourse analysis, ethnography of communication, and cultural theory, the study analyzes memes as instruments of symbolic representation, ideological reproduction, and digital folk creativity. It highlights how visual discourse enables communities to co-create cultural narratives, contest dominant ideologies, and sustain evolving digital identities through shared symbols and visual metaphors.

Аннотация. В данной статье мемы рассматриваются как культурные тексты, встроенные в социальную, политическую и идеологическую динамику цифровой коммуникации. Выходя за рамки их юмористической поверхности, мемы позиционируются как семиотические артефакты, выполняющие работу по формированию идентичности, ведению культурных переговоров и структурированию коллективного смыслообразования внутри онлайн-сообществ. Опираясь на мультимодальный дискурс-анализ, этнографию коммуникации и культурологическую теорию, исследование анализирует мемы как инструменты символического представления, идеологического воспроизводства и цифрового народного творчества. В статье подчеркивается, как визуальный дискурс позволяет сообществам совместно создавать культурные нарративы, оспаривать доминирующие идеологии и поддерживать

эволюционирующие цифровые идентичности посредством общих символов и визуальных метафор.

Annotatsiya. Ushbu maqolada internet memlari raqamli kommunikatsiya jarayonining ijtimoiy, siyosiy va mafkuraviy dinamikalariga singib ketgan madaniy matn sifatida ko‘rib chiqiladi. Memlarning kulgiga asoslangan yuzaki shaklidan tashqari, ular semiotik artefakt sifatida identitet yaratish, madaniy kuch munosabatlarini muzokara qilish va kollektiv ma’nomlarni shakllantirishda qanday rol o‘ynashi tahlil qilinadi. Multimodal diskurs tahlili, kommunikatsiya etnografiyasi va madaniyat nazariyasi yondashuvlari orqali memlarning ramziy ifodalash, mafkurani qayta ishlab chiqarish va raqamli xalq ijodkorligini shakllantirishdagi o‘rni yoritiladi. Vizual diskurs hamjamiyatlarga umumiy hikoyalarni yaratish, hukmron mafkuralarga qarshi chiqish va o‘zgarib borayotgan raqamli identitetlarni umumiy belgilar va metaforalar orqali ifodalash imkonini berishi ko‘rsatib beriladi.

Keywords: memes; cultural texts; collective identity; ideology; visual discourse; multimodality; digital folklore; internet culture; semiotics.

Ключевые слова: мемы; культурные тексты; коллективная идентичность; идеология; визуальный дискурс; мультимодальность; цифровой фольклор; интернет-культура; семиотика.

Kalit so‘zlar: memlar; madaniy matnlar; kollektiv identitet; mafkura; vizual diskurs; multimodallik; raqamli folklor; internet madaniyati; semiotika.

Introduction.

Memes have evolved from niche online jokes into globally recognized cultural artifacts. Their multimodal character, reliance on intertextuality, and rapid adaptability make them ideal vehicles for expressing contemporary social values and tensions. As visual discourse units, memes combine images, text, symbols, and

shared cultural references to produce meaning that resonates across diverse communities.¹

This article expands the theoretical and analytical scope of meme studies by exploring their role in constructing collective identity, reinforcing or subverting ideology, and shaping digital cultural memory. Through linguistic, cultural, and sociological perspectives, it argues that memes serve as valuable cultural documents representing the emotional, ideological, and humorous pulse of society.

Memes as Cultural Texts: Semiotics, Symbolism, and Meaning.

From a semiotic standpoint, memes operate as multimodal signs composed of the following layers: Visual layer – images, templates, characters, and symbols, textual layer – captions, catchphrases, typographical play, contextual layer – cultural background, intertextual references.²

The interplay of these layers allows memes to:

1. Condense complex cultural meanings into simple imagery.
2. Encode ideological viewpoints through metaphor and symbolism.
3. Produce shared cultural knowledge through recognizable formats.
4. Facilitate collective commentary on current events.

Semiotically, memes function similarly to proverbs, jokes, and traditional folklore, yet their digital form allows for rapid remixing, reshaping, and circulation. They become “folk texts” of the internet age collectively authored, constantly evolving, and culturally significant.³

Collective Identity and Group Belonging.

Collective identity is built through shared discourse, values, and symbolic practices. Memes reinforce group identity in several ways:

¹ Abbasi, Z. (2021). Internet memes and cultural politics in digital spaces. *Journal of Digital Culture*, 5(2), 44–59.

² Bakhtin, M. (1986). *Speech genres and other late essays*. University of Texas Press.

³ Danesi, M. (2018). *The Semiotics of Emoji: The Rise of Visual Language in the Age of the Internet*. Bloomsbury.

Shared Experiences. Memes reflecting daily struggles (student life, migrant experiences, workplace stress) create emotional bonds among community members.

Insider Knowledge. Understanding the humor of certain memes requires cultural or linguistic background, creating a boundary between “insiders” and “outsiders.”

Collective Humor. Shared laughter is a powerful mechanism of identity formation. Humor in memes builds solidarity, trust, and a sense of belonging.⁴

Through these mechanisms, memes serve as identity markers that symbolize who belongs to a group and what values they collectively celebrate or criticize.

Ideology and Power: Memes in Political and Social Discourse. Memes have become essential tools for ideological communication, political persuasion, and social critique. They simplify complex issues, enabling communities to express political attitudes in accessible visual forms. Because of their viral potential, memes influence public opinion faster than many traditional media forms, making them a powerful weapon in ideological battles. Memes embody a culture of remixing, where existing texts are continuously adapted to create new meanings.⁵

Intertextual practices include:

- referencing films, anime, news events, or historical photos;
- mixing languages and cultural symbols;
- parodying or transforming political imagery;
- reusing popular templates across contexts.

This remix culture shapes digital collective authorship. Memes do not belong to a single individual; they evolve through thousands of reinterpretations. Every new version contributes to the cultural life cycle of the meme, strengthening its symbolic relevance.

⁴ Dawkins, R. (1976). *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford University Press. (Original concept of “meme”)

⁵ Dundes, A. (1980). *Interpreting Folklore*. Indiana University Press.

Memes as Digital Folklore and Cultural Memory. Memes function as modern digital folklore: collaboratively created, orally (digitally) transmitted, and rooted in collective creativity.

They create cultural memory by:

documenting historical moments (elections, pandemics, crises),

representing shared emotions of specific communities,

preserving social values and generational humor,

archiving common experiences through visual storytelling.

These elements allow memes to build narratives about hardship, pride, frustration, humor, political loyalty, cultural nostalgia, or social critique. As narrative tools, memes simplify complex stories into iconic visual moments.⁶

They serve as both mirrors and molders of societal narratives, influencing how individuals perceive cultural, political, and social realities.

Conclusion. This expanded analysis demonstrates that memes, far from being trivial digital entertainment, are deeply embedded cultural texts that perform essential functions in shaping identity and ideology. Their multimodal nature, intertextual richness, and collective authorship make them potent tools for constructing social meaning in the digital era. As society becomes increasingly visual, memes will continue to serve as key instruments of cultural expression, resistance, and community building. Understanding memes as visual discourse is vital for analyzing contemporary culture and the symbolic worlds people inhabit online.

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