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The Art of Laughter: The Creation of Humour and Comedy in Social Media

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Abstract

Over time, global technological evolution has witnessed a resurgence of diverse media that have contributed to making the world a global village. While some accommodate all forms of content, others are media-specific and dedicated to creating visual contents that elicit laughter from the audience within few seconds of engaging it. This paper examines extensively how laughter achieves the soothing effect on human beings, building on the different receptive behaviours across four techniques of digital humour and comedy: reels, pranks, memes, and stickers. Social Semiotics is applied for in this paper. It is an approach to multimodal analysis influenced by the works of Michael Halliday (1978) which perceives language as a system of options and meaning potentials. Kress and van Leeuwen shift emphasis from written language to multimodality (visual) and explore texts in relation to a socially created network of options that have meaning potential realised in the context of use and perform ideological functions.

Keywords: Humour, Reels, Pranks, Memes, Stickers

Introduction

Social media is one of the fastest growing entrepreneurship explorations of the 21st century. Although it has experienced a steady resurgence and evolution in terms of platforms and media of dissemination, the commonalities have remained the same, even in terms of the effects that it has had on the society; while some say it is of high benefits, others continue to dwell on some of the negative effects that it has. Its benefits can be large, and the consequences can be catastrophic. In view of this, social media has increasingly become both a benefit and a menace in the society these days. Its impact is spreading so fast that it has started creeping to all settings (formal, semiformal, and informal) all over the world. Thanks to rapid advancement in

science and technology, social media has become one of the most serious factors of consideration in most countries of the world as it could directly and indirectly endangers lives.

However, humour and comedy in social media seem to have been taken for granted and in fact, been accepted by most people in the society as effects on young, juvenile social media users. This general conception may be due to the ignorance of the trends in social media, as well as the embodiments of the social media space. Humour and comedy are both forms of content-driven tools that creators use to grab attention of users. In fact, social media may not be so successful without these two tools, as they're among the cheapest, most applied tactics by creators. Social media experts propose that the combination of humour and comedy in social media are the top tools

that get users hooked to social media sites for hours.

Humour is perceived as a product of a comic, well-meaning and tolerant mind. However, following the Anglo-American tradition, humour is seen as a broad term that encompasses everything that elicits laughter: wit, non-sense, sarcasm, satire, irony and comedy. The implication of this stance on humour is that humour is made to assume all positive and negative meanings; from aggressive humour to joke (Ermida, 2008). The diversity of the language of humour makes the concept difficult to define. Norrick (1993; 2003) observes how extremely complex in both forms and functions, humorous communication can be and submits that there is no one straight way of defining the language of humour. This is coupled with the reality that humour spans diverse areas of inquiry such as linguistics, psychology, sociology, philosophy, etc. Evrard (1996) identifies the remarkable 'semantic flexibility' of humour and its 'enigmatic character' and states that 'its range of degrees, procedures, themes, its subtle and diffused character make it a difficult phenomenon to spot or define' (p.4).

Humour vs Comedy

The definitions of humour and comedy are not devoid of the context where they appear. **Humour** refers to the strategic use of wit, irony, or amusement within digital platforms to engage and entertain audiences, often leveraging cultural references and linguistic nuances to create a shared comedic experience. **Comedy**, within this context, encompasses a broader spectrum of intentional, culturally relevant humorous content, including memes, satirical

narratives, and comedic performances that shape online discourses and foster social connectivity through laughter.

Sources and Mechanisms of Humour and Comedy on Social media

From the irritating, persisting prankster who dedicates a whole Facebook wall to sharing videos of how he pranks people on random streets and scenes to the subtle memes that are shared on different blog Facebook walls and threads on X (formally 'Twitter'), humour and comedy have become the norm. This is, in fact, one of the major hooks that keep people drawn for hours searching and watching content on Facebook.

People switch easily between memes, reels, and videos, sometimes on two or more social media (e.g. X and Facebook) concurrently, in search of more appealing content that makes them less sober. However, the type of contents that they switch to between these social media applications are made of the same funny stuff, and in fact are just convoluted versions of themselves. In fact, one may say that X and Facebook are just one social media with two boards of directors.

It is not infrequent to notice that those who generate a steady means of income on Facebook through sharing comic and humorous stuff are the same people who earn money on X.

Here are some of the techniques and styles that these content creators generate a followership by engaging comic and humorous contents as:

- a. **Reels:** Reels are short videos ranging from as short as 5 seconds to as long as one minute where the creator shares visual content, often accompanied by a prepared background music (BGM) or a

synced audio file. This is the major content format on TikTok and Facebook. The BGM is usually a trending song, a doctored voice note, or an edited/mixed soundtrack.

- a. **Pranks:** Pranks are usually in audiovisual formats, though they are typically longer than reels. A prank is an extensive attempt by an actor (referred to as a prankster) to watch the reaction of the person being pranked to an event, news, or action. The video is usually recorded by a cameraman who is either hidden in an inconspicuous area, or is taking the video of the events without being noticed.

While some pranks are genuine and extemporised, some others are usually planned before-hand and are 'fake'. The original ones are oftentimes more engaging. Most pranksters end up having real security and life-threat cases filed against them by those who felt embarrassed by the prank videos that featured them.

- b. **Memes:** Memes are short, cropped photos with extensive beyond-face-value captions. Memes are usually gotten from videos, animations, football videos, and random photos of outstanding regular day photos. Memes are usually gotten from X, where the photos are replies to some questions. Although, memes are gotten from classic videos and funny animals with equally funny faces.

The concept of the "meme" goes back to the evolutionary biologist Richard

Dawkins (1976) in his attempt to find a term for the cultural counterpart to genetic evolution. He explains memes as replicators that should be considered as information units that are transferred via symbols (Dawkins, 1976, p. 206). He also binds meme evolution to the conditions of variation, replication, and fitness. Good replicators are characterized by their longevity, fecundity, and copying fidelity (Dawkins, 1976, pp. 18–19).

Dawkins' neo-Darwinian meme concept was frequently adopted and developed (Blackmore, 1999; Shifman, 2014). Since the Web 2.0 revolution, the term "meme" has also been used to describe ideas spreading across social media. This new application of the term must be distinguished from Dawkins' original concept. In accordance with Shifman (2014, p. 7), this study refers to these ideas as Internet memes.

- c. **Stickers:** Stickers are usually on WhatsApp. They are gotten from the 'emoji' section and are funny, looping animations that capture equally funny pictures. Examples may include a man riding a bike completely naked; a cat dancing; a man drinking a gall of engine oil; a woman slipping, etc.

Manifestations, Impacts, and Intersections of Humour Techniques

The manifestation of humour is a dynamic interplay between various forms and techniques. One prominent avenue is through the utilization of "Reels," short-form videos that encapsulate wit and

satire within a concise timeframe. Scholars such as Smith (2021) have underscored the pivotal role of Reels in fostering user engagement and cultivating a comedic ethos within online communities. Pranks, as a distinct comedic technique, have found a peculiar niche in the social media landscape. Building upon Goffman's dramaturgical perspective (1974), the deployment of pranks can be viewed as a performative act, where individuals adopt unconventional roles to elicit laughter. This aligns with the observations made by Jones et al. (2022), who contend that pranks function as a social lubricant that facilitates a shared comedic experience among participants and spectators alike.

Memes and stickers serve as a lens through which we examine the democratization of humour. Garcia (2020) posits that memes function as cultural artefacts that evolve through user-generated content and shared interpretations. Their rapid dissemination and mutation within online communities is a testament to the participatory nature of comedic creation on social media. In stickers, graphical elements add another layer to the comedic pattern. Johnson (2019) posits that stickers operate as visual language units, conveying nuanced forms of humour that transcend linguistic barriers. Their integration into digital conversations exemplifies the fusion of visual and textual elements in contemporary comedic expression.

Technical Comparisons

Smith's exploration of Reels (2021) emphasizes their role in fostering humour and user engagement, positioning them as dynamic vehicles for clear comedic narratives within the digital space. This aligns with Jones et al.'s performative

analysis of pranks (2022) which illustrates how pranks create shared comedic experiences. Garcia's study on memes (2020) explores the evolution of user-generated humour within online communities. Memes, as cultural signifiers, embody the participatory nature of comedic creation and echo the collaborative essence observed in the mutability of Reels and the performative aspect of pranks. The visual and textual fusion inherent in stickers is akin to the multifaceted nature of memes, as elucidated by Johnson's semiotic analysis (2019). Both memes and stickers cut across linguistic barriers and emphasize the importance of visual language units in the comedic discourse on social media.

The democratization of humour is a common thread across reels, pranks, memes, and stickers. The democratization is evident in the rapid dissemination and mutation of memes, as outlined by Garcia (2020). This mirrors the democratizing impact of Reels, where users actively contribute to the creation and reshaping of comedic content. The participatory nature is also highlighted in the collaborative use of stickers within digital conversations, showcasing the democratization of visual humour (Johnson, 2019).

Due to the growing dominance of the Internet as the primary means of communication, people are using more electronic media than ever before. And yes, the Internet, with its visual stimulation and constant distractions, is changing the way of thinking - and not always for the better. But, every new media that emerges on the scene raises similar concerns about harmful effects on tastes, thoughtfulness, and deep thinking. There is no doubt that the Internet has a

profound impact on our lives, but in our opinion, its impact is as powerful as any technological invention since its inception.

The advantage of any new technology is that it enhances human potential. In the 20th century, electricity, telephones, cars, airplanes, steamships made the world more accessible to more people, while changing the way society thinking. The Internet has the same revolutionary effect: people can overcome cultural barriers, including through the visualized language represented by memes. The visualized meme language is a communication system using visual elements that helps users perceive and understand visible signs.

Ethical Considerations in Digital Comedy

The explosion of reels, pranks, memes, and stickers in digital comedy calls for a critical examination of the ethical dimensions associated with their creation and dissemination.

Content creators, in their pursuit of humour, must navigate the multicultural audience on these platforms. Ethical guidelines must address the potential for content to be misunderstood, offending certain cultural or social groups. Miller (2019) argues that the speed and global reach of digital content necessitate a heightened awareness of cultural nuances to avoid inadvertently perpetuating stereotypes or causing harm.

Pranks, characterized by their performative nature, raise ethical concerns related to consent and potential harm. Jones et al. (2022) emphasize the need for content creators to consider the boundaries of acceptable comedic interaction, recognizing that what may be

amusing to some can be distressing or invasive to others. Establishing ethical frameworks that prioritize respect for personal boundaries becomes imperative in mitigating the risks associated with performative pranks.

Memes hold significant influence in shaping public opinion and discourse. Garcia (2020) suggests that considerations should extend to the potential misuse of memes for spreading misinformation or contributing to the amplification of harmful narratives, because content creators and platforms share a responsibility to discern and regulate the impact of memes on societal perceptions.

Johnson (2019) notes that stickers, as visual language units, have the potential to convey subtle forms of humour that may be interpreted differently by diverse audiences. Establishing guidelines for the ethical use of stickers ensures that visual communication aligns with values of inclusivity and respect.

Psychological Aspects of Digital Humour

- **Emotional Impact and Social Interactions:** Reels, with their visually compelling narratives, evoke a spectrum of emotions among users. The brevity of reels, as noted by Smith (2021), capitalizes on users' cognitive processes and triggers rapid emotional responses. These videos become emotional catalysts that influence the collective emotional tone within online communities. The interconnectedness of emotions in digital humour extends to pranks, where the performative element often sparks shared laughter and contribute to

a sense of communal amusement (Jones et al., 2022).

Garcia (2020) suggests that memes serve as emotional resonators that encapsulate shared experiences and sentiments within a condensed visual format. The rapid dissemination and mutation of memes contribute creating a shared emotional vocabulary that goes beyond linguistic boundaries.

- **Identity Construction and Self-Expression:** Digital humour, through reels, pranks, memes, and stickers, plays a pivotal role in identity construction within online communities. The participatory nature of humour creation allows individuals to express aspects of their identity through shared comedic content (Miller, 2018). Reels, with their user-generated nature, provide a canvas for users to showcase their creativity and unique perspectives. Pranks become tools for individuals to experiment with unconventional roles, contributing to the fluidity of online personas. Memes, as discussed by Garcia (2020), serve as mirrors reflecting cultural norms and individual experiences, allowing users to express and align themselves with specific cultural or subcultural identities.

Cognitive Processes and Humour Comprehension

Humour in social media is understood differently. Reels demand rapid cognitive processing to apprehend and appreciate the comedic elements (Smith, 2021). Jones et al. (2022), highlight the cognitive engagement involved in the

performative analysis of pranks. The cognitive load imposed by pranks contributes to the humour's impact, requiring users to navigate and interpret the unexpected elements introduced in the prank scenario.

Mememes engage cognitive processes in decoding layered meanings and cultural references. The semiotic analysis by Johnson (2019) emphasizes the cognitive dexterity required to interpret the visual language units inherent in stickers. The fusion of visual and textual elements in stickers demands cognitive flexibility, enhancing the richness of humour comprehension in digital conversations.

Beyond emotional and cognitive dimensions, digital humour influences behavioural patterns and social dynamics. Reels, as dynamic content, contribute to habitual patterns of content consumption, shaping user behaviours within social media platforms (Smith, 2021). Pranks catalyze social interactions and strengthen community bonds as users collectively engage in the enjoyment of unexpected comedic scenarios (Jones et al., 2022).

Mememes, with their potential for virality, become agents of behavioural influence. The shared experience of meme consumption fosters a sense of belonging within online communities, influencing users' tendencies to participate in meme creation and dissemination (Garcia, 2020). Stickers, embedded in digital conversations, contribute to the evolution of communication norms and the integration of visual language

into online interactions (Johnson, 2019). The behavioural impact of stickers lies in their ability to shape the modes of expression within digital conversations, influencing the dynamics of online communication.

Conclusion

The examination of reels, pranks, memes, and stickers within the context of digital humour illuminates a multidimensional landscape where technology, culture, psychology, and ethics converge. These comedic forms not only serve as entertainment vehicles but also play integral roles in shaping the emotional experiences, identity constructions, cognitive processes, and behavioural dynamics of individuals within the digital sphere.

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