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Communication and Risk of Disinformation: The Importance of Studing Memes

Victoria Smeyukha [a, *], Ekaterina Shapovalova [b]

[a] Crimean Engineering and Pedagogical University the name of Fevzi Yakubov, Russian Federation
[b] Southern Federal University, Russian Federation

Abstract

Memes convey ideas in an easy-to-consume form. Social network's users use them to broadcast their thoughts, feelings, emotions, and judgments on the Internet. Local memes reflecting urban problems: traffic jams, poor public transport, isolation of the outskirts from the center, and so on, have entered the media culture of social networks. Understanding and studying the essence of memes will allow journalists, sociologists, and researchers of urban issues to better analyze the moods and discontents of city residents and look for research topics.

The authors used a self-developed meme analysis that can be used to teach the topic of memes in classes with journalists, sociologists, and media industry specialists. Not all memes can be a source of truthful information. It can support urban myths that have no connection with reality and generate fakes. Memes are a communication tool, conveying information through humor, but they can also be a tool of manipulation. Using the example of local memes in communities of large Russian cities, the researchers conducted an analysis that showed that manipulation of public opinion and disinformation are most often found in comparative memes on the topic of comparing images of residents of urban areas. Memes can carry a false meaning and misinterpret the news. Working with memes, journalists and other professionals should pay attention to comparative memes. Their authors can use not just a social myth, but misinformation to make a vivid comparison.

Keywords: memes, Internet memes, media education, media culture, disinformation, manipulation.

1. Introduction

The spread of The Internet memes, these funny pictures with inscriptions, use in describing political, social, and cultural media events raise the question of increasing attention to this phenomenon in the process of media education, professional training for journalists, media specialists, and researchers of social phenomena.

"*Essential to thoroughly examine these patterns over time, considering their consequences for political communication and journalism, education and learning, health communication, science communication, and overall societal influence*", note researchers M.V. Srikandi, H.A. Wahab, J.J.P. Latupeirissa (Skikandi et al, 2024). The Russian authors also write that "*meme is practically not studied in the media sphere, which is purposefully saturated with content by journalists*" (Schurina, Kharakhorkina, 2020).

Scientists focus on the inclusion of memes in journalistic media discourse (Gomez et al, 2023; Khan et al, 2022; Elyamany, 2023), which allows us to consider memes as an actual and effective area of activity for journalists. Memes are sources of information for journalists when they

* Corresponding author
E-mail addresses: smeyha@yandex.ru (V. Smeyukha), kate-sapr@ya.ru (E. Shapovalova)

write materials about cities remotely (using open sources, interviewing residents by phone. Memes can misinform journalists and generate fake news.

Due to the fact that modern journalism education should reflect the latest trends in the development of the media industry (Fiialka, 2017; Shesterina et al, 2024), it is necessary to intensify scientific research aimed at studying technologies for creating and distributing memes, the results of these studies should be used in the training of media specialists.

Social networks are the context of the existence of an Internet meme, and the textual and visual content of social networks reflects the values of modern society. The study of memes by sociologists makes it possible to identify current socio-political processes, identify reference points in the socio-cultural space, and identify the values of modern society. "*Memes characterize a relatively new form of online culture that offers accessible ways of self-expression, engagement, and participation, especially suitable for bottom-up initiatives with limited financial resources*", wrote T.F. Harbo (Harbo, 2022).

There is a point of view that memes influence the world modeling of modern youth, that is, they help to form "*representational structures – objectified mental constructs of varying degrees of conceptual complexity that relate to the processes and results of representing the world and/or its fragments for communication purposes. Their main function is to orient the addressee and form public opinion in accordance with the needs of collectives or certain social groups*" (Babikova, 2021). Researchers are concerned about the development of another meme trend – hate memes. Unfortunately, memes have been used to spread hatred and attack others. Such memes are named as hateful memes. The rapid spread of memes of this kind has led to social problems, such as exacerbating ethnic tensions and disseminating disinformation (Bi et al., 2023). Memes are also used in political communication, and their deconstruction skills are important for people who participate in political discourse. Ahmed Al-Rawi in the article "Political Memes and Fake News Discourses" tells about "meme War II". He wrote that the social network Instagram "*has become weaponized by the two main online communities, and memes are used in an ongoing political online warfare to attack and demean the opponents. Meme War II is an ongoing daily reality on Instagram which requires more scholarly attention*" (Al-Rawi, 2021).

2. Materials and methods

The corpus of the study consisted of 554 memes collected from the popular in Russian social network VKontakte during the period from July 2022 to December 2024. The memes are taken from eight communities dedicated to jokes about four major Russian big cities – Novosibirsk, Omsk, Rostov-on-Don and Krasnodar. Using the screen capture feature on the researchers' notebook, this memes were collected and stored. Each meme file contains information about the date of its appearance and its membership in the community. Having collected all the memes, the researchers conducted an analysis.

The research scheme looks like this:

– Defining the topic;

– Type of meme;

– The type of humor and its purpose;

– The presence of manipulation in the meme (premeditation of implementation, hidden nature of the impact, personal benefit of the sender, distortion of information).

The author's meme research method helps to deconstruct a meme, and can be used by journalists, sociologists, marketers, and other specialists to study images created by users of social networks.

This meme analysis scheme can also be used by media education specialists in media centers of schools and universities to show students how memes influence the formation of public opinion, social myths and fakes. The authors believe that a practical lesson on meme analysis can be included in teaching the basics of media literacy, since, as the study shows, standard lectures on memes in media education classes do not teach how to recognize misinforming information in memes on the Internet – without involvement, there is no proper effect.

Methods such as a review of scientific literature, comparison, and interviews were also used in this study.

The purpose of the study is to determine which problems of cities are interpreted by residents through memes, and to find out whether memes convey real (somewhat exaggerated) information

or misinform residents. The research objectives also included identifying popular types of memes among young people and determining the type of humor.

3. Discussion

An analysis of the literature has revealed several approaches to the study of memes on the Internet. The most common approach is based on the meme theory formed in the book "The Selfish Gene" by Richard Dawkins. The author's approach is based on the concept of copying information (replication). The specificity of the meme lies in the special presentation of information that causes a desire to spread it. A meme can be expressed as a phrase, a piece of music, or an image. There is a lot of meaning in a meme, which is often clear only from the context of usage. Dawkins' approach to memes is based on the idea of them as units of information that perform the tasks of genes, only in the field of popular culture – they compete, mutate, adapt to the environment, and have the ability to reproduce. Memes are not only copied, but also evolve (Dawkins, 2006). In 1986, in the collection of articles by physicist and computer scientist Douglas Hofstadter "Metamagic Themes", a proposal was published to name the discipline studying memes "*memetics*" by analogy with genetics.

Psychologist S. Blackmore continues and complements the theory of the spreadability of memes. She calls memes the main building blocks of cultural evolution that shape human thinking (Blackmore, 2000). According to her concept, humans are meme machines that are used by memes to reproduce and copy.

Dawkins' theory predated the phenomenon of Internet memes. Memes have received unlimited distribution opportunities on the global network. In 2014 Limor Shifman described internet memes as *"(a) a collection of digital items that share common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) are created with awareness of each other; and (c) are circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the internet by a large number of users worldwide*" (Shifman, 2014).

Memes have exceptional communication potential and are a type of Internet user language. At the same time, as Russian scientist Yulia Shchurina wrote, "*a natural outcome of adaptation is the ability of memes to transcend their primary sphere of existence and extend into the realms of media, education, art, and more*" (Shchurina, 2023).

People use memes to communicate with each other. This allows them to be emotional and express their's opinion. Internet users create memes based on the characteristics (cultural, national) of the audience. Meme always has a coded meaning that is accessible only to a certain circle of people for whom this meme is intended (Gal, 2018).

Memes can live within a community for a long time, and they can change (one picture with a certain meaning, for example, misunderstandings, may reflect views on different issues), most often the authors simply change the text. However, there are memes that invariably circulate within the community, forming public opinion about the problem. Of course, the opinion of the group members is formed not only by memes, but also by reactions to them: likes, comments, the number of broadcasts of the picture outside the community.

Thus, by studying certain memes in local communities, it is possible to determine the social and individual picture of the world of its participants.

At the same time, a meme is not just a unique, specific communication language. It is well remembered, recognizable, and effectively broadcast. It can be an effective manipulation tool. This approach was one of the first to be applied by Douglas Rashkoff, who studied memes as an element of media viruses, that is, certain hidden information messages that shape or change public opinion (Rashkoff, 1996). The author of the concept emphasized that media viruses can be created spontaneously and intentionally. Of particular interest are those that have a mixed nature of appearance: the creator can take a ready-made meme and use it to create a media virus (he can artificially place it in an environment for the emergence of a media virus). Thus, memes can accidentally or intentionally become a tool for broadcasting fake information.

Myths can be considered as a means of adapting mass culture to modern digital realities and myth-making (Polishuk, 2020). O. Strelnik posits, that "*myth-making is the constructing of a mythological message or a message system, which is one of the types ofsocial communication. Amythological message, like any other message, is a collection of characters carrying information*" (Strelnik, 2017). Myths are regarded as statements of facts that demand no explanation. Memes were analysed as "*potent vehicles for information dissemination*" which are used to "*critique actions, lampoon political leaders and public officeholders, and deconstruct myths generated over time*" (Ugah, 2022).

Internet culture can be described as hyperreality (Shifman, 2014). Meme as a phenomenon of medical culture can mask reality. Moreover, by replicating, memes lose touch with the reality from which they emerged. Baudrillard's semiotic media theory of simulacraexplains how mass media reproduction of images empties signs of their original meanings. There are five steps to Baudrillard's successive phases of the image. The first: the image as a reflection of profound reality. The second: the image as mask of the reality. Then the image masks the absence of a basic reality (the 3rd step), and (the 4st step) the image has no relation to reality. So, it has become a simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1981). For example, researchers classify memes as simulacra (Kuznetsov, Slavina, 2018; Terossi, 2023). Thus, a meme may have nothing to do with reality, misinforming people.

4. Results

The memes under study were grouped by the topics they cover: problems with public transport (135 pieces), marginalization of the outskirts and the elite center (198), traffic jams (68), weather (32), the contrast of cities to Moscow andother major centers (21), other (90 pieces). The other column includes memes dedicated to universities, inflation, the rhythm of life (slow or fast), and the problem of drug addiction in the city. All of these topics also occur, but not as often as the first four. Therefore, we will analyze the memes based on the first four thematic groups.

10 % of the memes from the presented groups were analyzed in detail (the scheme was shown in the Materials and Methods). So, 14 memes about transport problems, 20 memes about suburbs and the center, 7 memes about traffic jams, 3 memes about the weather, 44 memes in total.

The analysis showed that among these memes there are such types as informative, representative, emotional (ironic, post-ironic, sarcastic). They highlight the social and cultural situation in the city, but sometimes the visual and/or textual part of the meme contains information that shows how a city resident can react to a problem. For example, according to the meme about Musical district in Krasnodar – this meme shows a car stuck on a flooded road after a rainstorm. The text of the meme contains the inscription: "*When I decided to avoid traffic jams on the Rostov highway through the Musical district*" and the direct speech of the man: "*I have to dry the mats again*".

Citizen understand that it is necessary to drive around the Musical district, which is located in a lowland, in the rain (the meme got 260 likes, 21 people shared the message). The comments under the meme show that the residents of Krasnodar support this information, it does not contradict reality.

Memes about the marginalization of the suburbs, the different characters of the inhabitants of the city districts are shown based on caricature techniques, ridiculing the features allegedly inherent in the inhabitants of the districts. In fact, many facts have no connection with reality, which is reflected in the comments to the memes. For example, there may be a comment under the meme that such behavior by residents of the area is a thing of the past. In general, social myths about the danger of new neighborhoods with high-rise buildings are used in each of the communities studied, and fits into the concept of imaginary marginalization, which helps to outline the processes associated with the formation of the image of certain locations on the urban periphery.

For example, the memes of the city of Novosibirsk compare the cconfrontation of the right and left river's banks according to the type of white – collar workers from the outskirts. The following marginal districts are represented in Rostov memes: Chkalovsky, Oktyabrsky, Nakhalovka.

For analysis, we have taken a meme that compares two districts of Krasnodar. Meme consists of two photos. The first one shows an elegant man in a business suit. The second one shows a plump man in a tracksuit with car keys. The first man is signed as the Yubileyny city district. The second man represents the central district of Krasnodar.

We have analyzed the meme according to the chosen methodology. By subject, it belongs to the category of "contrasting typical residents of the districts". By type, it is a comparative meme (comparing several images). The comic effect of most comparative memes is the mismatch of expectation with reality or the paradox of what is happening. The authors of comparative memes can use a fictional situation that has no relation to reality to reinforce the paradox. And therefore, not just to emphasize a social myth, but to create fake content.

The analyzed meme uses generalization to reinforce the paradox – usually the city center is associated with the epithet "business", and not with men in tracksuits.

In order to find out how far the meme is from reality, we conducted an interview with two residents of Krasnodar. It was found out that the meme reflects reality only partially: *"Yubileyny is*

just a young district, there are several elite residential complexes there, businessmen are really trying to settle there, and there are many private, non–elite buildings in the center"; "Yubileyny is a young elite neighborhood. There are no large office buildings there, and I don't associate this area with solidity and a suit. I will not say that there are such men in tracksuits in the center, there are many office buildings and shopping malls in the center of Krasnodar". Thus, this meme not only does not reflect the real reality, but also does not create a myth. A meme can become a source of fake information about a city, as people associate a man in a business suit with an office worker, rather than with the prestige of the place.

Similarly, we have analyzed another meme about the myths of the city's districts from the Omsk Memes for Every Day community in VKontakte. The meme consists of two images. One shows perfume, the other shows pepper spray. The text near the Franch perfume is: "What kind of perfume is used in the center". The text near pepper spray is: "What kind of perfume is used in the Oktyabrskij district".

This is a comparative meme, the comic effect of which is based on the principle of surprise: perfumes are compared to a pepper spray. The meme was created based on the principle of hyperbolization. Here we are dealing with sarcasm – malicious mockery, which is enhanced by the characteristics of the pepper spray indicated in the meme: "powerful effect, cone spray, ejection up to 2 meters".

The meme emphasizes that expensive perfumes are used in the center, and instead of perfumes, residents of the Sovetsky district use a gas canister, emphasizing and reinforcing the social myth of the marginalization of the outskirts. An Omsk resident commented on the meme in an interview as follows: "*Yes, the Sovetsky district is the northern part of the city, there are wastelands and places where it is better not to appear without a spray can, but not because of punks, but because of stray dogs. But our marginal area is different, for example, not all taxi drivers go to Port Arthur*".

It should be noted that an analysis of 20 memes about the characteristics of urban areas, which included interviews with residents of these cities and an analysis of comments on a social network to find out if there is information manipulation in the meme, showed that 12 of them completely contain misinformation, six memes reinforce a social myth (a myth formed in society and expressing the interests of social groups), two memes show the real state of affairs through irony. One of these memes concerned a sharp increase in the cost of apartments in the center of Rostov-on-Don, due to which the cat was able to rent only a cat carrier. Thus, in memes, the facts are not just exaggerated, but significantly distorted and rarely reflect reality.

Let's analyze memes about problems with public transport. The main issues raised by memes on this topic are waiting for buses, crowded transport, dirty floors on buses, old transport, very expensive taxi prices. Memes that touch on the topic of public transport do not contain comments about misinformation, and they also receive from 10 to 20 % of the approval reactions from the number of views. In interviews, the interviewed residents of the cities also indicated that the information provided in the memes has a lot in common with reality, although it is presented ironically.

For example, we've analyze a meme whose irony is expressed through metaphorical hyphenation. The mem's picture shows bus No. 93 in Rostov-on-Don, and below is the logo of the Russian program "Wait for Me".

The metaphor is shown unobtrusively. There is a shortage of city buses in Rostov-on-Don, and people can wait a bus for 30-40 minutes. Such situation is compared with the problem of guests of the famous program "Wait for Me", where people were looking for lost friends and relatives.

To determine if there is manipulation and distortion of information in meme, we turned to the interview method. Two residents of the city interviewed by us rated the meme as "close to reality", noting that the problem of waiting for this bus is really relevant: "*The bus rarely runs and if it is a small-capacity bus, as in the mem's picture, it's often overflowing", "I agree, you'll never wait, it's easier to go to the bus stop on Krasnoarmeyskaya Street and drive from there*".

In general, memes about public transport problems are clear to urban residents and reflect the real situation in the city. This was also emphasized by the interviewed residents of the cities, the information in the memes is confirmed in the comments to them on social networks.

A separate sub–topic related to the problems of public transport is the metro problem. Krasnodar and Rostov-on-Don do not have a metro, Omsk has only one station, and the problem of the lack of a metro is being played out in memes. For example, the metro map of Rostov-on-Don and Krasnodar is shown as a blank sheet (which, in principle, corresponds to reality).

A meme related to the Novosibirsk metro informs about the problem with the opening of the new Sportivnaya station. The meme's picture shows the host of the popular Russian game "Field of Miracles", the essence of which is to guess the letters of a word – the answer to a difficult question. The first six letters of the word "bankrupt" are open on the board, which is not true – according to media reports, the first contractor did not finish the work due to the lack of an agreed design of the station. Such a meme is actually disinformation, but none of the respondents noted this, there was no hint of a fake in the comments under the meme on the social network.

The problem of traffic jams is relevant for large cities. Social media users use similar patterns and phrases to express their emotions. Basically, metaphorical transfer is used to construct a meme, and irony is a type of humor. For example, a city without traffic jams is compared to a miracle by residents of Omsk and Krasnodar, and a meme created for residents of Novosibirsk indicates that men do not dream of girls, but of a city without traffic jams. There are also memes with maps of cities that are painted completely red, which is how traffic jams are designated. In such memes, the visual is accompanied by an expressive emotional characteristic, or an ironic comment by the authors of the meme.

For example we analyze a popular meme in Novosibirsk (216 likes). It's is a meme with a map that indicates that cars in the city have become stuck in traffic jams. At the bottom of the picture is a man with a raised finger. The text of the meme is as follows: "Driving test: begins. Roads in Novosibirsk": (meaning that there are traffic jams on the roads). "Good luck getting your driver's license". So, it's a meme with a joke about a driving test during traffic jams.

This meme was positively received by community members, the irony was appreciated, however, in one of the comments, a resident of the city noted that there is no problem passing the driving test during traffic jams – the car will just stand still for half an hour. During the interview, the idea was expressed that such an image on a map is impossible in principle, but a meme cannot be attributed to misinformation, since there are severe 10 points traffic jams in the city. This meme does not have a manipulative task, it is situational, has the task of entertaining the audience, and not creating a certain image.

The weather theme is one of the brightest in the memes of the city, it always receives approving comments from the townspeople. For example, in 2024, weather changes in Rostov-on-Don were emotionally understood and expressed through hyperbolization in crealized texts.

For example we decide to analyze a comparative meme about the weather, because it needs to be analyzed especially carefully: as we found out earlier, the comic effect is based on the paradox of what is happening and may contain completely false images that do not correspond to reality.

The meme contains two pictures – a desert and icebergs, and above them: "Weather in Rostov in October", "October 5", "October 15". When creating the meme, a metaphorical transfer was used: hot weather is associated with a desert, cold – with an iceberg. There was a sharp cold snap in the city when the heat turned to cold. There is no manipulation in the meme. The Rostov residents we interviewed noted that the meme does not misinform, but highlights the myth of a rapidly changing climate.

The Table 1 shows an analysis of memes in terms of manipulation and misinformation.

Table 1. The results of the analysis of the content of local memes in relation to fakes and reality

Memes about problems	*Completely disinformation, fake*	*A social myth*	*True, but with an ironic context*
About the outskirts and the city center	12	6	2
Transport problems	1	4	9
Traffic jams	0	3	4
Weather	0	2	1

The analysis showed that memes that contain manipulation mostly belong to the category "the outskirts and the city center". Probably, this is so because such memes are created in the interests of certain social groups, showing their superiority over others. These memes more often than others contained sarcasm. Most of the memes under consideration from other thematic groups are based on irony, not sarcasm, that is, on a milder form of ridicule, without malice and indignation.

Their task is to reveal current social problems, because when you treat problems with humor, they cease to be as frightening as before (Canepari, 2020).

5. Conclusion

The functioning of memes is a consequence of the development of Internet technologies, mass media, and popular culture. Today, they are present in the media discourse at the international and regional levels, which allows us to conclude about their popularity and scale of use.

The Internet meme as a form of information dissemination has become popular in mass communication due to the following characteristics: the use of a visual component, which at the present stage can not only complement verbal communication, but also replace it; humor (irony, sarcasm), dissemination (replication) through mass communications: through social networks, forums, messengers.

These aspects determine the interest of the mass audience in information presented in the form of a meme, which allows communicators (initiators of an information action) to attract the attention of communicants, control them, transmit an information message in an attractive, easy-to-understand form, and also involve the audience in the dissemination of information, which increases the effectiveness of the communication process.

The study showed that memes are actively used in regional media communities in order to highlight and identify problematic situations in the social environment. However, the hyperbolization inherent in memes can affect the formation of a negative image of reality, form incorrect public opinion, which will then be broadcast on social networks as a media virus. When analyzing memes, it is necessary to focus on this point, on understanding the construction of a myth through a meme and the origin of fakes.

Taking into account the identified trends in the functioning of Internet memes, their characteristics and significance, we consider it advisable to increase attention to their study in the framework of professional media education, as well as conducting practical training to improve media literacy. In addition to the problem of disinformation, the following issues deserve attention: the technology of creating and replicating memes, the impact of different types of memes on the audience and their role in political, economic, and cultural processes.

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