

Mememes: The Representation of Cultural Agency and Identity across the Boundaries

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how memes represent cultural agency and identity across international and sociocultural boundaries and how they can impact sociocultural discourses in online spaces. Based on the theoretical framework of Burnett's information domains, this study examines three specific examples to introduce how memes can traverse diverse contexts, adapt to local norms, and reflect global tensions. The examples underscore the need for critical and broader approaches in information literacy education along with contextual analysis and cultural awareness, suggesting that memes can serve as an effective tool.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Information literacy; Information use; Social media.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Mememes; Boundary-crossing; Cultural agency; Cultural identity; Information domains.

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INTRODUCTION

The rise of social media, generative AI, and global media platforms like Netflix and YouTube has facilitated global interactions in online spaces. As a result, how information is expressed, accessed, and interpreted has been diversified, but sociocultural challenges such as misinformation, hate speech, stereotyping, and discrimination have also intensified. While Library and Information Science (LIS) has long sought to understand user information behavior from diverse perspectives and enhance information literacy, these evolving complexities of global interactions demand more adaptive and inclusive educational approaches and pedagogies. Memes can be used to foster information literacy and study user information behavior because they reflect social norms, values, and sociopolitical discourses through constant online interactions (DeCook, 2018; Grundlingh, 2018).

This study introduces three specific examples that illustrate how memes can represent cultural agency and identity across various cultural and international boundaries. The examples depict how memes reflect and impact social norms and cultural values between diverse information worlds. Additionally, they exhibit how memes can involve and impact cultural identities, which include shared beliefs, traditions, or historical memories.

Although existing research on memes has examined memes used within specific sociocultural groups, such as political or gender communities, memes that cross international boundaries have not been extensively explored. This study addresses this gap by focusing more on transnational memes, their ideological and cultural implications, and their broader sociocultural impact through the theoretical lens of the information domains. By doing so, it aims to provide insights into enhancing information literacy in a broader sense using memes, which includes a critical understanding of how information is generated, disseminated, represented, and perceived in diverse societies, in addition to the ability to evaluate mis/disinformation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mememes and meme culture across boundaries

The word meme was coined by Dawkins (1976) as a self-replicating unit of cultural transmission. Like biological evolution, memes persist and transform, and they can gain longevity through adaptation while others may disappear (Blackmore et al., 2000; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015).

Social media boosted the evolution of memes and led to the prosperity of meme culture. Users actively create, modify, and share memes through iterative interactions on social media, and the meanings behind memes are newly generated or continuously recontextualized (Dyner, 2024). A well-known example is Pepe the Frog, which is a character that has been repeatedly reinterpreted and recontextualized in diverse sociopolitical contexts (Glitsos & Hall, 2019; Khan, 2021).

Memes also function as communicative tools, and they can cross different social, cultural, and international boundaries while used in communication (Ntouvlis & Geenen, 2025). When they cross these boundaries, memes may adapt to new sociocultural environments and obtain various meanings that reflect the ideologies and social values of different societies (Gal et al., 2016; DeCook, 2018; Trillò & Shifman, 2021). However, this boundary-crossing can lead to diverse interpretations and understandings of memes because of differences in shared sociocultural contexts between meme creators and readers, like the semiotic process (Shifman, 201; DeCook, 2018; Grundlingh, 2018). Additionally, linguistic and cultural differences in different countries further complicate meme communication, as seen in China, where features in Chinese characters, like ideograms and homonyms, influence how memes are constructed and perceived (Mina, 2014).

This complexity of memes implies that while meme creators may intend specific meanings, the meanings might not be stable. Users may reinterpret and recontextualize them based on their distinct social norms, values, and identities (Kanai, 2016; Andreasen, 2023). This feature also demonstrates that memes can represent and relate to the unique cultural agency of society that mediates digital discourse, often challenging or reinforcing existing societal narratives.

Information domains

Information domains theory was outlined by Burnett in 2015 as a framework for understanding and examining human information behaviors in various societies. There are three intertwined domains—the domains of the individual, the social, and signification.

The domain of the individual examines the role of individual cognitive, affective, and physical factors in information behavior (Burnett, 2015). The domain of the social examines information behavior from a broader level, subsuming the concepts of Burnett's earlier theory, information worlds, including collective and contextual factors such as shared social norms, social types, normative information behaviors, information values, and information boundaries as influencing factors in information behavior (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010; Burnett, 2015). Third, the domain of signification focuses on modes of interaction between individuals and social groups, such as the linguistic systems or encoding and representational practices in different contexts, used to make information sharable in interactions (Burnett, 2015; Burnett & Burnett, 2019).

The three domains are intertwined: that is, interactions can occur between individuals and other individuals, between individuals and social groups, and between different social groups. Also, these interactions depend on the tools and practices of the domain of signification. In the context of memes and meme culture, this theory can uncover how memes can reflect individual and social factors in different societies as a mode of interaction in online spaces.

METHOD

This study adopts an interpretivist approach to examining memes across international and cultural boundaries through the theoretical lens of information domains. After exploring diverse online spaces by focusing mainly on public social media groups such as those on Facebook, three cases were first selected as examples of cultural and international boundary-crossing memes. Through iterative discussions, we focused on situations and cultural dynamics in which memes crossed international and cultural boundaries. For this, we examined not only physical properties, such as formats and content, but also the context, history, and social norms in which memes were shared.

DISCUSSION

Example 1: Memes That Consist of Photoshopped Images of Politicians in Different Countries

This example illustrates how memes can explicitly cross international boundaries (see Figure 1). The left image references General Mark Milley's 2020 phone calls with China's Ministry of National Defense, as detailed in Woodward and Costa's book, *Peril* (2021). Concerned that then-President Donald Trump might launch a military strike, Milley reassured Chinese officials that if an unprovoked attack appeared imminent, he would notify them (Schmidt, 2021). This fact provoked strong criticism from U.S. right-wing groups, who accused Milley of betrayal, and many memes mocking Milley emerged, including an example that merges his face with Mao Zedong (see <https://www.facebook.com/communistdemocrats/photos/1042844596552004>). Though created as a political satire in the U.S., this meme involves different aspects of cultural agency in different sociopolitical contexts. In China, Mao Zedong remains an important historical figure who is associated with revolutionary achievements (Dong, 2012). However, in the U.S., his image is often satirical and used to critique authoritarianism; thus, the same meme evokes different meanings or interpretations based on cultural histories or social norms, as the domain of the social suggests.

Similar transformations can occur in places like North Korea, where leaders or politicians receive deep reverence, in contrast to Western traditions of satire. The example on the right in Figure 1 is a meme made of photoshopped images of Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un. Even though the example meme was created as political satire targeting Trump's political conduct and leadership in the U.S. and was even sold on Amazon as a product (see <https://www.amazon.com/Donald-Trump-Laptop-Bumper-Sticker/dp/B088FKTW3X>), it may also be interpreted or perceived differently outside of the U.S., as in the previous example. These examples show how memes represent diverse aspects of cultural agency in different countries explicitly, reflecting differing political discourses across international boundaries.

Figure 1

Gen. Mao Milley and Kim Jong-un Trump Memes



Example 2: Rooftop Koreans

In another example, the Rooftop Koreans meme (see Figure 2) was shared actively when riots and looting broke out after George Floyd's death in 2020. The meme has very different connotations for both the Korean-American and African-American populations (Wong, 2020). This example highlights how memes can reflect multiple cultural agencies simultaneously and can be perceived differently in different groups, mediating collective memories and cultural identities across boundaries.

The photographic images in the Rooftop Koreans meme were initially taken during the 1992 Los Angeles (L.A.) riots, showing the response of Korean business owners protecting their stores located in predominantly African-American communities. Riots ensued in 1992 after 1) the acquittal of four L.A. officers recorded in the video beating motorist Rodney King and 2) thirteen days later, the killing of 15-year-old Latasha Harlins by a Korean store owner who accused Harlins of theft and was later sentenced to only five years' probation and 400 hours of community service, with no jail time. The media reported this sequence of events and 'hyped' major tensions between Korean and African-American communities, leading to severe racial conflicts and victims (Johnson, 2020). As a result, the event of the 1992 L.A. riots is remembered as a tragedy for both African-American and Korean-American communities.

However, as the domain of the social suggests, this tragic event was perceived and remembered differently by Korean-American and African-American communities due to their different focuses on the event: for the Korean-American community, it involved community trauma about economic and human loss caused by conflict between whites and blacks (SBS DALI, 2022), while to the African-American community, it was an example of historical oppression and systemic injustice (Johnson, 2020). As a result, different concerns arose between the two communities when the Rooftop Koreans meme was actively shared. In Korea, concerns about

racial conflicts arose when using this meme after the death of George Floyd because of its potential to arouse hostility toward Korean immigrants or Korean-American communities like the 1992 L.A. riots (Song, 2020). Meanwhile, this meme raised concerns in African-American communities because of its potential to reinforce the stereotypes of African-Americans as looters or threats by ‘overshadowing their social justice’ (Weaver, 2020).

This example demonstrates that memes can engage diverse communities with in sometimes wildly varying cultural perceptions of specific historical events. It also illustrates the roles and impacts of memes that reflect diverse cultural agencies and identities across international boundaries in mediating and shaping sociocultural discourses. Particularly in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement, the Rooftop Koreans meme demonstrates how memes can relate to and amplify historical tensions across cultural and international boundaries while influencing contemporary activism.

Figure 2

Rooftop Koreans Memes



Example 3: News Article on an Online Website in Korea

Another example involves the repurposing of a Time magazine cover featuring then-President Donald Trump, initially published in March 2017. Although the image began life as a magazine cover and is re-presented without alteration, its re-use and repurposing in a quite different online setting qualify it as a meme. The image shows Donald Trump, holding his cell phone, leaning against the Washington Monument, which is cracked. It symbolized his disruptive governance with his favorite weapon at the time, Twitter, and its impact on American democracy. The original article, ‘Inside Donald Trump’s War Against the State’ (Calabresi, 2017), argued that

Trump was actively undermining U.S. governmental institutions, with the cracked monument representing the fragility of democratic structures under his leadership.

However, the online Korean article in Seoul Administration News repurposed the image, inverting its meaning by explicitly putting forward a set of conspiracy theory claims surrounding the 2020 election, insisting that the election was stolen, that Donald Trump was clearly the rightful winner, and that he would soon be returned to office when the ‘truths’ became known (Hwang, 2021). This repurposing completely reversed the original critique of Trump and turned him from a destabilizing force into a protector of American democracy, holding up the Washington Monument as a symbol of that democracy.

This example demonstrates how the meaning of memes can be shaped or repurposed simply by crossing international and sociopolitical boundaries without additional edits or encoding processes, unlike the previous examples. This further highlights the role of memes as the representation of cultural agency, which shapes public perceptions by adapting content to fit local sociopolitical narratives. This example also shows that a shift in cultural identity behind the meme can occur while crossing international boundaries. The depiction of Trump in this article, for example, reflects a certain political or ideological sentiment in Korea that diverges from the original American context.

Figure 3

Online News Article Published in Korea about the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election

[칼럼=국제. 한국] 트럼프 왕의 귀환 언제?...조 바이든 대통령은 가짜인가?(美대선 부정선거 확인)

미 타임스. 트럼프(TRUMP) 미시오 칼라브레시 기자의 트럼프의 위상된
임상 전쟁 보도

TIME
Trump's War on Washington

Click confidently.
Get protection against all types of threats.

많이 본 기사

- 1 [구형로커의] 송하구. 8월부터 집중해서. 곧 나면들의 장기적일 한대일, 2023. 송하구
- 2 [송하구] [송하구] [송하구] [송하구] [송하구] [송하구] [송하구] [송하구] [송하구] [송하구]
- 3 [송하구] [송하구] [송하구] [송하구] [송하구] [송하구] [송하구] [송하구] [송하구] [송하구]
- 4 [송하구] [송하구] [송하구] [송하구] [송하구] [송하구] [송하구] [송하구] [송하구] [송하구]

Translation of the title: When is King Trump's return? ... Is President Joe Biden fake? (The U.S. presidential election fraud confirmed)

CONCLUSION

This study shows how memes can represent cultural agencies that influence, shape, and transform meaning while crossing different information worlds through three examples. Memes are not static but undergo iterative and sometimes radical recontextualization and reinterpretation, often reflecting deeper sociocultural dimensions beyond their surface-level representations. Particularly, this study demonstrates that memes can play an important role in forming public perception and discourse in digital spaces by adapting to different cultural, social, and political landscapes while crossing boundaries. They also reveal how cultural identities can be impacted through memes and meme communication, such as reinforcing existing ideologies or challenging dominant narratives. These examples and discussions suggest that utilizing more diverse boundary-crossing memes may contribute to broadening users' perspectives of memes in various sociocultural contexts, promoting critical thinking, and ultimately improving information literacy.

AI STATEMENT

During the initial preparation of this work, the author(s) minimally used OpenAI Chat GPT on a couple of paragraphs in order to improve the readability and language of the work. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

AUTHOR CRediT STATEMENT

Minhyung Jo: Conceptualization, Investigation, Resources, Writing – Original Draft.

Gary Burnett: Writing – Original Draft, Review & Editing.

Shannon Williams: Writing – Review & Editing. **Willie Smith:** Writing – Review & Editing.

Kathleen Burnett: Writing – Review & Editing.

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