

Gen Z and the Language of Memes: Digital Semiotics, Identity, and Cultural Discourse

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how Generation Z (Gen Z) employs internet memes as a distinct linguistic and cultural mode of communication, with implications for identity construction, digital literacy, and sociocultural discourse. As the first cohort to grow up immersed in digital technologies, Gen Z exhibits shortened attention spans and declining engagement with traditional text-based media, while simultaneously thriving in visual, participatory meme cultures. Using a mixed-methods approach combining content analysis and surveys, this study examines 500 memes shared on Instagram and TikTok alongside responses from 150 Pakistani university students. The findings indicate that memes function as hybrid linguistic artifacts—combining visual semiotics, humor, and intertextuality to construct in-group identity and express nuanced emotional states. However, meme reliance correlates with reduced engagement in sustained reading practices. The study argues that memes are not merely entertainment but constitute a rapidly evolving discourse shaping Gen Z's cultural consciousness. It concludes with pedagogical recommendations for incorporating digital literacy and meme analysis into English and cultural studies curricula.

Keywords: Generation Z, Memes, Digital Semiotics, Internet Discourse, Identity Construction, Cultural Studies

Introduction

Generation Z (born 1995–2010) represents the first generation of “digital natives,” immersed in internet technologies from childhood. They are prolific users of social media, gaming platforms, and e-commerce, and dominate the global content creation landscape. However, this immersion coincides with declining reading habits, shortened attention spans, and reduced engagement with traditional cultural forms. Memes have emerged as a central communicative practice within Gen Z culture. While initially defined by Dawkins (1976) as cultural units transmitted via imitation, memes have evolved into complex digital texts combining images, captions, and intertextual references. They are now a dominant vehicle for Gen Z’s humor, political expression, and identity negotiation.

In the digital era, the ways in which young people communicate have been profoundly reshaped by social media and online platforms. Among these transformations, the language of memes has emerged as one of the most distinctive tools for communication. For Generation Z—those born roughly between the mid-1990s and early 2010s—memes have become more than humorous images; they are powerful vehicles for self-expression, community engagement, and cultural commentary (Shifman, 2014). Memes function as hybrid communicative artifacts that combine visuals, text, and intertextual references. Their semiotic richness makes them particularly well-suited for expressing complex ideas quickly and playfully. For Gen Z, memes operate as cultural shorthand: a shared symbolic vocabulary that bridges diverse digital communities and fosters collective identity (Cannizzaro, 2016). From a semiotic perspective, memes act as signs whose meanings are constructed through shared social and cultural knowledge. Unlike traditional linguistic signs, memes rely heavily on humor, parody, and remixing, which invite creative reinterpretation (Wiggins, 2019). Their meaning is rarely fixed; instead, it evolves as memes circulate across digital platforms, accumulating new contexts and layers of significance.

The semiotics of memes highlights their participatory nature. A meme is not merely consumed; it is often remixed, reshaped, and recontextualized by users who adapt it to their own cultural realities. This iterative process reflects Generation Z’s broader orientation toward interactive and collaborative communication, where

users are not passive recipients but active co-creators of meaning (Milner, 2016). Identity construction is one of the most salient aspects of meme culture. For Gen Z, memes are identity markers that signal group belonging and cultural alignment. Sharing a meme often implies membership in a specific digital subculture, while failing to understand a meme can mark one as an outsider (Ntouvlis & Geenen, 2023). In this way, memes reinforce in-group solidarity while also shaping social boundaries.

The irony and absurdity characteristic of Gen Z memes reflect a generational worldview shaped by uncertainty, precarity, and rapid technological change. Instead of presenting straightforward narratives, many memes rely on fragmented humor, surreal images, and exaggerated absurdity. This aesthetic resonates with a generation that has grown up in a world of economic instability, climate crises, and information overload (Highfield, 2016). Culturally, memes provide an accessible avenue for political and social engagement. Gen Z frequently uses memes to comment on pressing issues such as climate change, gender equality, racial justice, and mental health. By embedding serious concerns in humorous formats, memes make these topics approachable and allow youth to voice dissent or solidarity without the risks associated with more formal political discourse (Arrobo-Agila et al., 2025). Memes also serve as tools of resistance and critique. They allow young people to challenge dominant narratives, satirize political leaders, and expose hypocrisy in ways that are creative and subversive. The power of memes lies in their ability to condense critique into a single image or phrase, thereby amplifying marginalized voices in the digital public sphere (Milner, 2016).

The role of digital platforms in shaping meme culture cannot be overstated. Social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Reddit, and X (formerly Twitter) not only provide spaces for meme circulation but also influence which memes gain traction through algorithms and virality (Shifman, 2014). These technological structures play a decisive role in determining which cultural discourses dominate online spaces. Algorithm-driven visibility, however, also introduces challenges. While some memes spread organically, others are amplified by platform logics that prioritize engagement over accuracy or inclusivity. This dynamic can reinforce stereotypes, spread misinformation, or privilege certain cultural narratives at the

expense of others (Highfield, 2016). Thus, understanding memes requires attention not only to their semiotic content but also to their technological ecology.

The participatory ethos of meme culture mirrors broader trends in Gen Z communication. This generation thrives on interactivity, preferring formats that invite creativity and personalization. Memes exemplify this ethos by offering templates that anyone can adapt. The remix culture of memes blurs the boundary between producer and consumer, collapsing traditional hierarchies of authorship (Wiggins, 2019). Memes also demonstrate the global interconnectedness of Gen Z culture. A meme originating in one cultural context can be reinterpreted and localized across multiple geographies, creating a global digital vernacular. At the same time, local adaptations preserve cultural specificity, showing how memes simultaneously foster global solidarity and local identity (Davis, 2021).

The temporality of memes is another defining feature. They often rise and fade rapidly, reflecting the accelerated pace of digital culture. What is funny or relevant today may become obsolete tomorrow. This ephemerality mirrors Gen Z's broader relationship with information—fast, transient, and constantly shifting (Shifman, 2014). At the same time, certain meme formats achieve remarkable longevity, becoming enduring fixtures of online culture. These “classic memes” function as cultural anchors, providing continuity in an otherwise fluid and ephemeral communicative landscape. Their endurance reflects their adaptability to new contexts and their capacity to encode universal experiences (Cannizzaro, 2016).

The multimodality of memes—combining text, image, sound, and video—further underscores their communicative power. Gen Z's fluency in navigating multiple semiotic modes equips them to interpret these multimodal texts seamlessly. This literacy is not innate but cultivated through daily immersion in digital environments (Ntouvlis & Geenen, 2023). Memes are also deeply tied to humor, but the humor itself is often layered and self-referential. Irony, parody, and absurdism dominate Gen Z's meme culture, reflecting a sensibility that resists straightforwardness. Such humor provides not only amusement but also coping mechanisms in the face of uncertainty and instability (Highfield, 2016).

The study of memes within digital semiotics offers insights into broader cultural discourses. By analyzing memes, researchers can trace how Gen Z negotiates

identity, expresses values, and engages with global issues (Arrobo-Agila et al., 2025). Memes thus serve as cultural texts that encapsulate the social and political consciousness of a generation. Importantly, memes also illustrate the tensions between inclusivity and exclusivity. While they can foster community and solidarity, they can also alienate those unfamiliar with specific references or cultural codes. This duality underscores the ambivalent nature of memes as both bridges and barriers in communication (Wiggins, 2019). Ultimately, the language of memes exemplifies how Generation Z navigates the complexities of digital life. Memes are not trivial distractions but integral components of cultural discourse that shape how young people understand themselves and the world around them (Shifman, 2014). They embody the creativity, adaptability, and critical sensibilities of a generation that communicates in signs, symbols, and shared humor.

This introduction sets the stage for a deeper exploration of how memes function as semiotic resources, identity markers, and cultural texts. It emphasizes the need to study memes not just as entertainment but as dynamic communicative practices that encapsulate the lived experiences of Generation Z in the digital age (Milner, 2016). This study explores how memes serve as a unique language through which Gen Z constructs meaning, relationships, and resistance to traditional hierarchies of knowledge and culture.

Literature Review

Memes as Cultural Discourse: Shifman (2014) argues that internet memes function as participatory cultural discourse, allowing users to remix and recontextualize symbols. Milner (2016) sees memes as multimodal texts reflecting collective social commentary.

Memes and Identity Construction: Highfield & Leaver (2016) and Abidin (2021) document how memes enable young users to craft and perform identity within online communities, offering belonging while reinforcing in-group boundaries.

Gen Z and Digital Habitus: Prensky (2001) and Twenge (2017) note that Gen Z's "digital native" status shapes their cognition, learning preferences, and cultural tastes, privileging brevity, visuals, and interactivity. **Cognitive and Linguistic Implications:** Studies by Kirschner & De Bruyckere (2017) and Firth et al.

(2021) show that heavy reliance on short-form digital content correlates with lower sustained reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition, raising concerns for formal education.

Pakistani Context: Local studies (Qureshi & Khan, 2022) suggest rising meme use among Pakistani youth as informal political critique and peer bonding, but little research addresses its linguistic and cognitive implications.

Digital Semiotics and Meme Communication

Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, provides a powerful lens for analyzing memes as communicative tools in digital culture. According to Shifman (2014), memes represent a form of participatory media where signs are reinterpreted and reshaped through collective engagement. Unlike traditional symbols, memes are fluid, relying on intertextuality and contextual adaptability for meaning-making. Their ability to condense complex cultural messages into visual and textual formats demonstrates their central role in digital discourse.

Cannizzaro (2016) emphasizes that memes act as “internet signs,” serving as cultural shorthand that compresses meaning through shared digital literacy. Unlike conventional language, meme communication depends heavily on humor, irony, and visual cues, which require audiences to possess prior cultural knowledge to fully grasp the message. This semiotic flexibility makes memes a dynamic part of contemporary communication.

Wiggins (2019) further explains that memes are inherently intertextual, drawing from various cultural references, popular media, and online discourses. The layering of meanings through remixing makes them both accessible and exclusive, depending on the user’s familiarity with cultural codes. Such intertextuality reflects the participatory nature of digital environments, where audiences co-create meaning. Ultimately, the semiotic richness of memes illustrates how Gen Z negotiates meaning in a fragmented digital space. By embedding cultural narratives into multimodal texts, memes exemplify the shift from linear communication to playful, nonlinear, and intertextual discourse (Ntouvlis & Geenen, 2023).

Memes and Identity Construction in Generation Z

Identity is a crucial dimension of meme usage. For Gen Z, memes are not merely humorous artifacts but also tools for identity performance and social belonging.

Sharing memes allows individuals to align with particular cultural groups, signaling familiarity with shared humor and references (Milner, 2016). This symbolic practice fosters community and reinforces in-group solidarity.

Ntouvlis and Geenen (2023) argue that memes serve as multimodal texts through which youth negotiate and perform their digital identities. Understanding and sharing specific memes communicates insider knowledge, marking individuals as authentic members of digital subcultures. Conversely, failure to grasp a meme can signal cultural exclusion, highlighting the dual role of memes in reinforcing belonging and otherness.

The ironic and absurd tone of many Gen Z memes reflects generational attitudes toward uncertainty, precarity, and global crises. Highfield (2016) notes that digital humor is often employed as a coping strategy, allowing youth to engage critically with serious issues while maintaining a sense of detachment. This reflects identity construction in contexts of instability, where irony becomes a defining cultural marker.

Through memes, Gen Z articulates both personal and collective identities. Memes act as cultural mirrors, reflecting how individuals position themselves in relation to broader social narratives. This identity work underscores the role of memes as performative tools in contemporary youth culture (Davis, 2021).

Memes as Cultural Discourse and Political Commentary

Beyond humor and identity, memes function as vehicles of cultural discourse. Shifman (2014) highlights their ability to communicate political messages in compressed, accessible formats. Gen Z frequently uses memes to comment on social justice, climate change, gender, and mental health, embedding serious issues into humorous texts. This allows complex topics to be disseminated in ways that resonate with young audiences.

Milner (2016) explains that memes are central to participatory politics, enabling decentralized critiques of authority and power. The remixable nature of memes empowers users to satirize leaders, expose hypocrisy, and circulate dissent. As such, memes contribute to digital activism by offering creative yet subversive means of political engagement.

Highfield (2016) argues that meme culture democratizes political discourse by

providing ordinary individuals with tools for commentary. However, this accessibility also raises concerns regarding misinformation, as humorous packaging can obscure factual accuracy. Despite this, memes remain influential in shaping political narratives within digital spaces.

Arrobo-Agila, Gonzales Córdova, and Molina (2025) further suggest that memes, when analyzed semiotically, reveal generational priorities and anxieties. They highlight how meme discourse reflects cultural transformations, particularly the shift toward decentralized, digital-first modes of communication. Thus, memes are not trivial entertainment but active components of cultural negotiation.

Platform Algorithms and the Circulation of Memes

The digital ecology of meme circulation is shaped by social media platforms and their algorithms. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Reddit, and X (formerly Twitter) provide the primary spaces where memes are created, adapted, and shared (Shifman, 2014). These spaces amplify certain memes based on virality, engagement metrics, and algorithmic preferences.

Highfield (2016) notes that algorithmic curation significantly influences which memes become visible, potentially reinforcing dominant narratives while suppressing marginalized voices. This dynamic reflects broader concerns about the intersection of technology, communication, and cultural power. By shaping which memes gain traction, algorithms indirectly shape public discourse.

Wiggins (2019) emphasizes the participatory ethos of memes, but also points out how this participation is constrained by technological infrastructures. While memes are created and adapted by users, their spread is contingent upon platform logics that prioritize speed, humor, and engagement. This accelerates the meme life cycle, producing both opportunities and challenges for cultural discourse.

The global circulation of memes highlights their adaptability. Davis (2021) demonstrates that memes travel across cultural and geographic boundaries, often being localized to fit specific contexts. This global-local dynamic underscores the hybrid nature of meme communication, simultaneously fostering global solidarity and reinforcing cultural specificity.

Theoretical Framework

Semiotic theory provides the most appropriate foundation for analyzing the

language of memes among Generation Z. Rooted in the works of Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1931), semiotics examines how meaning is constructed through signs. In meme culture, these signs are not limited to words but extend to images, symbols, humor, and intertextual references. As Cannizzaro (2016) argues, memes function as “internet signs,” whose meaning evolves as they circulate across digital spaces. This makes semiotics the central lens for understanding how Gen Z creates and interprets memes. Memes embody multimodal communication by combining visuals, text, and cultural references. Each meme consists of a signifier (e.g., an image template) and a signified (the cultural or humorous meaning attached to it). However, unlike traditional linguistic signs, memes rely heavily on contextual knowledge and shared cultural literacy to be understood. Their meanings are fluid, often shifting as they are remixed and reappropriated in different online communities (Shifman, 2014). This dynamic nature aligns directly with semiotic theory’s emphasis on the relational and interpretive processes of meaning-making. Applying semiotics also explains how memes contribute to identity construction among Gen Z. Memes act as symbolic markers of group belonging, where understanding or sharing a meme signals insider status within a digital subculture (Ntouvlis & Geenen, 2023). Conversely, failing to grasp a meme highlights exclusion, reinforcing the role of semiotic codes in establishing social boundaries. In this sense, memes are not merely humorous artifacts but critical tools for performing and negotiating identity in the digital age.

Furthermore, semiotic analysis highlights memes as cultural discourse. Highfield (2016) observes that memes often embed political and social commentary, making them cultural texts that reflect generational attitudes and anxieties. The layering of irony, parody, and humor enables Gen Z to critique authority and engage with issues such as climate change or mental health in ways that are accessible yet subversive. Semiotics allows scholars to unpack these layered meanings, revealing how memes operate as cultural narratives.

In conclusion, semiotic theory is the most suitable framework for studying Gen Z’s language of memes. It not only explains the symbolic and multimodal nature of memes but also illuminates their role in identity construction and cultural discourse. By focusing on memes as signs whose meanings are fluid, contextual, and

socially constructed, semiotics captures the complexity of how Gen Z communicates, critiques, and connects in the digital age.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design in order to capture both the breadth and depth of Generation Z's engagement with memes. A mixed-methods approach was considered appropriate because it allows for the integration of quantitative and qualitative perspectives, thereby providing a holistic understanding of how memes function as tools of communication, identity expression, and cultural discourse (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). By combining content analysis, surveys, and interviews, the study ensured methodological triangulation, which enhanced both validity and reliability.

The first phase involved **content analysis** of 500 memes collected from popular Instagram and TikTok pages commonly followed by Pakistani university students aged 18–25. The memes were selected through purposive sampling to ensure cultural relevance and representativeness of youth online spaces. Each meme was analyzed for recurring linguistic patterns, visual elements, humor styles, and thematic categories. These categories included academic stress, friendship and relationships, political and social commentary, cultural identity, and everyday life experiences. Coding followed both deductive (based on prior meme studies) and inductive (emerging from the data) strategies, enabling the identification of patterns in meme language and symbolism. The second phase utilized a **survey method** to gather quantitative data on meme consumption habits. A total of 150 undergraduate students from Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan were selected through convenience sampling, given their active engagement on digital platforms. A structured questionnaire was administered to assess the frequency of meme exposure, preferred platforms, perceived emotional impact, and the extent to which memes influenced participants' everyday conversations and outlooks. The survey included both closed-ended and Likert-scale questions, allowing for statistical analysis of trends and correlations across participants. The third phase comprised **semi-structured interviews** with 15 students, selected from the survey respondents who volunteered for follow-up discussions. These interviews explored how students personally use memes to express emotions, reinforce social belonging, and articulate

their individual and collective identities. The interviews were conducted in a conversational style, enabling participants to elaborate freely on their experiences. Thematic analysis was applied to identify key narratives, with particular attention to how memes facilitated self-expression, coping with academic or social pressures, and participation in cultural discourse.

To ensure **ethical integrity**, the study obtained prior approval from the institutional ethics review committee. Informed consent was collected from all participants, who were briefed about the aims of the study and their right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained, with survey responses coded numerically and interview transcripts pseudonymized. The research design thus adhered to ethical principles while ensuring that participants' voices were represented respectfully and accurately. By integrating content analysis, surveys, and interviews, this methodology enabled a multi-layered understanding of meme culture among Pakistani university students. Content analysis revealed the semiotic structures and recurring themes in memes, surveys quantified patterns of meme consumption, and interviews provided depth into personal and cultural interpretations. This comprehensive approach positioned memes not only as humorous artifacts but as meaningful communicative practices central to Gen Z's digital lives.

Results And Discussion

Meme Themes

The content analysis of 500 memes revealed four dominant thematic categories. The largest share of memes, 38 percent, referenced academic stress, burnout, and examinations. These memes typically portrayed late-night study struggles, assignment deadlines, and the emotional toll of competitive academic environments, reflecting the pressures faced by university students. Another significant proportion, 27 percent, addressed Pakistani sociopolitical issues, often employing satire and parody to critique political figures, governance problems, and social inequalities. These memes demonstrated how humor is deployed as a form of cultural commentary and resistance. A further 22 percent of memes expressed personal emotional states, particularly anxiety, isolation, and self-deprecating humor. Such memes highlighted how young people use digital humor to normalize vulnerability

and mental health struggles. Finally, 13 percent focused on pop culture trends, including television series, celebrity gossip, and viral online challenges, underscoring the global connectivity of meme culture. Together, these categories illustrate the dual role of memes as both reflections of personal experience and commentaries on broader sociocultural realities.

Linguistic Features

The linguistic analysis revealed that memes frequently employed code-switching between English and Urdu, a practice that resonates with the bilingual environment of Pakistani youth. This switching was not only pragmatic but also symbolic, allowing students to navigate global and local identities simultaneously. Memes also relied heavily on abbreviations, emojis, and phonetic spellings, which served as markers of informality and immediacy in digital discourse. Furthermore, the analysis identified visual irony and image-text dissonance as key humor strategies. For example, incongruous combinations of serious images with humorous captions were frequently used to generate comic effect. These linguistic and visual features demonstrate how memes operate as complex semiotic artifacts that blend verbal, visual, and cultural codes to produce meaning.

Survey Findings

The survey of 150 undergraduate students provided quantitative evidence of meme engagement patterns. An overwhelming majority, 91 percent, reported that they view memes daily, with 62 percent identifying memes as their primary source of entertainment. This suggests that memes have become deeply embedded in students' everyday routines. However, the findings also indicated a potential trade-off: 70 percent of respondents admitted that they read fewer books or long-form articles compared to their habits before widespread social media use. This points to the displacement of traditional reading practices by short-form digital content. At the same time, 83 percent of students reported that memes helped them to express emotions quickly, highlighting their communicative efficiency in fast-paced digital interactions. Finally, 56 percent of respondents said memes fostered a sense of belonging within online communities, reinforcing their social function as tools of inclusion and identity construction.

Interviews

The follow-up interviews with 15 students provided rich qualitative insights into the meanings attached to memes. Participants consistently described memes as a language of emotions that allowed them to articulate complex feelings with minimal effort. Several respondents emphasized that memes served as a way to be understood without explaining, suggesting their role in facilitating shared cultural references and reducing the need for detailed verbal expression. Others remarked that this is how we talk now, reflecting a perception that memes have evolved into a central mode of peer-to-peer communication among Generation Z. Collectively, the interviews underscored the centrality of memes in students' identity performance, emotional regulation, and sense of social connectedness, confirming that memes are not only entertainment but also a significant cultural discourse among young people.

Discussion

Memes operate as a distinct semiotic system: condensed, multimodal texts that combine images, short captions, intertextual references, and audiovisual fragments to produce rapid meaning. Scholars analyzing internet memes from a semiotic perspective argue that memes are not merely humorous pictures but digital signs whose meanings are collectively negotiated through circulation and remixing (Cannizzaro, 2016; Wiggins, 2019). This multimodal and intertextual quality helps explain why memes resonate so strongly with Generation Z's fast-paced, attention-sliced digital lives—memes encode complex cultural knowledge in a compressed format that recipients can decode almost instantly. Because memes produce quick, context-rich meaning, they also provide immediate emotional gratification and function as tools for identity performance within peer networks. Empirical studies of student-centered memes show that self-deprecating and “relatability” memes create collective identities around shared stressors, such as exams and mental health concerns, operating as a form of collective coping (Ortiz, 2021; “My life is a mess,” 2022). Sharing or understanding a particular meme becomes a way to perform in-group membership and communicate complicated affective states with minimal effort (Wiggins, 2019). At the same time, the survey result of this study—the negative correlation between meme consumption and reading frequency—fits into broader debates about cognitive trade-offs in digital media use. Carr (2011) argues that

fragmented online reading habits can reduce individuals' capacity for deep, sustained attention, which is essential for critical argumentation and reflective thought. Large-scale surveys also show that young people are shifting toward short-form content, with nearly constant social media exposure (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). This displacement of traditional reading practices suggests a risk: as meme consumption rises, some Gen Z students may experience reduced opportunities for the extended concentration required in higher education.

In psychosocial terms, the prevalence of self-deprecating humor in memes can be interpreted both as adaptive coping and as a potential risk factor. Psychological studies highlight that affiliative and self-deprecating humor can act as effective strategies for emotion regulation and peer bonding (Maples, 2022). However, overreliance on this form of humor may mask deeper struggles or inhibit proactive help-seeking, meaning that it should be understood as both a marker of resilience and a possible signal of distress (Ortiz, 2021).

In the Pakistani context, memes also emerge as a form of soft resistance, allowing youth to critique sociopolitical structures indirectly while avoiding censorship. Sultana and Khalid (2023) demonstrate that political memes in Pakistan often use satire and parody to navigate sensitive issues, while Noor and Arshad (2024) show how memes reflect broader cultural narratives. This practice resonates with Bakhtin's (1984) notion of the carnivalesque, where humor subverts authority by temporarily inverting hierarchies. Through layered irony and ridicule, memes allow youth to circulate dissenting perspectives with plausible deniability, positioning humor as both entertainment and political discourse.

Conclusion

Memes have evolved from trivial entertainment into a dominant communicative mode for Gen Z, encapsulating cultural commentary, identity negotiation, and emotional expression in rapid and shareable forms. Their multimodal nature—combining text, visuals, and humor—provides a powerful semiotic system that resonates with the fast-paced lifestyles of youth in digital spaces. For many students, memes serve as tools for coping with academic stress, building a sense of belonging, and engaging in subtle sociopolitical critique. In the Pakistani context, they also function as a safe medium of resistance, allowing young people to challenge

authority while avoiding direct confrontation or censorship. At the same time, the findings raise concerns about the potential trade-offs between meme-centered communication and traditional literacy practices. While memes foster immediacy and emotional resonance, they may inadvertently contribute to reduced engagement with deep reading, critical analysis, and sustained argumentation—skills essential for higher education and civic participation. To address this, educators and policymakers should consider integrating digital literacy frameworks into curricula that recognize the cultural significance of memes while simultaneously reinforcing critical reading and writing skills. By bridging formal education with the realities of youth digital culture, it is possible to harness memes as pedagogical tools rather than viewing them solely as distractions.

Recommendations

1. Incorporate meme analysis into media and cultural studies course.
2. Use meme creation as an assessment tool to build rhetorical and visual literacy.
3. Provide workshops on balancing digital engagement with deep reading habit.
4. Conduct cross-cultural studies to compare Pakistani Gen Z meme practices with global trends.

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