School Memes Reflection of Learning Experiences: A Multimodal Discourse Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study employs Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to examine how Instagram memes construct meaning in real-world learning experiences through the interplay of language and visual elements. Focusing on school memes, the research explores how humor, informal language, pop culture references, and visual composition work together to convey student experiences, academic challenges, and social critique. Findings reveal distinct sociolinguistic patterns such as code-switching, in-group language, and resistance to institutional authority, demonstrating how memes function as tools for identity construction, peer solidarity, and digital learning. The study highlights the role of memes in shaping contemporary educational discourse and encourages further exploration of their pedagogical and communicative potential.

Keywords: School memes, real-world learning experiences, sociolinguistic patterns

INTRODUCTION

Meme, a term conceptualized by Richard Dawkins (1976) are rich concepts that the community members shared on the internet to communicate, whereas reader-viewers are invited as recipients to construct meaning set in visual representations (Anurudu & Adi,2017 as cited in Hassan,2021). Moreover, memes are constantly reshaped and remixed, reflecting the creativity, humor, and occasional madness of modern existence, thus bringing new bits of vocabulary, styles of humor, expressions, and slang that ripple through digital communities.

The rise of meme culture has become a portal to open online discussions that include creators, distributors, and viewers (Plevriti,2014 as cited in De Leon,2021). In which, meme creators aim to produce content mainly for self-expression that others can culturally, emotionally and linguistically relate to; distributors share memes for socializing and building community; while viewers of memes use them as a tool to gather information and be entertained (De Leon,2021). Furthermore, meme culture serves as linguistic artifacts that show language evolution and shifts that broaden cultural and social information through satirical imitations, and sometimes offensively humorous parodies (Muktar et.al,2024) on popular online spaces such as Facebook, Instagram, X, and many more. Furthermore, memes use vernacular English phrases from specific dialects, puns, and punning riddles, jargon, slang, shortenings, neologisms, incorrect spelling and multiple, intentional or non-intentional grammar and syntax mistakes (Stojchevska & Shalevska,2018).

Meme has been a subject of research on sociolinguistics. Holm (2021) concluded in his article entitled "*What do you meme? The Sociolinguistic Potential of Internet Memes*" that internet memes are digital artifacts that interact with society and language to form a new communication practice that has social implications. While Muktar et.al (2024) support the claim of Holm in their study "*Memes in the Digital Age: A Sociolinguistic Examination of Cultural Expressions and Communicative Practices Across Border*" that memes is a powerful communication tool that mirrors the society, trends, generational disparities, cultural dynamics and facilitates self-expression and cultural commentary in online communities. On the other hand, there are studies that focus on the vital role of memes in conveying meanings in social media platforms. In the study of Sayani (2013) on the "*Semiotic Analysis of Memes in 9Gag.com*" she concluded that memes have different signifiers that lead to the different function when they are posted.

Instagram is commonly accepted as a multimodal platform as it combines a variety of semiotic resources such as images, videos, written captions, hashtags, emojis, audio and interactive features and some like polls and reactions. This multimodal quality allows users to interact by making and understanding meaning across modes of communication and is particularly evident in visually based texts like the meme. Lim (2020) stressed that Instagram facilitates complex meaning making practices by integrating the visual with the textual, and that almost 95% of Instagram posts carry an image and its accompanying caption, along with emojis and other symbolic devices. These multimodal affordances are particularly important in youth culture since users interact in robust ways with aesthetic and expressive content. Moreover, data from the Pew Research Center (2021) indicated that 71% of U.S. adults aged 18–29 use Instagram, and more than 60% have expressed a preference to consume visual content. These numbers highlight how the platform plays a central role in enabling multimodal discourse and point to the meme's communicative potential on the site.

New language and idioms are presented, allowing people to communicate complex thoughts or ideas in a short manner. Its structures—like Stories, Reels, direct messaging and use of hashtags substantially increases meme sharing by increasing discoverability, engagement, quickly and going viral. Hashtags, which are terms or expressions that start with the # symbol, are used to group information on social media sites, especially Instagram. They are an efficient way for people to find content related to their interests. Utilizing related hashtags on Instagram Reels can significantly enhance visibility and interaction because they aid the algorithm in comprehending the context of the video and establishing a connection with potential viewers.

One of the critical research challenges relates to the methodological complexities of analyzing multimodal digital communication. By virtue of operating at the crossroads between text and imagery while simultaneously rooted in cultural context, memes demand discourse analytic methods that are able to account for their layered meanings (Shifman, 2013). Furthermore, ethical issues associated with data collection from social media platforms and user privacy remain underexplored, suggesting a need for systematic approaches to the study of Instagram memes.

By conducting multimodal discourse analysis on selected Instagram memes, this study aims to fill these gaps by investigating the linguistic features, humor devices used in the memes and explores the construction of the identity in the digital space. This study analyzes the relationships amongst language, visuals and culture to reflect on the interactivity of memes as discourse in a digital society of Instagram. The study's findings also have practical implications for educators, communication specialists, and policymakers as they provide insights into the impact of meme culture on digital literacy and online social interactions. This work attempts to frame Instagram memes, therefore, not only as diverting cultural production but also as sophisticated linguistic instruments that influence current modes of expression in digital contexts.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1.   How do school memes use language to link real-world learning experiences?

2.   What sociolinguistic patterns emerge in the language of the chosen school memes?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

In this paper, the researchers used the Multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) approach to examine how meaning is constructed through various communication modes beyond language, including visuals, audio, and spatial arrangements, offering a broader perspective than traditional linguistic analysis using the memes on Instagram. Multimodal Discourse Analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) is a study of how visual and verbal texts relate to each other in making meaning.

Additionally, the study was guided by Michael Halliday's (1978, 1992) Systemic-Functional Linguistics (SFL), which describes language both as a social semiotic system, and also as a resource for making linguistic choices that serve three metafunctions: the ideational (representing experience), the interpersonal (enacting social

relationships), and the textual (organizing the message). SFL is useful in analyzing both captions and how language is employed in memes, because it shows how meaning, power and identity are made across the real-world learning experiences, settings or concepts and cultural contexts of Instagram discourse.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework used for examining the meaning is created in visual communication is the Kress and van Leeuwen framework for visual grammar. It offers a means of comprehending how visual components, such as pictures and graphics, can convey meaning in a manner akin to that of language.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) was also employed, a theoretical framework that sees language as a social semiotic system—that is, one that is changed by its social context and serves to produce meaning—was primarily developed by Michael Halliday. SFL examines language according to its grammatical structure, social context, and meaning.

Data Selection

Purposive sampling was used to select 15 memes for analysis. The study focused on five main memes, with three different versions of each meme collected from Instagram. All selected memes were related to real-world learning experiences. Three unique variations of each meme were chosen for this study in order to capture the fluid and changing character of meme culture. Users across platforms constantly copy, alter, and recontextualize memes, making them dynamic forms of communication. Memes can convey intricate ideas or societal commentary in a clear, understandable way because of this process of replication and adaptation (Adamic et al., 2014). Examining several variations enables one to uncover contextual and cultural subtleties present in various meme iterations. According to Melkonyan and Karaperyan (2019), internet memes serve as textual and visual depictions of social experiences and societal discourse, frequently with varying interpretations within communities. A collection of versions might better convey the breadth of meaning or regional variance than a single version. Furthermore, this method facilitates an examination of the adaptability and virality of a meme. According to research by Knobel and Lankshear (2007), intertextuality, comedy, and relevance are some of the elements that affect spreadability and can differ greatly throughout meme variants. It is possible to gain insight into how some iterations resonate with audiences better than others by observing various forms. Finally, meme culture is participative by nature. Users participate by remixing content in addition to sharing it. According to Shifman (2014), memes are "units of cultural transmission" that evolve and acquire significance through community engagement. A more complete picture of how ideas spread and find traction online is provided by including three variants of each meme, which enables the study to represent this collaborative innovation. While there is no single, universally applied set of criteria for selecting memes for analysis, these general guidelines are commonly used. Researchers typically choose memes based on their relevance to the research question, their popularity or virality, and their ability to reflect on the social and cultural themes being studied. Shifman (2014) emphasizes the relevance of memes to social and cultural contexts as a key factor for their selection in studies and analysis. For Milner's (2012) study, virality and audience engagement are primary criteria for meme selection. In Burgess & Green (2009) study, memes are chosen based on their cultural significance, reflecting societal themes and current events. According to Cunningham (2017), memes are selected because of their capacity to reflect social and cultural issues, making them valuable for analysis in these contexts. Memes can be chosen for analysis based on their multimodal nature, their ability to encode cultural messages, and their engagement with the audience's shared cultural knowledge" (Dancygier & Vandelanotte, 2017, p. 87). Additionally, memes that engage with language variation, identity, and social norms provide valuable insights into how language and culture intersect in digital spaces" (Sullivan & Kember, 2022, p. 110).

A number of researchers highlight the close analysis of memes in the context of culture and sociolinguistics, especially within the frameworks of multilingualism and digitally mediated societies. Chik and Ho (2017), for instance, analyzed the Asian settings and demonstrated how memes function as multifunctional cultural phenomena in which youths blend languages and culturally specific clues to re-negotiate a sense of self. They also point out the globalized character of memes as Varis and Wang (2011) suggest their use as multimodal indicators of group membership and participatory culture. All of these studies explain the rationale on why memes that come from, resonate with, and are crafted in local languages by and for specific communities like

multilingual Filipino digital natives, embody a rich cultural sociolinguistic reality. In the classroom situation, memes were chosen for a variety of reasons associated with students' cultural and sociolinguistic experiences. First, memes that were more closely associated with relevant school contexts, such as classrooms and peer interactions, were prioritized because of research indicating direct associations with students lived school experiences (Morrison & Li, 2018). Secondly, the use of language, particularly memes that are in English text, were emphasized to more accurately demonstrate students' linguistic practices (Deumert, 2014). Third, memes that had particular cultural symbols that referenced student lived experiences, such as school uniforms or local figures, were evaluated (Lin & Zeng, 2020). Fourthly, the selection of memes that use humor or satire, and criticize or draw attention to issues within education, weigh significance given its position when peers engage in commentary, critique, or resistance to authority figures (Chugh & Bansal, 2018). Lastly, memes that related most to Filipino youth social media use, in particular Instagram, were prioritized and selected to meet its digital connectivity to what they engage with most (Bennett & Maton, 2010).

For this study, the researchers selected memes for their educational relativity, viral circulation, and their ability to reflect sociolinguistic patterns in educational settings. They offer a lens through which to analyze student life, learning challenges, social inequalities, and educational experiences in a fun and engaging way, all while contributing to discussions about motivation, achievement, and failure within education.

Axes for Selecting the School Memes:

Criteria	Explanation
Educational Relativity	These memes each have distinct ties to educational experiences and can be linked to real-world learning scenarios. Students use memes to express their frustrations with school structures and learning difficulties. Memes function as a form of "digital resistance" where students critique the educational system through humor and shared cultural symbols (Porfilio, B. J., & McLaughlin, J. R. C.,2020). They reflect students' real-world learning challenges and offer avenues for critiquing educational systems through humor, sarcasm, and creativity (Franco, J., & Golden, N. A., 2021). Memes can also function as educational tools by engaging students, sparking discussion, and representing authentic student experiences. Memes support student creativity and critical thinking, particularly in digital literacy and media studies contexts (Samantha Close, Craig Robertson, et al., 2021).
Widespread Circulation	Popularity (Virality)- An image or video post that gets 10,000 to 20,000 likes or views in the first 24 hours is considered viral (Fourthwall,2024). This statement supports Sayani (2013) that the most popular memes are often shared via social networks such as Facebook and Twitter.
Cultural and Sociolinguistic Reflection	These memes exemplify cultural and sociolinguistic stories in education, identifying how multilingual Filipino youth engage in humor and local symbols as means of negotiating school-related experience. They show how students' question, connect with, and reimagine authority and identity in digital sites such as Instagram.

The five selected memes—Oppenheimer, Squid Game, Drakeposting, Success Kid, and Crying Monkey—were chosen due to their exceptional alignment with the study's criteria and their ability to reflect educational realities through multimodal discourse. While other memes also meet some of the outlined standards, these five were chosen because they offer the richest sociolinguistic, cultural, emotional, and educational representations, making them particularly salient for multimodal analysis.

Instruments

For the purposes of this study, memes are defined as multimodal digital objects featuring visual and textual elements (e.g., images, GIFs, or videos) that are persistently distributed across Instagram and used for

sociolinguistic expression and for educational commentary. The memes utilized in this study are selected based upon the information they contain that is relevant to an educational context, the meme's persistent distributions' virality, and the meme's formulation of cultural and sociolinguistic representations. The study used a variety of different versions of the same meme format—where the visual template stays the same, but the content of the text is relevant—to see how changing the language concerned (captions, slang, tone, intertextuality) changes the meaning and connects with other parts of the academic experience. Following frameworks established by Shifman (2014), Milner referenced by Dancygier & Vandelanotte (2017), memes are treated as semiotic, communicative texts, elaborating experience through composition of visuals and linguistic strategies.

The data used for this study mainly comes from Instagram. Instagram's visual-first and algorithm-driven design fosters rapid meme circulation and engagement among youth, making it uniquely suited for studying multimodal communication. Batı (2020) explains that Instagram's design—centered around images, short videos, and interactive content—makes it highly effective for student engagement and informal learning. Its algorithm amplifies content that receives high interaction, making memes that reflect relatable academic or school-based experiences go viral quickly. These memes are examples of multimodal texts—they combine images, humor, and culturally relevant messages to communicate complex educational and social commentary in a digestible format. This makes Instagram not only a social platform but a site of participatory digital literacy where students express themselves, critique school culture, and build shared understandings using memes. In Highfield, T., & Leaver, T. (2016) study, it shows how Instagram's visual layout and user practices make it ideal for studying multimodal content like memes. Carah, N., & Shaul, M. (2016) analyzes how Instagram's visual interface supports layered communication through images and brief text. Leaver, T., Highfield, T., & Abidin, C. (2020) explored how Instagram's platform features promote multimodal meaning-making more effectively than Facebook or Twitter. Page, R. (2018) argued that Instagram encourages narrative construction through coordinated multimodal elements—image, caption, and interaction. Tiggemann, M., & Zaccardo, M. (2018) shows how Instagram's image-caption-comment system conveys complex discourses, demonstrating its multimodal nature.

The study followed Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to identify how meaning is made by the interplay of these elements on Instagram memes:

a. linguistic strategies

b. multimodal features

c. construction of Meaning and Engagement

d. sociolinguistic patterns emerge in the linguistic and visual composition of memes related to real-world learning experiences, settings or concepts on Instagram

Data Gathering Procedure

This research prioritized ethical integrity. To ensure responsible data collection, the researchers meticulously addressed issues of consent, privacy, and intellectual property throughout the analysis of Instagram memes. The data collection began with the careful selection of five distinct memes. Each of these memes were further explored by gathering three variations, or adaptations, of the original meme as they appear on Instagram. Critically, all selected memes and their variations were required to link to real-world learning experiences settings or concepts.

The analysis was then proceeded by examining both the linguistic and multimodal features of these memes. Specifically, the researchers analyzed linguistic strategies, focusing on textual elements such as word choice, syntax, grammar, discourse markers, and intertextuality. Simultaneously, the researchers scrutinized the multimodal aspects, including visual analysis and the use of emojis and symbols. Beyond the individual components, this study also delved into the construction of meaning and engagement within these memes. The researchers explored how these memes are used to express emotions like frustration, facilitate community building, or deliver educational content in a playful manner. This holistic approach allowed them to understand

the complex interplay of language and visual elements in shaping online educational discourse, while maintaining a commitment to ethical research practices.

Data Analysis

To analyze data using the research design, the primary approach here was Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), enriched by semiotic and thematic analysis to interpret both textual and visual elements. Semiotic analysis is the study of signs and symbols, and their use or interpretation, examining how meaning is created and conveyed through various systems of communication, including language, images, and other cultural artifacts. Multimodal Discourse Analysis is used to examine the ways in which each meme jointly produces meaning through images-text-layout-symbols. This includes exploring how visual and textual elements co-construct messages that engage audiences or how messages are shaped based on shared educational experiences. The analysis, thus, also utilized digital sociolinguistics to seek out further implications about use of language as memes bring together disparate groups of users in their various online interactions and work to build a community around educational discourse.

The study was also guided by Michael Halliday's (1978, 1992) Systemic-Functional Linguistics (SFL), which describes language both as a social semiotic system, and also as a resource for making linguistic choices that serve three metafunctions: the ideational (representing experience), the interpersonal (enacting social relationships), and the textual (organizing the message). Thematic analysis, a qualitative research technique that methodically finds, examines, and interprets recurrent patterns or "themes" within qualitative data, was also used in this study. The investigation examined the verbal and visual elements of the chosen memes using the six-phase framework put forward by Braun and Clarke (2006). The procedure entailed getting to know the data, methodically coding the most important aspects, coming up with preliminary themes, checking and honing these themes for coherence, and then analyzing them to create insightful conclusions. The data revealed several themes, such as comedic techniques, depictions of student-teacher relationships, and critical analysis of the educational system. This approach made it possible to conduct a methodical and sophisticated investigation of the ways in which multimodal components convey sociolinguistic meanings and educational experiences.

Ethical Standards

This study upholds ethical research standards by addressing issues of consent, privacy, and intellectual property when analyzing Instagram memes.

Researchers used two well-known frameworks—Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics and Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar—to address the ethical gap on systematic examination of memes. By highlighting the fact that communication, whether verbal or visual, is essentially molded by social context and fulfills vital social tasks, Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar and Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics both have a sociolinguistic basis. With a focus on ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions, Halliday's work explores how language choices create meaning in social contexts. Kress and van Leeuwen also apply this viewpoint to visual communication, claiming that compositional, interactive, and representational aspects of visual elements also communicate social meanings. The study selected memes based on criteria such as educational relevance, viral circulation, and their reflection of sociolinguistic patterns in educational settings. The five chosen memes—Oppenheimer, Squid Game, Drakeposting, Success Kid, and Crying Monkey—effectively captured student life, learning challenges, social inequalities, and educational experiences in an engaging manner. These memes contributed to conversations about motivation, achievement, and failure in education, offering rich sociolinguistic, cultural, emotional, and educational representations, making them ideal for detailed multimodal analysis.

Since the study focused on publicly available educational memes, no direct consent from meme creators was required. According to the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2), research that relies exclusively on publicly available information may be exempt from REB (Research Ethics Board) review if the information is in the public domain and the individuals to whom the information refers have no reasonable expectation of privacy. However, the interpretation of what constitutes a "reasonable expectation of privacy" can be complex in the context of social media platforms. (https://ethics.gc.ca/eng/reb-

cer_social-sociaux.html?utm_source). The University of Pennsylvania's Institutional Review Board (IRB) emphasizes that even when data is publicly accessible, ethical considerations remain paramount. Researchers are advised to consult guidelines, such as those provided by the Association of Internet Researchers, to ensure the ethical use of publicly available data, especially when dealing with user-generated content. This includes considerations around obtaining permission and protecting content creators, particularly when using photographs, videos, and other image-based content (https://irb.upenn.edu/homepage/social-behavioral-homepage/guidance/types-of-social-behavioral-research/use-of-social-media-as-a-research-activity/?utm_source). Furthermore, the Belmont Report, a foundational document in research ethics, outlines principles such as respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, which have specific implications for participant recruitment, informed consent, and the assessment of risks and benefits in research. These principles underscore the importance of considering the ethical dimensions of using publicly available social media content in research (https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7183769/?utm_source). Ethical guidelines were followed to ensure that user-generated content is handled responsibly, particularly by avoiding direct attribution to specific individuals unless they are verified public figures or institutions. If necessary, meme samples were anonymized or aggregated to prevent the identification of private accounts. In summary, while the use of publicly available educational memes on Instagram may not always require direct consent from the creators, it was essential for researchers to carefully evaluate the context, considered the expectations of privacy, and adhered to ethical guidelines to ensure the responsible use of such content in their studies.

Using copyrighted meme templates, this study operated under the Fair Use Doctrine, which allows limited use of copyrighted materials for purposes such as research, commentary, and education. The analysis focused on linguistic and multimodal aspects rather than commercial reproduction, ensuring compliance with international intellectual property laws such as the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works. This treaty, adopted by over 180 countries, provides guidelines for the protection and fair use of copyrighted works, allowing for exceptions in research and educational contexts. Additionally, memes included in the study were cited according to fair use principles, with due acknowledgment of their sources when applicable.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The first category of the selected memes is the Oppenheimer memes. It is important to note that the three variants (Figures 1a, 1b and 1c) analyzed in this study are originally video memes. However, for the purposes of description and analysis, they have been represented here in the form of static screenshots.

Figure 1. Oppenheimer Memes

a. Me thinking in class

b. When you finally came up with a solution for a problem after hours of trying
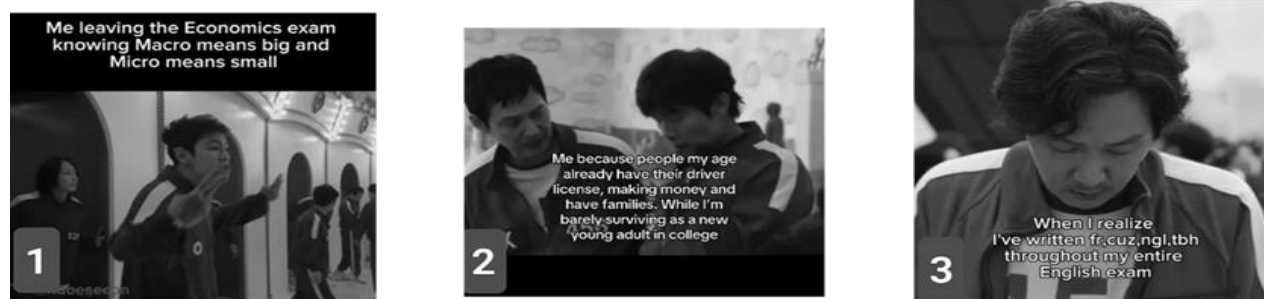
c. "bro college end this year"

The Instagram Oppenheimer memes use both language (like captions, slang, or humor) and visuals (like images, emojis, or layout) to share ideas and connect with people online. It looks at how these elements work together to make memes funny, relatable, or powerful in digital conversations. In the Oppenheimer meme, 3 variants that are related to educational concepts were analyzed using Multimodal Discourse Analysis. The actor/s in the meme are either expressionless or show so much joy. The multimodal elements convey layered meanings that reflect both external interactions and internal emotional states. It also used metaphoric representation like cosmic explosions or dramatic lighting symbolize emotions or mental states such as chaos or inspiration. The interactive meaning helps establish the viewer's role—whether as a passive observer or an emotionally engaged participant—in the discourse. Most of the time, Oppenheimer's face is in the center of the frame, creating information value by drawing immediate attention and emphasizing importance.

There are times when there is an alternating frame on Oppenheimer and other scenes, which signal shifts in thought or emotion. Multimodal discourse analysis of the Oppenheimer memes reveals that humor is constructed through the interaction of various modes. Specifically, the interplay between textual elements, such as captions, and visual elements, including the character's facial expressions and movements, is crucial in generating comedic effects. For instance, the juxtaposition of serious facial expressions with humorous captions creates a layer of comedy. Furthermore, visual components like character movements and vectors, when combined with text, effectively represent relatable student struggles and amplify the humor. The use of varied actors' emotions across frames, in conjunction with text, also contributes to the overall comedic impact of the memes.

In the Oppenheimer meme of 3 variants, it is evident that the memes are particularly for those who are in the share cultural context of the education community. The narrative style targets those who have the same experience and story. Example of the meme "me thinking in class" illustrates the power dynamics between students and teachers, where the student must maintain the gaze toward the professor. The meme shows that the student is in the state of disassociating or mind is drifting somewhere. It is a shared culture context wherein we must listen to the professor's lecture during class discussion. In contrast, the meme that has finally solved a problem, it shows empowerment inside the classroom. It illustrates the language as empowerment" or language and identity in classroom discourse. The last meme "Bro college end this year" addresses the systemic power wielded by educational institutions over students' lives and the students' yearning for individual agency within that system.

The second category of the selected memes is the Squid Game memes. It is important to note that the three variants (Figures 2a, 2b and 2c) analyzed in this study are originally video memes. However, for the purposes of description and analysis, they have been represented here in the form of static screenshots.

Figure 2. Squid Game memes

a. Me leaving the Economics exam knowing Macro means big realized I've written and Micro means small

b. Me because people my age already having their driver license, my entire English exam making money, and have families.

c. When I

The three variations of the Squid Game memes use multimodal features and linguistic strategies to create meaning and encourage participation in online conversations by fusing textual language, visual symbolism, and

emotive design elements that speak to the audience's common experiences, particularly among young people and students. These memes instantly engage viewers by using

conversational, informal, and culturally appropriate vocabulary. Digital language codes indicate group identity and common hardships, as exemplified by phrases like "fr," "cuz," "ngl," and "tbh" in Meme 3, or phrases expressing sarcastic self-awareness in Meme 2 ("while I'm barely surviving"). The three variants used a combination of images, body language, gaze, movement vectors, and facial expressions to build narrative, emotional, and social meaning.

The memes make people laugh by combining verbal humor—which frequently depicts common student struggles like pressure, exams, and feeling behind in life—with visual irony, such as exaggerated actions or blank faces. Emotional body language and facial emotions have a psychological impact, particularly when combined with hilarious or vulnerable material. Pop culture figures (like those from Squid Game and Marvel) are used to appeal to shared media literacy, which enables viewers to easily comprehend meanings and feel "in" on the joke.

The memes on Instagram reveal key sociolinguistic patterns that reflect students shared cultural knowledge and resistance to academic norms. Through humor, these memes blend pop culture references like *Squid Game* with school-related themes, creating a relatable and empowering discourse for students. They subvert formal academic language by simplifying complex concepts and using informal digital slang like "fr" and "ngl," highlighting the tension between institutional language expectations and everyday student communication. Visual and linguistic cues in the memes challenge traditional power dynamics in education, promoting collective empowerment and a sense of belonging among peers. Overall, these memes act as a multimodal form of discourse that reshapes authority and promotes student voice through culturally resonant, informal expression.

The third classification of the chosen memes are the Drakeposting memes. These are from a popular meme format featuring Canadian rapper Drake, where two engaging images show a visual preference to one concept over another. Though still in its earliest stage, this form of visual meme works dynamically through both formation of the cast and usage of lean and fat captions that combine verbal and visual humor to comment on social, academic, and online issues.
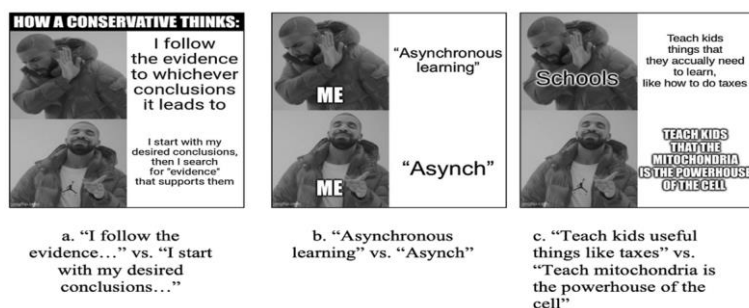

Figure 3. Drakeposting Memes

The Drake posting memes share the same template: In the top, Drake frowns and pushes away something the internet wants to reject; in the bottom, he smiles and says hot damn yes to what we want to accept. This is dualism in visible form, a physical manifestation of a dialectic of two concepts, choices or beliefs. Within the memes analysed, all variants critique or comment on student experience or institutionalized education.

Using Multimodal Discourse Analysis, it is found that meaning in face-to-face talks is "constructed through the synergy between facial-expressions, posture and the elements of the text". Drake's unchanging bodily posture offers narrative clarity: His body and his gestures function as visual vectors that demonstrate rejection and acceptance. And these vectors are not just expressive; they are narrative, a trajectory from lesser choice to greater.

For instance, in Figure 1a, the meme lampoons confirmation bias in public discussion. Disapproval of "I follow the evidence" and approval of "I start with my desired conclusions" satirize the forsaking of critical thinking. In Figure 1b, Drake's use of the term "Asynch" instead of the complete term "Asynchronous learning" is

illustrative of linguistic economy and digital culture. (It is a parody of formal academic language and how even online learners employ it.) Finally, in Figure 1c, the meme contrasts 'common everyday life tasks' with rote learning (e.g.., "Taxes", with "Mitochondria is the powerhouse"), suggesting that the curriculum doesn't focus on life-long learning and the future.

These memes represent a cultural storyline that resonates with many students. They depend on common visual grammar — a set, almost, of facial jazz hands and direction of gaze — to make us laugh and criticise. The semiotic operations are performed between image and text: Drake becomes an icon of the subjective imprimatur, a cultural type whose behavior mediates interpretation for the spectator.

The memes are in the context of a communal education and social experience. For example, Meme 1 is aimed ideologically at political and epistemological reasoning. Meme 2 addresses the way in which online learners reduce academic language, manifesting freedom as opposed to mandated formality. Meme 3 The meme attacks the schools for the fact that they value "useless scientific facts" more than practical knowledge. In all three, institutional power is implicitly criticized, and the student's voice is heard through irony and satire.

The interactive meaning comes through gaze, distance, and attitude. Drake never makes eye contact with the viewer. Instead he glances off with smug or challenging complicity, drawing the viewer in to share his judgment. This sideways glance creates a bond between the meme and the viewer in which mutual knowledge and in-jokes are the common currency. Medium close-ups position the viewer at speaking distance — close, but not intimate — evoking the casualness of meme culture. In terms of composition, the structure of these memes use binary framing such as top v. bottom or left v. right. This interplay of subdivisions creates visual rhythm and significance. The two opposite gestures are marked by their placement, yellow background and capital letters. And these design decisions lead readers through a story of rejection to acceptance–one that frequently unlocks profound sentiment tucked beneath laughter.

These memes rely on multimodal interaction between, text, image and sounds. Text-based captions provide dramatic juxtaposition of academic formality and trendy student slang, or of reasoned analysis and ideological dogma. And at the same time, visual modes — Drake's frown and hand in frame one vs. his approving smile and gesture in frame two — make these contrasts seem even louder. It's in this dance that satire best derives.

In context, these memes are responses to collective aggravation with education. They emphasize students speaking out against antiquated curricula, academic jargon and institutional norms. Meme 1: the caricature symbolizes epistemological struggle; Meme 2 brings attention to both generational language and the autochthonous element; Meme 3 questions education primacies and the lack of Life Skills as part of the essential framework. Together, they represent not just jokes but semiotic resistance — students deploying jokes as a way to push back against systems they don't believe are working.

In conclusion, Drakeposting memes are more than just a passing trend of humor. They function as visual arguments, articulated through layers of representation, interaction, and composition.

The fourth group of the chosen memes is Success Kid memes. These are well-circulated photoshopped memes and all featuring a still photo of a young, fist-clenched, smug and smiling child. This is a meme format that is not interested in chronology, but in symbolic stasis. Yet, despite the single-frame format, each Success Kid meme is a visual bite-size hap instance: they transform mundane real-world contexts into micro triumphs by harnessing the performative affordances of multimodality.

Figure 4. Success Kid Memes

a. "Hits wrong answer on quiz / Turns out to be right"

b. "It's been a long day / Let's pack in sleep… / Good night!"

c. "You can get ON the airplane… / I'm getting IN the airplane."

The design of the Success Kid memes enables a combination of the visual lean simplicity with the text-heavy critique and comedy to present with very little visual at all. Applying Multimodal Discourse Analysis, these memes can be seen to be reactional narratives processes with emotion as the key process, rather than movement, as action is at least through expression rather than through involving a physical response. As opposed to multi-paneled narrative meme forms, these are based on conceptual content such as symbolism for triumph, rationale, or emotional completion.

In the first meme, the clenched fist and smirk reflect the surprise success of answering a quiz question right by accident. It's a sly indictment of academic appraisals that can pay more for luck than learning. In the second, the identical image instead flips the script on emotional depletion, from academic victory to the quiet triumph of opting for sleep over all else, which would speak to students and workers treading the territory of burnout culture. The meme-third incorporates intellectual pride in speech, comparing street speech to polished speech, and cues the smug expression and satisfaction. The authority figure who acts more in the capacity of a gate-keeper and the principal mode of teaching is through the drill method.

The comedy of memes (of "Success Kid" in particular) stems from the juxtaposition of visual-non-verbal gestures (fist, face) and verbal punch lines that usually include an element of irony, miscalculation, or sarcasm. The figure of the raised/ clench fist is a powerful symbol and flexible enough to signify different kinds of victories—academic victories, emotional victories, intellectual victories. This malleability contributes to the meme's resonance, rendering it a repeat semiotic abbreviation for small, covert personal victories.

These memes are meant for people entrenched in youth digital culture, especially anyone still in school or early in their career who encounters an obstacle in their daily life and wants some light validation. And the relatability is there in the shared contexts: quizzes, weariness, online language debates — all translated into moments of triumph.

Interactive meaning is implicit in the Success Kid meme, where it involves tangential assuming of positions. (The child refuses eye contact with the viewer; the downward gaze and assertive fist serve to ally, not engage, empathy.) Viewers find themselves in the pose —and project their silent victories onto the expression. This generates a kind of emotional intimacy where the meme isn't speaking to the audience, but on their behalf.

The compositional meaning is realized by means of a strong central framing. The meme features a cool colored radial burst background, with the child's face and fist being the first thing to grab attention. Text usually goes on the top and bottom — framing the idea in a meme-standard rhythm of setup → punchline. This dialectic construction streamlines significance and supports cognitive rhythm — shepherding the viewer from recognition to emotional payoff.

They swiftly transition between modes of interaction in these memes. The text gets the cognitive work — the context, the twist; the visual, the emotional tone. In Meme 1, the irony is coming from inside the quiz logic; in Meme 2, wellness culture is flipped into a win; in Meme 3, linguistic specificity amounts to intellectual pride. The static visual — Success Kid standing eternal and unchanged — serves as an empty, but impactful, vehicle into which these varying textual inscriptions are poured.

In context, these memes express the micro-resistance of digital youth culture. Meme 1 playfully institutionalized rigid pedagogy as a part of the problem. In Meme 2, productivity culture is twisted on its head, as sleep is recast as a form of self-care and strength. Meme 3 disdains linguistic accommodation by declaring its own right to express oneself. In doing so, the memes generate a sense of personal agency and promote cultural critique, cotising a toddler's triumph stance to call into question deeper systemic expectations.

Combined, those results serve as visual shorthand for scenes of everyday triumph—be that through trickery, or tactics, or just giving up. These are the instruments of empowerment in meme culture: quietly subversive, emotionally grounded, and collectively celebrated.

The fifth category of the selected memes from Instagram is the crying monkey memes. Similarly, with Oppenheimer memes, these three variants (Figures 5a, 5b, and 5c) are from video memes. The following memes are presented as static screenshots.

Figure 5. "Crying Monkey" Memes

a. When you see
"revise and resubmit"
but take it personally.

b. Realizing that my
dissertation is
only thing delaying
my graduation.

c. That crushing moment
when all your late nights
and hard work still aren't
enough for smooth thesis defense

The crying monkey memes depict visual humor and academic pain that make these memes funny and relatable. Furthermore, the natural colors used reflect a burst of emotion which implies distress and disappointment that can be compared with the emotions of students who are struggling to finish their thesis/dissertation before graduation.

Utilizing the Multimodal Discourse Analysis, the monkey's expressions such as glassy; wide-open eyes; and tight lips hinted defeat, frustration, and sadness. Consequently, the visual vector of each variant depicts academic struggles students undergo with their thesis/dissertation writing process. Certainly, Figure 5a, expresses a heart wrenching expression that implies emotional burden of academic feedback such as "revise and resubmit"; while figure 5b, signifies heavy self-awareness on academic procrastination that intensifies conflict between expectations (graduating) and personal barriers (unfinished dissertation); then figure 5c, presents the hard reality that sometimes one's best efforts aren't enough.

The three variants of meme use visual empathy and cultural familiarity that is shown on the monkey's expressive face that creates a shared emotional space for those who struggle on academics. The crying monkey memes have several linguistic strategies that enhance humor and emotional impact to the viewer. Those are: relatability on shared experience; emotive language; figurative language (Hyperbole, exaggeration, irony, and sarcasm); use of POV (Point of view); uses of concise and direct language; use of emoji; and visual reinforcement.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) Analysis

Utilizing the Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) or Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) of Michael Halliday, the researchers examined how the five memes and their three variants communicate meaning by analyzing language. His framework allowed researchers to understand how memes function not only as entertainment, but also as tools for expressing opinions, shaping identity, and influencing audience perception in specific cultural or social contexts.

Instagram memes construct meaning and foster engagement through a blend of linguistic strategies and multimodal features that work together to create humor, relatability (e.g., humor, relatability, critique). Representationally, the meme depicts layered meanings (briefly describe the scene or scenario), using narrative processes such as gaze, gesture, body movement (e.g., gaze, motion, action) to reflect external interactions, internal emotional states (e.g., emotions, social dynamics). Conceptual elements like objects, characters, symbolic objects (e.g., objects, symbols, emojis) function to symbolize social, cultural frameworks, classroom, accomplishment in life, reflecting the lighter side of life (e.g., feelings, cultural ideas). Interactive meaning is established through direct gaze, indirect gaze (e.g., direct/indirect gaze), which creates a sense of emotional and relational involvement, engagement (e.g., intimacy, detachment), while the social distance, such as low and mid

shots camera angles (e.g., close-up, medium shot), contributes to disconnection or introspection (viewer's emotional proximity or formality).

The point of view, shown through a close-up (e.g., high, low, eye-level) angle, conveys power dynamics by pulling viewers into the emotional state of the character and prompting empathetic reactions, evoke an emotional reaction and provide a personal connection. Compositionally, the meme emphasizes meaning by placing key elements center (e.g., center, left/right), using salience through repetition and visual contrast (e.g., color, font, size) to draw attention. Framing techniques like frames are absent (e.g., borders, split panels) help to _process meaning, guiding their focus and interpretation through visual hierarchy and spatial organization (e.g., contrast or connect ideas/scenarios). Multimodal interaction is evident in how the text enhances (e.g., enhances, contradicts, explains) the visual content, creating effects such as humor, (e.g., irony, exaggeration, humor).

Textual elements include captions (e.g., captions, slang, hashtags), while visual elements like character's facial expressions and movements (e.g., gestures, expressions, props) work to _ the overall comedic impact of the memes (e.g., reinforce/subvert the text, add emotion). Finally, in terms of contextual analysis, the meme draws on shared cultural references to the education community. (e.g., popular culture, internet trends, societal norms), and it addresses power dynamics by subversion, negotiation of power of reinforcing teacher's expected authority, gender roles, authority, social expectations. School memes on Instagram reflect distinct sociolinguistic patterns through their combined use of language and visuals to communicate academic content in relatable, humorous, or critical ways.

Linguistically, these memes often use informal register mal register, slang to appeal to the education community, signaling group identity and shared experience. The captions or overlaid text typically feature humor which contributes to an accessible and conversational tone, even when addressing complex topics like grammar rules, historical facts, scientific theories. Visually, educational memes employ common formats such as pop culture references that mirror the communicative norms of online youth culture. These visuals are often paired with textual content that highlights classroom struggles, reinforcing group solidarity and shared cultural references. The memes may also demonstrate code-switching or language mixing, especially in multilingual contexts, to reflect the everyday linguistic realities of their audience and to create humor or emphasis.

Furthermore, these memes subtly negotiate power dynamics between students and teachers using language to either parody, resist, or reinforce institutional discourse. Altogether, the linguistic choices and visual design of educational memes showcase sociolinguistic patterns that emphasize community belonging, humor as coping, and the blending of formal knowledge with informal digital communication practices.

In Internet Memes as Multimodal Constructions by Barbara Dancygier and Lieven Vandelanotte, the study emphasizes the role of frame metonymy and the interplay between visual and textual elements in conveying meaning and humor. Umamah, Mudhiah & Septiyatik, Dyta & Fikri, Fikri (2023) study's findings demonstrated that comedy allusion and definition strategies are used to present social phenomena memes.

Furthermore, the purpose of social phenomenon memes is solidarity, which involves exchanging experiences, benefiting from shared experiences, making fun of without hurting others, and using humor to psychologically confront everyday issues and calm the psyche. Furthermore, social phenomena memes are designed to share social issues or behaviors that the majority of people encounter. Several scholarly articles that delve into how language and visuals are used to communicate academic content in relatable, humorous, or critical ways support the results. Memes are a way for readers to learn about people's actions. Additionally, memes may be a useful tool for improving communication skills and promoting digital literacy (Destira, Yosi & Hidayat, Didin & Alek, Alek & Sufyan, Agus, 2021).

Social media has a significant influence on how contemporary humor is developed, how society's ideals are reflected, and how intercultural communication is promoted. In the end, it is discovered that social media comedy is a dynamic, multifaceted phenomenon with important ramifications for community development, identity construction, and the negotiation of cultural norms in online environments (Ziyaiddinovna, 2025). Digital media platforms such as Instagram expand on traditional sociolinguistic spaces by showing how humor, informal

registers, and code-switching create new standards of identification and communication in communities that are centered on education.

Additionally, by fusing formal academic information with informal, youth-driven digital styles, educational memes demonstrate how multimodal discourse reflects changing language practices and produces new hybridized forms of communication. Memes also serve as informal teaching aids in classrooms, assisting educators in appreciating the benefits of humor and relatable communication techniques in boosting student interest and reinforcing academic ideas. Furthermore, by integrating multimodal and culturally relevant memes into educational settings, it may be possible to close the gap between students' digital lives and formal curriculum, simplifying difficult subjects and encouraging critical media literacy.

The implications for students emphasize that memes are a form of peer-to-peer learning and solidarity, enabling them to share academic struggles, use humor to cope with challenges, and create supportive online learning communities. Additionally, by creating and analyzing memes, students gain critical sociolinguistic skills, such as the ability to navigate informal language use, code-switching, and critical reflections on institutional and social power structures.

CONCLUSIONS

Instagram memes construct meaning and foster engagement in digital discourse by blending linguistic strategies—such as humor, informal register, and relatable tone—with multimodal features like expressive visuals, pop culture references, and layout design. These elements work together to generate humor, relatability, and critique, allowing viewers to emotionally and socially connect with the content.

The sociolinguistic patterns emerging in the language of the chosen school memes reveal how students use humor and satire to negotiate their identities and experiences within the educational system. These memes reflect a strong sense of peer solidarity, with in-group language that resonates with shared student struggles and frustrations. Through the use of informal, colloquial expressions and culturally relevant references, students construct a collective voice that both critiques and copes with academic pressures and institutional norms. The roles and relationships depicted—primarily between students and educational authorities—highlight a subtle resistance to hierarchical structures, often conveyed through irony, exaggeration, and digital vernacular. Ultimately, the language of these memes serves not only as a mode of entertainment but also as a form of social commentary, revealing underlying tensions and values in contemporary educational discourse.

Limitations and Suggestions

The results of the study shed some light on how Instagram memes use multimodal elements and linguistic methods to create meaning and encourage participation in online discourse. The linguistic and visual makeup of educational memes on Instagram, which use humor, informal language, and culturally appropriate imagery to reflect common experiences, group identities, and communication styles within educational groups, exhibits sociolinguistic tendencies. It is crucial to note that this study only examined five educational memes, each of which had three variations. Therefore, more extensive and broad-ranging research is recommended to capture a wider range of sociolinguistic patterns and deepen the understanding of meaning-making in digital educational discourse.

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