ISSN 0975-217X Vol. No. 30, Issue No. 2, April-June, 2026

# *Memes as Digital Folklore: A Structuralist-Semiotic Analysis*

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**Abstract**

*This study examines internet memes as an expression of digital folklore by applying a structuralist-semiotic framework to deconstruct them. This study investigates whether the various components of memes, such as structural framework, agents, signs, and subject treatment, are associated with the thematic meaning derived from the meme. Specifically, it examines how the structure of a meme contributes to the meaning formation in a digital environment. The findings reveal that no clear patterns or consistent relationships could be identified between their structural signifiers and the thematic meanings signified, thereby highlighting that memes demonstrate multimodal complexity and draw upon shared cultural signifiers to construct meaning.*

**Keywords:** Memes, Digital Folklore, Multimodality, Semiotics, Participatory Culture, Meaning Formation

## Introduction

In recent years, internet memes have become one of the most prominent forms of digital expression. Though often humorous and short-lived, they serve as compact units of meaning that both respond to, and are a reflection of, society. These seemingly simple memes are increasingly recognised as complex, multimodal artefacts that bring together text, images, and, occasionally, sound, along with cultural references, to construct layered and nuanced meanings (Holm, 2021). This study examines memes as a form of modern digital folklore through a structuralist-semiotic approach to understand how they communicate meaning.

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This study draws upon both consensus and conflict within the field of folkloristics. Earlier definitions of folklore highlighted the importance of orality and cultural continuity. This severely limited the scope of what folklore could be, leading many folklorists, including Richard Dorson (1972, as cited in Blank, 2009), to believe that their field was dying, further accelerated by technological advancements.

Dan Ben-Amos (1971) defined folklore as "artistic communication in small groups." His definition was a deliberate attempt to move away from folklore's association with tradition, and he was credited with championing the behavioural school in folkloristics. However, his emphasis on face-to-face communication created further confusion in the field, particularly in relation to digital folklore. There is clearly artistic communication happening on the internet, but it is neither face-to-face nor, often, confined to small groups. Increasingly, contemporary folklorists such as Trevor Blank (2009) and Simon Bronner (2009, 2016) have questioned the emphasis on face-to-face interaction between participants, which excludes ICT-driven folklore from being recognised as legitimate. They argue that the internet is not just a space for preserving already existing folklore, but a tool for creating entirely new folklore.

This study builds on Limor Shifman's (2014) argument that memes can be understood as the (post)modern equivalent of folklore. While there is a growing consensus that memes can be viewed as digital folklore, scholars remain divided on how best to approach their analysis. For instance, Holm (2021) argues against the linear, gene-like approach to meme evolution. Instead, he advocates for a rhizomatic framework, where memes develop through intricate, often unpredictable, interconnections rather than simple replication. This challenges earlier approaches rooted in Richard Dawkins' (1976, as cited in Shifman, 2014) notion of memes as "units of cultural transmission."

Wiggins and Bowers (2014) propose that memes should be recognised as a unique genre, shaped by both user engagement and the structural limitations of digital platforms. They introduce the concept of the "memescape," where human agency and digital norms influence the evolution of meme content.

Pordzik's (2017) study conceptualises memes as autopoietic systems, describing memes as self-sustaining entities that evade

fixed interpretation. Pordzik's work is especially relevant to this study, because it emphasises the interaction between visual and textual signifiers, and how they produce multi-layered meanings within socio-political contexts.

Despite the extensive, and yet, growing scholarly discourse on memes in the field of communications and folkloristics, notable gaps remain. While many studies focus on the function of memes as tools for humour, discourse, resistance, and identity formation, very few have attempted to systematically examine the internal structure of memes, and how that structure contributes to the thematic meaning or the subject matter addressed in the meme. Research by *Ugah* (2022) and *Calimbo* (2016) examines the political influence of memes in specific cultural contexts, but their approaches primarily focus on the themes and not the structure that can influence the thematic meaning.

By examining the relation between the various signifiers and the meaning signified, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how meaning is constructed and circulated within digital folk culture. However, the study also acknowledges that meme logic is not strictly governed by fixed structural patterns but is significantly shaped by affective resonance, cultural familiarity, and online participatory norms.

Although this study is more related to the communication aspect of the meme rather than folklore, it heavily borrows from the field of folkloristics, not only to identify patterns but also to identify the various components that make up the meme, including agents. For this purpose, the study appropriates the morphology of the folktale, as developed by Soviet folklorist Vladimir Propp (1968), who, after analysing around 100 Russian fairy tales to find recurring narrative structures, identified 31 narrative functions, which are actions or events that move the plot forward. He also identified seven agents (hero, villain, donor, helper, dispatcher, false hero, and princess) based on the actions they perform in the folktale. The agents are more relevant to the study than the 31 narrative functions, but the functions still played an important role in correctly labeling the agents.

**Objectives:**

1. To identify the inter-structural framework (Static or dynamic) and intra-structural framework (Static memes: verbal-visual ratio,

colour psychology; and dynamic memes: narrative progression, colour psychology, choice of audio) of memes.

2. To identify the agents present in the memes (Hero, princess, etc.), based on the actions performed by them. (Absentation, interdiction, violation of interdiction, etc.)
3. To document the value addition by various signs (Verbal: text, audio; and non-verbal: kinesics, proxemics, paralanguage) used in the memes.
4. To examine what is being signified. (Subject category: personal, socio-cultural, intellectual, political)
5. To study the subject treatment of the memes. (Irony & satire, surprise, slapstick, surreal)
6. To analyse the association between the structural framework, agents, signs and subject treatment with subject category.

**Methodology:** The sampling unit for this study was the individual meme. After conducting a pilot study, a purposive sample of 30 memes was deemed appropriate, given that memes have an infinite population. The sample memes were collected from Instagram, a popular social media platform widely used for sharing photographs, videos, and memes. Instagram's large user base and visual-centric content made it an ideal platform for accessing a wide variety of memes across different categories. Each individual meme was categorised on the basis of its inter-structural framework (static and dynamic), intra-structural framework (verbal-visual ratio, colour psychology, etc.), agents (hero, villain, etc.), signs (verbal and non-verbal), subject treatments (satire, slapstick, etc.), and subject categories (personal, socio-cultural, intellectual, political). The data is presented in the form of a cross-tabulation to show the relationships between memes' structural framework, signs, agents, and subject treatments with subject categories.

## Data Presentation and Analysis

### 1. Structural Framework

**a. Inter-structural Framework:** For the purposes of this study, only the visual properties determined whether a meme was considered static or dynamic, not the audio. Static memes are those that feature visuals, text, or both, without any movement or animation.

In other words, the content appears to remain still throughout its display. Dynamic memes, on the other hand, include any meme where the visual or textual elements exhibit movement or animation.

**Intra-structural Framework**

**b. Verbal-Visual Ratio:** Of the 15 static memes analysed, the visual element dominated the verbal element in nine instances, while the verbal element dominated in only two. There were two cases where the meme consisted solely of verbal elements, and one instance with the presence of only visual elements. Only one meme in the selected sample featured an even verbal-visual ratio.

**c. Colour Psychology:** This section of the study examines the value addition of colours to the meaning of a meme. Memes in which the use of colour significantly contributed to their meaning were categorised as significant, whereas memes in which the presence or absence of colour did not contribute to, or enhance the meaning, were categorised as insignificant. Of the 30 memes that were selected, colour significantly contributed to the meaning of the content in only five instances, three among static memes, and two among dynamic. In all instances, however, colour functioned either as the source of the humour or as the means through which it was delivered.

**d. Narrative Progression:** Of the 15 dynamic memes analysed, 12 had a linear narrative. These memes had a chronological progression with clear and discernible beginning and ending, without the use of flashbacks or flash-forwards, or a looping video. Two memes employed a circular narrative structure, where either the visual elements from the beginning and end of the video form a loop that conveys continuity. Only one meme employed a non-linear narrative.

**e. Choice of Audio:** For the purposes of this study, only the audio accompanying dynamic memes was analysed, as dynamic memes typically include sound as part of their content. While some static memes may also include audio, for example, the Instagram feature that allows users to add music to their posts, such audio was not taken into account during the classification process.

It is important to reiterate that for the purpose of this study, the presence of audio alone does not determine whether a meme is dynamic. In other words, audio by itself is neither necessary nor sufficient to classify a meme as either static or dynamic.

Among the 15 dynamic memes that were analysed in the sample, six featured music, six memes included spoken dialogue or similar vocal elements, one meme contained sound effects, and two memes featured a combination of music, sound effects, and/or speech.

**2. Subject Category**

The subject category of a meme has to do with what is being signified in the meme. It will be prudent for the researcher to mention that the subject category of the meme may not always match the context in which the root stimulus emerged.

Out of the selected sample, eleven memes were categorised as socio-cultural, having indicators such as references to cultural sources, social constructs, and norms, among others. Ten memes were categorised as personal, referencing individual experiences, habits, emotions, and struggles, among others. Five memes contained references to political issues, policies, or office bearers, and were subsequently categorised as political. Four memes were categorised as intellectual, with indicators such as references to scientific theories, concepts, or ideas.

***Table 1: Structural framework of memes vis-à-vis subject category.***

**a. Inter-structural Framework**

| | **Intellectual** | **Personal** | **Socio-Cultural** | **Political** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Static | 1 | 6 | 6 | 2 |
| Dynamic | 3 | 4 | 5 | 3 |
| **b. Layout** | | | | |
| Visual Only | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Visual Dominant | 0 | 5 | 4 | 1 |
| Even | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Verbal Dominant | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Verbal Only | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| **c. Colour Psychology** | | | | |
| Significant | 2 | 1 | 2 | 0 |
| Insignificant | 2 | 9 | 9 | 5 |

| **d. Narrative Progression** | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Linear | 3 | 4 | 2 | 3 |
| Non-Linear | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Circular | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| **e. Choice of Audio** | | | | |
| Music | 1 | 1 | 4 | 0 |
| Speech | 1 | 3 | 0 | 2 |
| Sound Effects | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Combination | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |

No significant association between the structural framework of memes and their subject categories could be identified. The data appears to be evenly distributed throughout. In a few instances, a pattern does seem to be emerging, which can be attributed to the overrepresentation of a particular subject category or a dominant element within the structural framework. As such, these irregularities do not indicate a meaningful relationship between the structural components of the memes and what they signify.

### 3. Agents and Actions

Of the 30 memes analysed, the study identified a total of 50 agents fulfilling the seven narrative roles identified by Propp. Among these, 25 agents were categorised as heroes, eight as villains, and six as false heroes. Three subjects were identified as donors, dispatchers, and princesses respectively, while only one was categorised as a helper.

***Table 2: Agents vis-à-vis subject category.***

| | **Intellectual** | **Personal** | **Socio-Cultural** | **Political** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hero | 4 | 10 | 9 | 3 |
| Villain | 1 | 2 | 3 | 2 |
| False Hero | 0 | 0 | 4 | 2 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Donor | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Princess | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| Dispatcher | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 |
| Helper | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |

There does not appear to be a significant association between the seven agents and the four subject categories identified in the study. The presence of specific agents within a meme does not seem to vary in a meaningful way across these categories. The distribution of agents appears to be independent of the subject category. This suggests that the subjects present or addressed are not strongly influenced by the themes signified in the memes.

**4. Signs**

A sign can be categorised as either verbal or non-verbal. Verbal signs include text and audio, whereas non-verbal signs encompass kinesics, proxemics, and paralanguage. A meme may contain all of these signs, but only those in which the signs significantly contributed to conveying or enhancing the message were taken into consideration.

**Verbal Signs**

a. Text: Out of the sample of 30 memes, the textual elements present within the meme played a significant role in conveying or enhancing the meaning in 27 instances.

b. Audio: There were only eight instances where audio significantly contributed to the overall meaning. However, since 15 of those 30 memes were static and did not contain audio, the actual proportion of dynamic memes where audio conveyed or enhanced meaning is eight out of 15, just over half.

**Non-Verbal Signs**

c. **Kinesics:** There were 19 instances where the subject's movements, gestures, facial expressions, or postures significantly contributed to the meaning derived from the meme.

d. **Proxemics:** Of the selected sample, there were only four memes where proxemics significantly contributed to or enhanced the meaning derived from the meme.

e. **Paralinguistics:** Signs such as pitch, tone, and volume contributed to or significantly enhanced the meaning of the memes in four instances out of the total sample of 30. However, since only dynamic memes included audio, the actual proportion was four out of 15 dynamic memes.

***Table 3: Signs vis-à-vis subject category***

| | Intellectual | Personal | Socio-Cultural | Political |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **a. Text** | | | | |
| Yes | 4 | 10 | 10 | 3 |
| No | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| **b. Audio** | | | | |
| Yes | 1 | 3 | 1 | 3 |
| No | 3 | 7 | 10 | 2 |
| **c. Kinesics** | | | | |
| Yes | 3 | 4 | 4 | 2 |
| No | 1 | 6 | 7 | 3 |
| **d. Proxemics** | | | | |
| Yes | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| No | 3 | 9 | 10 | 5 |
| **e. Paralinguistics** | | | | |
| Yes | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| No | 4 | 7 | 11 | 5 |

The data did not demonstrate any notable association between the signs used in the meme and the four subject categories.

**5. Subject Treatment**

As the name suggests, it refers to the treatment the meme receives that contributes to the meaning derived from the same. In other words, the devices used in the meme that contributes to its

humour. The study identified five content categories that the selected sample fit within. In case there were multiple subject treatments that could be identified within one meme, the most dominant one with the presence of the most indicators was considered.

Irony and Satire remained among the largest content categories, with nine memes being categorised under this subject treatment. Memes that contained indicators such as sarcasm, contradiction, and hyperbole, were used to categorise a meme under this category.

The other largest subject treatment, also appearing in nine memes, was slapstick. Indicators such as physical actions, visual gags, or exaggerated facial expressions made by subjects or objects were used to categorise a meme under this content category.

Four memes were categorised under linguistic humour. Indicators for this category included wordplay such as puns, deliberate grammatical errors, intentional misspellings, and rhythmic humour. Four memes were classified under surprise because they relied on the subversion of expectations or deliberate misdirection to create humour. Four memes were classified as surreal. The memes in this content category rely less on traditional joke structures and more on the absurdity of the meme's content itself, which often leads to a humorous reaction precisely because it makes little or no logical sense.

***Table 4: Subject treatment vis-à-vis subject category.***

| | **Intellectual** | **Personal** | **Socio-Cultural** | **Political** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Irony and Satire | 1 | 5 | 2 | 1 |
| Slapstick | 2 | 2 | 3 | 2 |
| Surprise | 0 | 1 | 3 | 0 |
| Linguistic | 0 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| Surreal | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |

No meaningful association between the subject categories and their treatment was identified. Variations in one do not influence

variations in the other, and any differences we see are likely just due to coincidence or random chance.

**Discussion**

The study aimed to identify any association between the various signifiers of the memes and the meaning signified. However, the data failed to produce significant patterns of association. The absence of associations suggests that the relationship between the structure of the meme and subject category may be more nuanced than initially assumed.

The failure to find any significant association itself provides an insight into the chaotic, participatory, and fluid nature of memes as a form of digital folklore. It is precisely the absence of clear structural patterns that gives memes their unique power, which is the ability to resist rigid classification. They thrive in ambiguity and mirror the complex, dynamic digital realities of both their creators and audiences.

Memes often follow familiar visual and narrative conventions, but work with a high degree of contextual remixing and social participation, and emerge spontaneously in response to events, circulating informally and adapting rapidly. (Blank 2009; Shifman, 2014) Thus, they mirror the dynamic and evolving nature of traditional folklore, but in a digital environment.

Structurally, both static and dynamic memes employ the use of different signifiers to create meaning. Static memes often rely more on visual dominance and textual cues to convey their message. In contrast, dynamic memes make better use of kinesics, sound, and narrative progression. Colour significantly contributed to the meaning of the meme in a minority of cases, but when it was, it was central to the meme's humour or message.

When applying Propp's taxonomy of seven agents and 31 actions, the research confirmed that memes tend to represent mini-narratives with well-known character archetypes, such as hero, villain, or princess. However, a reliable association with any particular subject category could not be established. It can be inferred that users who make memes tend to reuse narrative elements to suit a wide variety of themes, ranging from political discussions to personal stories.

The function of signs, both verbal and non-verbal, proved to be central to the meaning derived from the meme. At the same time, textual signs dominated in general, audio, kinesics and paralinguistics in dynamic memes contributed to the depth of the humour. Nevertheless, an association between the sign types and subject categories could not be established, which, again, highlights the meme's characteristics of adaptability and cultural remixability.

As far as subject treatment is concerned, memes employed irony, satire, slapstick, surrealism, linguistic play, and surprise almost evenly. It reinforces the fact that the meme logic is less structurally predictable, and instead, relies more on cultural resonance and emotions. The absence of association between subject category and treatment also shows how memes flatten or recontextualise the boundaries between traditionally separate types of discourse. For example, intellectual ideas can be presented through slapstick humour, and political discourse might be expressed using surreal or absurd visuals.

One of the key limitations of this study included the large number of variables that were analysed, which made it necessary to keep the sample size relatively small in order to meaningfully study each variable in depth. The limited sample size made it difficult to draw valid conclusions that can be generalised. Although Chi-square is commonly used to test associations between categorical variables, it was not conducted in this study due to the small sample size (n = 30) and the distribution of observations across multiple categories. Applying Chi-square under conditions of low expected counts can lead to inflated Type I or Type II errors, making any statistical inference invalid.

Given these constraints, the study instead focused on cross-tabulation and qualitative interpretation of distributions, which allowed for meaningful insight into the multimodal complexity of memes without overextending statistical claims. This approach is appropriate for an exploratory, small-sample study such as this, where identifying trends and descriptive associations is more suitable than formal inferential testing. For future research, reducing the number of variables and increasing the sample size would allow for a more focused analysis and the potential to detect stronger patterns and associations.

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