

Meme sharing in relationships: The role of humor styles and functions

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Abstract

To better understand the role of memes in close relationships, this study synthesizes work on humor use in relationships (Hall, 2017), idiomatic communication (Hopper, *et al.*, 1981) and memes as intergroup communication (Gal, 2019). Results from an online survey demonstrated that having a self-enhancing or self-defeating humor style was positively associated with meme usage in relationships, whereas having an affiliative humor style was negatively related to meme usage. Further, sending memes to fulfill the humor function of enjoyment was positively associated with relational satisfaction, whereas sending memes for the function of apology was negatively associated with relational satisfaction. Participants reported sharing memes most frequently in their closest relationships. Results demonstrate that the sharing of memes plays a meaningful role in many close relationships, and that the role of memes in relationships is partially a function of humor orientation of the individual and humor-related goals of the meme sharing.

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Introduction

The use of and understanding of Internet memes has evolved rapidly from mere “funny photos of cats on the Internet” (Miltner, 2014) to a tool for distilling and understanding war (Romano, 2022). Memes were originally proposed as a cultural replicator that spreads ideas in a gene-like fashion (Dawkins, 1976), and Internet memes are reproducible creative expressions that are shared, circulated, and transformed by users via the Internet (Shifman, 2013a). Internet memes are a piece of online culture that takes many possible forms, whether an image with caption, an animated image (*i.e.*, gif), or a text-based joke with multiple possible formats, or even a short video clip (*e.g.*, TikTok or Vine) that use replicable sounds or visual motifs. Memes are often creative expressions through which individuals communicate and express themselves. Far from simply trivial, humorous ephemera, memes can “reflect deep social and cultural structures” [1].

Though memes are more often examined from a political, cultural, or rhetorical lens, they are also interpersonal artifacts, often shared person-to-person before becoming accepted and circulated as broader cultural expressions (Shifman, 2013b). The present study contextualizes meme sharing via the lens of relational humor and idiomatic communication to investigate the predictors and outcomes of meme sharing in close relationships.

Meme sharing in relationships

Though researchers have just begun to examine memes using relational frameworks, scholars have often noted the interpersonal promise and functions of internet memes. For instance, Phillips and Milner (2017) examined memes as a form of folklore. Importantly, one of the defining characteristics of folklore is that its importance is embedded in the small cultural groups in which it's shared — often families and small groups of friends. In examining the humor function of memes, Miltner (2014) noted that memes (LOLcats, specifically) were often exchanged for the purpose of interpersonal communication with the goal of sharing emotional states and feelings with friends. In fact, both heavier and more casual users of the I Can Has Cheezburger community reported sharing memes most frequently with close friends and family members (Miltner, 2014).

More recently, Shandilya, *et al.* (2022) found that in new work teams, individuals frequently share non-text, visually based forms of communication, including gifs and memes. Further, the sharing of such content is usually undertaken with the goal of indicating humor and lightening a conversation (Shandilya, *et al.*, 2022). In examining the potential usefulness of memes in qualitative research, Iloh (2021) noted that effective qualitative studies necessitated a trusting, harmonious relationship between researcher and participant, and that the use of memes at the start of a project could be an effective strategy for building rapport and getting to know one another. Further, because of the specificity and nuance of the humor of memes, they could allow individuals to quickly get to know one another and gain insights into their personalities (Iloh, 2021).

In the most extensive, direct investigation of meme usage in relationships to date, Dominguez (2023) examined meme sharing and its association with relational outcomes via both dyadic and longitudinal methods. Results suggested an association between relational closeness and a sense of a shared reality between partners on their perception of the pertinence of meme sharing in their relationship. Further, individuals were most likely to report sharing memes with their closest relational partners (*i.e.* romantic partners and friends), and 27 percent of participants said they sometimes wanted to share memes with certain people but did not because they wanted to avoid potentially negative effects on their relationship.

Further, anecdotal evidence and coverage in the popular press affirms that memes are frequently used interpersonally — shared between friends, romantic partners, and family members to achieve multiple interpersonal goals (Dray, 2021; Munro, 2020; Stolar, 2022). As of 2019, memes were the second most-shared type of item amongst young (under 35) social media users, following only vacation photos in their frequency (Statista, 2019). Memes are not just shared in a broadcast-like fashion, however, but are frequently shared in interpersonal contexts. For instance, Munro (2020) noted that on Instagram meme pages, the comments section under posts were almost universally littered with thousands of username tags. These tags notified another user — often friends or romantic partners — of the meme. Stolar (2022) noted that most group texts and message exchange amongst college-aged students consisted almost exclusively of memes, making particular note of the importance of shared humor reflecting relational closeness.

Though research on memes in the context of close relationships is nascent, prior research on Internet memes provides some insight into how they are used in romantic relationships, families, and close friendships. Further, there is much work that has examined the use of humor and symbolic language in relationships that helps in framing an investigation into the use of memes in relationships.

Mediated and idiomatic communication

Romantic relationships and close friendships are increasingly maintained via technologies (McEwan, *et al.*, 2018), and research suggests that the extent to which individuals can seamlessly shift between communication modalities (*e.g.*, from face-to-face to mediated contexts) with their close relational partners is positively associated with the closeness and satisfaction of those relationships (Caughlin and Sharabi, 2013). Memes — which are often combinations of text, image, and video shared across contexts and platforms — are inherently multimodal objects (Milner, 2013). Other relational characteristics also affect technology use, including whether the relationship is long-distance (Merolla, 2010; Holtzman, *et al.*, 2021). Specifically, long-distance partners general use mediated communication to interact with their relational partners more frequently than geographically close partners (Merolla, 2010).

Further, the use of technology to keep relationships intact has given rise to adapted forms of language unique to the largely text-based, mediated environment. Text-based writing is interspersed with abbreviations, emoji, and other paralinguistic cues. These cues supplement for nonverbal cues that are often missing in text-based mediated communication (Walther, 1992). Similarly, it's likely that images such as memes can provide nuance and meaning that might go misinterpreted in text-only communication.

Long predating the study of Internet memes, research examined how relational partners develop idioms, phrases, and inside jokes that are unique to their closest relationships. Couples use idioms to signify affection as well as tease and humor each other. Language that is specific to a relationship can demarcate boundaries between couples and the outside world as well as strengthen the bond of a relationship. Moreover, the number and type of idioms used by a couple is positively associated with their love and commitment (Bell, *et al.*, 1987). In many ways, relationships function as “mini-cultures” in which cultural artifacts and shared in-jokes can take on outsized meaning that does not necessarily extrapolate to external relationships (Baxter, 1987).

The sharing of memes in relationships likely functions similarly to idioms. For instance, memes are typically examined across three dimensions — content, form, and stance (Shifman, 2013b). Content refers to the specific ideologies expressed within the meme; form refers to the visual and audible dimensions of a meme; the third is the stance of the meme. Stance refers to the ways that individual users position themselves in relation to the meme itself, as well as the communicative goals and function of the meme. In other words, how can individuals personally understand and relate to the content of the meme, and what are the goals of the meme sender and potential effect on the meme receiver (Shifman, 2013b)? Further, memes are intertextual, meaning they can be remixed, altered, and recirculated by specific communities to fit localized narratives, perspectives, and even the humor orientations of targeted audiences (Laineste and Voolaid, 2016). Such flexibility allows individuals to find and alter memes that they can send to specific audience members, including their romantic partners, friends, and family members. These memes then take on meaning that is relationship-specific, similar to idioms.

Memes are circulated and even often recreated within relationships to note specific relational norms and forms of humor that are meaningful to partners. Humor via meme usage has been explored largely in political contexts (*e.g.*, Pearce and Hajizada, 2014; Harlow, *et al.*, 2020). Gal (2019) investigated how the use of ironic humor on the Internet can demarcate social boundaries. Humor can be ambiguous and requires contextual understanding by both (or more) participants for the joke to successfully evoke laughter. Thus, the success of a joke signals that partners have a shared bond that enabled their understanding of the joke. Memes operate similarly, in that they are often layered with references and meanings that are inscrutable to outsiders and necessitate a historical engagement with the meme's content, form, and stance for true understanding. Sharing a meme that both parties will understand can indicate a deep bond and shared understanding, as well as who is an “insider” and “outsider” in the relationship. Often, this shared understanding revolves around a co-created sense of humor (Gal, 2019). Further, in one national survey of individuals who share memes, the most frequently reported reason for sharing memes was to make someone laugh or smile (YPulse, 2019). Thus, the use of humor in relationships may be an important indicator and outcome of meme sharing.

Humor in close relationships

Much research has explored the role of humor in relationships, including the association between humor style and functions and relational outcomes. Humor fulfills a number of roles in relationships, including signaling attraction and interest (Hall, 2017), the reduction of uncertainty (Graham, 1995), dissolution of conflict (Alberts, 1990), as a tool for relational maintenance (Canary, *et al.*, 1993), and as a form of play (Baxter, 1992). At its core, the use of humor in a relationship signals shared values and interests, similar to the use of idioms.

The effects of humor in relationships has been explored from both individual differences (*i.e.*, humor style as a personality trait) and behavioral (*i.e.*, functional use of humor in relationships) perspectives. Taking a personality approach, Martin, *et al.* (2003) developed a model that oriented humor along a two dimensions. The first dimension was self-other orientation — is humor used to enhance the self or one's relationships with others? The second dimension related to the primary function of the humor — is it relatively benign or potentially damaging and deleterious? By crossing these dimensions, Martin, *et al.* (2003) derived four humor styles. Self-enhancing humor was self-focused and benevolent. Aggressive humor was self-focused and aggressive. Affiliative humor was benign and used to enhance relationships. Self-defeating behavior was aggressive and used to enhance relationships at the expense of the self.

Humor styles have been investigated in some contexts relevant to this study. In a metaanalysis of 43 quantitative studies of relational satisfaction and humor, Hall (2017) found consistent support for a positive relationship between positive humor styles and relational satisfaction and a negative association between negative humor styles and relational satisfaction. An examination of mental health and Internet meme sharing found that those experiencing depressive symptoms differed in the extent to which they perceived the relatability of depressive memes. Specifically, depressive memes were viewed more favorably by those reporting a self-defeating humor style, perhaps because they perceived the meme as indicating there were others with a shared understanding of their experiences (Gardner, *et al.*, 2021).

The use of humor in relationships is associated with the quality and satisfaction of the relationship, as the function of humor in relational contexts emphasizes achieving relational and communicative goals (Hall, 2013). In general, research on humor in relationships tends to take a functional perspective. To better capture the specific uses of humor in relationships, Hall (2013) derived and validated five relationship-specific functions of humor: enjoyment, affection, conflict reduction, coping, and apology. Enjoyment is the use of humor to share happiness and positivity with a partner. Affection is the use of humor to, often idiomatically, strengthen relational bonding through showing love to their partner. Conflict reduction humor can be used to productively deal with disagreements in a relationship. Coping humor are messages used to cope with difficult circumstances in relationships. Finally, humor can be used to apologize to a partner (Hall, 2013).

In general, the use of all five humor functions are considered prosocial in that they were expected to positively influence relational satisfaction (Hall, 2013). Further, if memes are indeed similar to relational idioms, which demonstrate positive associations with relational outcomes (Bell, *et al.*, 1987), it is possible such associations persist in the use of memes in relational contexts. Thus, this study examines whether this expectation persists when considering the humor functions as expressed via memes.

Study goals

The first goal of the study is to compare frequency and importance of meme sharing across relationship types. Additionally, as outlined earlier, meme usage is often centered on the use of ironic humor that is used to emphasize social boundaries (Gal, 2019). Though meme usage in relational contexts has not been explored extensively, much work has examined the use of humor in relationships from both individual difference (*i.e.*, humor styles) and behavioral (*i.e.*, humor functions) perspectives. Thus, a second goal of this study is to understand how individual humor styles predicts meme sharing in relationships and how the functional use of memes predicts relational outcomes.

Specifically, the present study explores three research questions: How does meme sharing frequency and

importance differ between relationship types (*RQ1*)? Second, how does an individual's humor style relate to meme sharing in relationships (*RQ2*)? Third, how are the specific humor and communicative functions of meme sharing (*RQ3*) within relationships associated with relational satisfaction?

Method

The research was approved by the lead author's institutional review board (IRB) and all participants provided consent prior to completing the survey. Participants ($N = 270$) were recruited using the Amazon.com Mechanical Turk Web site (Mturk) which allows individuals to complete tasks for nominal fees. Some scholars have noted ethical and reliability issues around the use of Mturk (*e.g.*, Sheehan, 2018). To address these concerns, workers in this study were compensated at or above the national (U.S.) minimum wage. Respondents were paid US\$1.50 for their participation, and the survey took participants approximately 10 minutes to complete. Mturk responses have been shown to be reliable (*e.g.*, Buhrmester, *et al.*, 2011; Sheehan, 2018). Moreover, several awareness check items were utilized, and 79 participants were removed prior to analysis due to failure of an awareness check, resulting in a final sample of 196 participants. Mturk was used as a recruitment tool to move beyond a college-aged convenience sample. The average age of participants in the present study was 36.18 ($SD = 9.88$) and ranged from 21 to 69.

Participants self-identified their gender — 93 (47.4 percent) identified as male, 102 (52 percent) identified as female, and one (.5 percent) identified as gender nonconforming. A majority of participants were White ($n = 142$; 72.4 percent), followed by African-American or Black ($n = 19$; 9.7 percent), Asian/Pacific Islander ($n = 20$, 10.2 percent), Hispanic or Latinx ($n = 12$, 6.1 percent), Middle Eastern ($n = 2$, 1 percent) and not listed above ($n = 1$, .5 percent). This demographic breakdown roughly matches that of the United States, though White participants were oversampled by approximately 10 percent and Hispanic/Latinx participants were under-sampled by approximately 10 percent. Implications are discussed in the [Limitations](#). Six participants abstained from reporting their ethnic background.

Procedure

Participants were eligible for participation if they were at least 18 years of age, currently resided in the United States, and had shared a meme with a romantic partner, family member, or friend at least once in the past six months. Participants were provided a definition of memes derived from Shifman (2013a):

“An Internet meme is a piece of online culture that takes many possible forms, whether an image with caption, an animated image (*i.e.*, gif), or a text-based joke with multiple possible formats. Memes are shared, circulated, imitated and transformed by many users via the Internet. Memes are often creative expressions through which individuals communicate and express themselves.”

After confirming they were eligible, participants were guided to an online survey hosted by Qualtrics. Participants then provided informed consent and answered a series of questions (described below) regarding their humor style and general meme sharing and consumption behaviors. Next, they were asked to think of the person with whom they share memes most frequently. Participants entered that person's initials in the survey instrument to spur recall. Participants then answered the remaining questions — including the nature of their relationship with the individual, their closeness and satisfaction with the individual, and the communicative functions of their meme-related sharing — in regards to their interactions with the identified individuals. These questions and measures are described in more detail below.

Relational type, closeness, and satisfaction. Participants indicated that the person with whom they shared

memes most frequently were a romantic partner ($n = 92$; 46.9 percent), best friend ($n = 46$; 23.5 percent), close friend ($n = 30$; 15.3 percent), family member ($n = 26$; 13.5 percent), or casual friend/acquaintance ($n = 2$; 1 percent).

In addition, individuals indicated whether their relationship was long-distance or not. Long-distance was defined as someone who lives too far away from the participant to interact face-to-face on a daily basis. Sixty-one participants reported on a long-distance relationship (31.1 percent) and 135 participants reported on a geographically-close relationship (68.9 percent). The variable was dummy-coded (0 = not long-distance, 1 = long-distance) for use as a control variable in regressions.

Relational closeness was measured with the Aron and Aron (1992) inclusion of other in self scale. Participants chose from a set of seven overlapping circles that represented their perceived relational closeness (1 = not overlapping; 7 = almost completely overlapping) ($M = 5.27$; $SD = 1.60$).

Relational satisfaction was measured with an adapted version of the Huston, *et al.* (1986) marital opinion questionnaire. The question was modified to refer to the relationship more generally, rather than a marriage. Participants answered 10 semantic differential-style questions on a seven-point scale (*e.g.*, this relationship has been miserable::enjoyable hard::easy, empty::full) as well as a single Likert-scale item regarding their overall satisfaction with the relationship. The 11 items demonstrated high reliability ($M = 6.07$; $SD = .96$; $\alpha = .93$).

Humor Styles Questionnaire. Participant humor styles were assessed with the Humor Styles Questionnaire (Martin, *et al.*, 2003). The humor style assessment measures four humor styles — affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating. Each style was measured with eight Likert-type questions — individuals were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with a series of statements (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). Affiliative humor style ($M = 5.54$; $SD = .97$; Chronbach's $\alpha = .84$) was assessed with items such as "I laugh and joke a lot with my friends." Self-enhancing humor style ($M = 5.13$; $SD = 1.14$; Chronbach's $\alpha = .87$) was measured with items such as "If I am feeling upset or unhappy I usually try to think of something funny about the situation to make myself feel better." Aggressive humor style ($M = 3.83$; $SD = 1.01$; Chronbach's $\alpha = .78$) was assessed with items such as "If I don't like someone, I often use humor or teasing to put them down." Self-defeating humor style ($M = 3.22$; $SD = 1.27$; Chronbach's $\alpha = .86$) was assessed with items such as "I let people laugh at me or make fun at my expense more than I should."

Humor functions. Participants completed a slightly adapted version of the Humor Function Inventory created by Hall (2013). The questions were updated to refer to meme usage rather than humor more generally. Participants were asked to consider the function of their meme sharing with the individual indicated above with whom they share memes most frequently and responded to a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). Meme usage for enjoyment ($M = 5.64$; $SD = 1.07$; $\alpha = .75$) was assessed with items such as "To bring your relationship closer together." Meme usage to show affection ($M = 4.95$; $SD = 1.45$; $\alpha = .79$) was measured with items such as "To show love." Meme usage to reduce conflict ($M = 3.71$; $SD = 1.72$; $\alpha = .86$) included items such as "To move on when I'm frustrated or unhappy." Using memes for coping ($M = 4.64$; $SD = 1.69$; $\alpha = .86$) was assessed with items such as "To make light of a stressful situation." Sharing memes to apologize ($M = 3.5$; $SD = 1.71$; $\alpha = .74$) was measured with items such as "To apologize for something I did."

Relational meme importance and frequency. Two scales were used to measure the frequency and importance of meme usage in the specified relationship. To measure meme importance, a five-item scale was created. Individuals were asked to respond regarding the previously identified relationship. Participants responded on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) to such items as "Memes are an important aspect of our friendship/relationship" and "Our friendship/relationship relies on the sharing of memes." The scale was reliable ($M = 2.23$; $SD = 0.82$; $\alpha = .75$).

To measure meme frequency, six items were measured on a six-point Likert scale (1 = Rarely or Never; 7 =

Frequently during the day). Participants were asked to indicate how frequently they and/or their relational partner engaged in a selection of activities. Sample items included “I share memes with this person” and “This person tags me in memes.” The scale was reliable ($M = 3.46$; $SD = 1.43$; $\alpha = .97$).

Results

The first research question assessed the difference in meme sharing frequency and importance between relationship types. Because of the small number of participants ($n = 2$) reporting that they shared memes most frequently with a casual friend/acquaintance, those responses were re-categorized as close friends. To assess the research question, two GLMs were conducted with relationship type as the between-subject factor and meme sharing frequency and meme sharing importance as the dependent variables, respectively. [Table 1](#) displays the means and SDs for each relationship type.

Table 1: Means and standard deviations of meme sharing/importance by relationship type.				
Note: $n = 191$; Different superscripts on the same row indicate statistically significant differences on Tukey HSD Post hoc.				
	Close friends	Romantic partners	Family members	Best friends
Meme sharing frequency	2.51 (.87) ^a	3.63 (1.50) ^b	3.49 (1.57) ^b	3.78 (1.23) ^b
Meme sharing importance	2.23 (.84) ^a	2.19 (.84) ^a	2.34 (.78) ^a	2.47 (.77) ^a

With meme sharing frequency as the dependent variable, the test was significant, $F(3, 196) = 6.42$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .09$. The Tukey HSD post hoc test indicated that people reporting on close friends shared memes less frequently than those reporting on family member, romantic partners, or best friends. Overall, individuals reported sharing memes more frequently in their closer (*i.e.*, romantic, best friends, and family) relationships than close friendships.

With meme sharing importance as the dependent variable, the test was not significant, $F(3, 196) = 1.25$, $p = .29$. Overall, meme sharing importance did not differ as a function of relationship type.

Research question two, which investigated the association between humor style and meme frequency (*RQ2a*) and importance (*RQ2b*) in relationships, was tested with two hierarchical linear regressions ([Table 2](#)). The first regression utilized the meme importance variable as the criterion variable, and the second regression used the meme sharing frequency variable as the criterion variable. In both regressions, relational satisfaction, closeness, and long-distance status (0 = geographically close, 1 = long-distance) were entered in the first step as control variables to parcel out relationship types and qualities. The four humor style variables were entered in the second step.

Table 2: Hierarchical regressions predicting meme usage frequency and importance in relationships.

Note: Meme frequency: Total $R^2 = .24$; adjusted $R^2 = .22$. $F(7, 194) = 8.70, p < .001$. Meme importance: Total $R^2 = .25$; adjusted $R^2 = .22$. $F(7, 194) = 8.78, p < .001$.

Predictor variables	DV: Meme frequency				DV: Meme importance			
	B	SE _B	β	ΔR^2	B	SE _B	β	ΔR^2
Step 1				.20**				.12**
Closeness	.37	.06	.42**		.09	.04	.17*	
Satisfaction	-.02	.10	-.02		-.21	.06	-.24**	
Long-distance	.75	.19	.25**		.45	.12	.25**	
Step 2				.04*				.12**
Affiliative humor style	-.06	.13	-.04		-.19	.07	-.23*	
Self-enhancing humor style	.26	.10	.21*		.24	.06	.33**	
Aggressive humor style	-.09	.11	-.06		-.04	.07	-.03	
Self-defeating humor style	.17	.08	.15*		.16	.05	.25**	

For *RQ2a* (meme frequency), the model and the addition of the second step were each statistically significant. In the first step, relational closeness and being long-distance were significantly, positively associated with meme sharing frequency. In the second step, self-enhancing (the ability to see humor even in serious circumstances) and self-defeating (humoring others via self-deprecation) humor styles were also significantly, positively associated with the frequency of meme sharing in relationships.

For *RQ2b* (meme importance), the model and the addition of the second step were each statistically significant. Relational closeness and being long-distance were significantly, positively associated with meme sharing importance, and relational satisfaction was negatively associated with meme sharing importance. In the second step, having an affiliative humor style significantly, negatively related to participants' perceptions of meme importance in their relationship, whereas self-enhancing self-defeating humor styles were significantly, positively related to the perception of meme importance in their relationship.

The third *RQ* investigated the association between the humor function of meme usage within a relationship and relational satisfaction and was tested with a hierarchical linear regression (Table 3). Relational closeness, long-distance status (0 = geographically close, 1 = long-distance) meme importance, and meme sharing frequency variables were entered in the first step as control variables. The five humor function variables were entered in the second step. The model and the addition of the second step were each statistically significant. In the first step, meme sharing importance was significantly, negatively associated

with satisfaction, and relational closeness was significantly, positively associated with satisfaction. The sharing of memes to fulfill the function of enjoyment was significantly, positively associated with relational satisfaction. Sharing memes in a relationship to fulfill the function of apology was significantly, negatively associated with relational satisfaction. The affection function was not significant ($p = .06$) but was positively associated with satisfaction. Conflict reduction and coping humor functions were not significantly associated with relational satisfaction.

Table 3: Hierarchical regression predicting relational satisfaction.				
Note: Total $R^2 = .30$; adjusted $R^2 = .27$. $F(9, 194) = 8.82$, $p < .001$.				
Predictor variables	B	SE B	β	ΔR^2
Step 1				.19**
Meme importance	-.33	.06	-.28**	
Meme frequency	.07	.06	.11	
Long-distance	.03	.13	-.01	
Closeness	.19	.04	.32**	
Step 2				.12**
Enjoyment	.22	.08	.24*	
Affection	.12	.06	.18†	
Reduce conflict	-.01	.06	-.01	
Coping	.00	.06	.003	
Apologize	-.17	.05	-.30**	



Discussion

Results of this study build on the extant research documenting the humor function of memes (*e.g.*, Miltner, 2014) and the use of humor in relationships (*e.g.*, Hall, 2017) to better understand the role of humor in relational meme sharing. The findings suggest that individuals' humor style was associated with meme usage, and that the humor function of meme usage in a relationship was associated with relational satisfaction.

First, individual differences related to humor were associated with meme usage in relationships. Specifically, people who endorsed an affiliative style of humor saw memes as being less important in their relationship. Affiliative humor was typified by telling jokes and saying funny things. Thus, it was likely that the use of memes to inject humor into relationships was distinct from "traditional" forms of joke-telling in relationships. Rather, the importance of memes in relationships was associated with self-enhancing and self-defeating humor. Thus, memes appear to be important in that they allowed individuals to entertain others at their own expense and/or to lighten difficult circumstances. Overall, these results point to broader conclusions about the predictive power of individual humor styles for behavior (Martin, *et al.*, 2003) but

also hint at the particular style of humor most likely shared via memes in relationships (*i.e.*, self-enhancing and self-defeating humor).

Further, the communicative and functional usage of memes in relationships predicted relational satisfaction. Meme usage to communicate affection and foster enjoyment was positively associated with relational satisfaction, but meme usage for apology was negatively associated with relational satisfaction. These findings complement the work of Hall (2017) and demonstrate that humor usage via memes operates in a similar manner to other forms of relational humor — positive use of humor was positively associated with satisfaction, and negative humor was negatively associated with satisfaction. Although Hall (2013) framed apology as a positive communicative function of humor, apology was the only function not to demonstrate an association with relational satisfaction, perhaps indicating that it was not as universally positive as the other functions. Of course, higher levels of apology in a relationship likely also correlated with relational challenges. In this case, the use of memes to apologize does not appear to fully buffer the negative effectives of whatever event precipitated an apology.

The perceived importance of memes (but not the frequency of meme sharing) was negatively associated with relational satisfaction. It may be that individuals who see memes as important in their relationships were using memes to supplement other more effective relational maintenance strategies or channel usage. These results intersect with the communicative interdependence perspective of technology use in close relationships (Caughlin and Sharabi, 2013). Specifically, the interdependence perspective suggests moving beyond simply examining the overall quantity of both face-to-face and mediated communication as it relates to satisfaction. Rather, it is the integration between mediated and non-mediated interactions that better predicts relational outcomes. Though this study does not directly test this proposition as it relates to multiple channel usage, some of the findings suggest support to the model. For instance, memes are inherently multimodal — a mix of text, image, links, and sometimes sound and image (Milner, 2013). Moreover, memes are shared across platforms — often created on one channel (such as Twitter or Reddit) and then redistributed across interpersonal channels such as text messaging for interpersonal social media. Thus, memes can be seen as a multimodal object that represents an important aspect of a relationship. It is possible that the significance of memes in a relationship reflects a lower level of integration between multiple modes of interaction. Future research should examine this proposition more directly by investigating how meme sharing and the shared understanding associated with it aligns with the integration levels outlined by Caughlin and Sharabi (2013).

There were also differences between relational types in the quantity of memes shared, and these findings generally support prior research and theory that suggests those in closer relationships communicate via technology more frequently than those in less-close relationships (*e.g.*, Taylor and Bazarova, 2018). Similar to the work of Milner (2014), participants reported that they shared memes most frequently in their romantic relationships, family relationships, and best friendships as compared to close friendships. Additionally, other research has noted that long-distance partners communicate via technology more frequently than those in geographically-close relationships (Holtzman, *et al.*, 2021), and in this study being long-distance was positively associated with meme sharing frequency and importance, further underscoring the centrality of mediated communication in long-distance relationships (Merolla, 2010). Overall, it appears that the frequency of meme sharing was predicted by similar factors as individuals' overall technology use frequency.

In this study, meme importance was negatively related to satisfaction. It could be that individuals who saw memes as important were sharing them as opposed to engaging in face-to-face or other more intimate forms of mediate interaction. On the other hand, the use of memes to communicate affection and enjoyment was positively related to satisfaction, above and beyond the effects of overall meme importance. It is likely that such meme usage was, in part, designed to bolster face-to-face or other more intimate mediated interactions, as suggested by communicative interdependence perspective (Caughlin and Sharabi, 2013). Overall, these results suggest that how memes were used was equally important to how frequently memes were exchanged.

The findings also suggest that the framing of meme usage in relationships as a form of idiomatic communication (Hopper, *et al.*, 1981) warrants further investigation. Just as memes can operate as tools for intergroup bonding via the communication of shared humor (Gal, 2019), they can be used interpersonally to communicate similar taste and humor style. Hopper noted that one of the primary uses of idioms in relationships was the communication of affection, and subsequent studies found that the use of idioms to communicate affection was positively associated with relational outcomes (Bell, *et al.*, 1987). The results of this study underscore the importance of humor to communicate affection via memes, which was positively associated with relational satisfaction. Further, individuals in closer relationships shared memes more frequently, and relational closeness was positively associated with both meme frequency and intensity. Just as partners share nuanced terms, phrases, and sayings within relationships, they share memes, often with the same intent and with similarly positive outcomes. When relational partners are able to decode and understand the intent underlying these memes, their relationship is strengthened. Given the correlational results, it could also be that in satisfied relationships, partners are more likely to share memes indicating affection, or that meme sharing prompted increased closeness. Regardless of the direction of the effect, these results suggest several beneficial uses of memes in relationships.

Limitations and future directions

This research was a first step in examining the role of memes in relational contexts. As such, future studies should examine additional, unexamined variables. For instance, type of meme sharing (picture, video, text) was not explored in this research, nor was the overall frequency of online behavior and online community membership of participants. When one relational partner was a member of an online community with a nuanced and deep set of memetic communication norms, they may be less likely to share such memes with a partner or friend who was not part of the community. Further, as individuals increasingly consumed memetic content via less interpersonal and more algorithmically generated social media feeds (Zulli and Zulli, 2022), the role of algorithms in relational maintenance and meme sharing, specifically, will warrant further investigation.

Moreover, this study was cross-sectional, and individuals were the unit of analysis, and thus causality cannot be assumed. In particular, a dyadic study would better capture the partner effects of meme sharing, especially when one partner shares memes more or less frequently or when a couple has similar humor styles.

Although the study included a diverse age range of participants, given the age-specific nature of meme cultures, the results would likely differ with a sample of younger or older participants. In addition, though the sample somewhat approximated the ethnic breakdown of the United States, Hispanic/Latinx-identified participants were undersampled and white participants were oversampled. This may have resulted in different base rates of meme intensity, meme sharing, and humor style. Thus, future studies should gather more participants from each age and ethnic group and control for any differences.

Conclusion

Memes are increasingly used to foster and maintain interpersonal relationships. Just as the use of idioms in a relationship can indicate underlying relational qualities, the specific humor function of meme usage is associated with relational satisfaction, and individual differences (*i.e.*, humor orientation) are indicative of meme-related behaviors in relationships. Overall, the results suggest that the usage of memes in relationships is a normative behavior that is associated with relational quality. Moreover, though the overall intensity of meme usage was negatively related to satisfaction, some specific functions of meme usage were positively associated with satisfaction, providing further evidence for the nuanced link between online communication behaviors and relational outcomes. In sum, these findings underscore that memes reflect more than just cultural and social structures (Shifman, 2013a) — they reflect relational structures, as well.



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Note

1. Shifman, 2013a, p. 15.

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Editorial history

Received 17 November 2022; revised 11 April 2023; accepted 17 April 2023.



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Meme sharing in relationships: The role of humor styles and functions
by Nicholas Brody and Sean Cullen.
First Monday, volume 28, number 5 (May 2023).
doi: <https://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v28i5.12789>