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LMAO, SMH, or WTF? The role of internet memes in mood, engagement, and persuasion.

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Digital communication platforms (DCP) are disrupting the traditional model of discourse. Internet memes have emerged as a ubiquitous artifact on DCP. Typically regarded as humorous combinations of images or short videos with text, internet memes propagate across DCP as low-cost and customizable user-generated content with viral potential. The term "meme" was first introduced by Richard Dawkins to refer to units of cultural transmission that propagate through imitation, like genes in evolutionary theory (Dawkins and Davis 2017). Thus, internet memes possess the potential for imitation of cultural units. While the content of internet memes varies, humor is central to their creative practice. Internet memes can crystallize arguments in a compact and easily shareable format to express emotion, build identity, or convey political subjectivity (e.g., Shifman 2013). Classic humor theory posits that the inherently social experience of humor involves cognitive-perceptual processes where an individual (1) perceives a stimulus as incongruous and (2) appraises this stimulus in a nonserious mindset (Martin and Ford 2018). Literature on the cognitive models of humor comprehension, appreciation, and emotional response can inform research on humor and persuasion on DCP. The elaboration likelihood model of persuasion provides one framework for studying this relationship (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). For example, humorous content encourages individuals to use heuristic cues via a peripheral information processing route (Young 2008). This can reduce motivation to process a non-humorous message through the central route, or influence the nature of central route processing by inducing positive affect that can encourage persuasion (Mackie and Worth 1989). Humor can be paired with a persuasive message, or it can be part of the message. In the context of internet memes, the meme can embody the message or it can trigger an affective reaction that influences subsequent cognitive processing. The objective of this research is to understand how users' experience with humorous internet memes influences their engagement and behavior on DCP.

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