

Remix Realities: The Cultural Codework of Photo-Based Memes in Malayalam

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Abstract

This study explores how photo-based internet memes—reaction photoshops, stock character macros, and photo fads—function as hypersignifying visual texts. By manipulating photographic realism and exaggerating cultural codes, these memes deconstruct social norms, disrupt temporal continuity, and engage digital communities in collective meaning-making through parody, remixing, and visual subversion.

Keywords: Photo memes, hypersignification, photographic realism, digital participation, reaction photoshops, stock character macros, photo fads, visual parody

Introduction

Internet memes are dynamic, multimodal texts continuously reshaped by users across digital platforms. Unlike Richard Dawkins' original concept—memes as culturally replicating units similar to genes—today's internet memes are deliberately created, shared, and altered by online communities. While early memetics emphasized imitation and static transmission, contemporary scholarship views memes as evolving signs embedded within social and cultural contexts. Memes are not fixed instructions but variable, context-sensitive artifacts shaped by collective discourse.

Often low-resolution and visually unpolished, internet memes use humour and cultural references to foster group identity and enable discourse on sensitive topics, such as in support communities. Their accessibility, remixability, and symbolic resonance make them icons that strengthen group belonging. As such, internet memes function as enduring, participatory cultural artifacts embedded in the rhythms of digital life.

In the age of participatory digital culture, photo-based internet memes have emerged as potent visual artifacts that mediate, parody, and contest social realities. Genres such as reaction photoshops, stock character macros, and photo fads function not merely as sources

of humour but as hypersignifying texts that deconstruct photographic realism and cultural scripting. Hypersignification is when we no longer “conceal the code”, rather using the code itself as the punch line (Shifman 344). Drawing from inspiration from postmodern media theory, cultural studies, and performance sociology, this study investigates how these meme genres exaggerate, distort, and remix visual conventions to reveal the constructed nature of identity, time, and truth. Whether critiquing political figures like Shashi Tharoor, mocking ideological symbols like Che Guevara, or amplifying domestic rituals such as Onam festivities, memes encode cultural critique through mechanisms of visual irony, stereotype amplification, and pose repetition. These digital texts illuminate how image-based humour becomes a form of social commentary, shaped through collective authorship and ritualized interaction.

Literature review

A few previous studies find a mention here.

Chi-Chin Lin and Yi-Ching Huang (2014) argue that humorous images are widely shared across social media platforms, but newcomers often struggle to engage with them due to the often-unspoken subcultures within these online communities. Among the various forms of humorous content, internet memes can be particularly difficult for outsiders to interpret. This study introduces a system that uses crowdsourcing to generate explanations for memes. The template-based explanations highlight the incongruity between everyday situations and the punchlines that create humour. These explanations are generated through two specific human task processes. Experimental results show that the system significantly improves newcomers’ understanding of unfamiliar memes. In future work, this explanation-generation approach may be applied to enhance research in the field of computational humanities.

Bradley E Wiggins and G Bret Bowers (2014) propose a viable genre framework for understanding the evolution of internet memes, structured into three categories: *spreadable media*, *emergent memes*, and *memes*. They argue that memes function as remixed and iterated messages, rapidly disseminated by participants in digital culture to sustain and expand ongoing conversations. They conceptualize *emergent memes* as modified or remixed forms of spreadable media—content that originates as either original or non-parodic material. Their approach builds on and adapts Henry Jenkins’ concept of “spreadable media,” applying it specifically to initial, unaltered content.

Sara Cannizzaro (2016) advocates for a more precise conceptual framework for understanding internet-based “memes.” The field of memetics, which emerged following Richard Dawkins’ influential work *The Selfish Gene* (1976), traditionally views memes as units of replication. However, this model of information transmission is open to critique through the lenses of Peircean semiotics and biosemiotics. These alternative approaches offer a reconceptualization of memes beyond simple replication, framing them instead as sign systems that shape and are shaped by habitual meaning-making processes involving asymmetrical variation. Her article draws on insights from biosemiotics, the Tartu-Moscow School of semiotics, and Peircean semiotic theory.

L. Grundlingh (2018) states that memes have become a popular form of online communication. Internet users frequently use them to interact on social media platforms and online forums. This study argues that memes—particularly image macros—function

effectively as tools for communication because they operate as speech acts and are recognized as such by online audiences. When crafting a meme, creators make deliberate choices about the semiotic elements they include, which are then interpreted by the broader internet community to enable mutual understanding.

Bisera Kostadinovska-Stojchevska and Elena Shalevska (2018) have written about memes as a significant phenomenon in online communication, highlighting their socio-linguistic features that interest both linguists and sociologists. Memes, often humorous in nature, typically consist of a combination of images and text (or GIFs and text), and spread rapidly across digital platforms, evolving as they circulate. The study specifically focuses on the most popular meme format: image-plus-text. Linguistically, memes are rich in features such as vernacular English, dialectal phrases, puns, slang, jargon, abbreviations, neologisms, and deliberate grammatical and syntactic deviations.

The interdisciplinary study by Michael Johann and Lars Bülow (2019) investigate the mechanisms behind meme diffusion on social media platforms. Drawing on Spitzberg's model of meme diffusion and Rogers' theory of the diffusion of innovations, the research incorporates linguistic analysis of image-based memes. Through quantitative content analysis, the study examines the factors contributing to the widespread circulation of the "Merkel Meme" on Twitter.

Vera Zvereva (2020) examines trolling as a form of literary expression. It discusses various specific types of trolling found on the Russian-language Internet, particularly in relation to digital literature and the literary practices of different online communities. The creation and refinement of provocative "troll-texts" began within subcultural circles in the 1990s. Initially a subversive and insider-driven activity, trolling gradually evolved into a widespread phenomenon, with meta-texts emerging to codify its rules and disseminate knowledge about its culture to a broader audience. By the 2010s, these once-niche trolling techniques had gained popularity and were increasingly viewed as effective rhetorical tools in online discourse. The article further reveals that troll-texts are frequently centered on struggles over voice and authority—conflicts that shape the formal characteristics of trolling discourse.

De Leon, F. M. G. & Ballesteros-Lintao, R (2021) presents a detailed content analysis of the linguistic features of memes and examines their role as instruments of political propaganda. A total of 60 memes, collected between July 2016 and December 2018, were analysed. Based on their linguistic and visual structures, the memes demonstrate a capacity to construct and simplify complex political narratives. This was achieved primarily through the categories of Shops, Text, and Stacked Stills, as outlined in Milner's (2012) Taxonomy of Meme Collectives. The primary humour strategies identified were intertextuality, parody, and binary opposition, emphasizing the contextual nature of memes and their reliance on exaggeration and contrasting ideas to generate humour. These findings suggest that memes are effective tools for political propaganda due to their ability to manipulate complex narratives through humour and accessible visual-linguistic formats.

Menna Mohammed Salama El-Masry (2021) seeks to examine verbal humour in a selection of Egyptian web memes related to the Coronavirus pandemic. It also aims to identify the various strategies and techniques employed by meme creators to generate humour. The

findings reveal that the primary types of script opposition present in the memes are "possible vs. impossible" and "normal vs. abnormal." Additionally, analogy and exaggeration emerge as the most frequently used logical mechanisms for humour creation in the analysed memes.

Cille Hvass Holm (2021) examines the sociolinguistic potential of internet memes—how language and society intersect in this emerging mode of communication. While modern internet memes differ from Dawkins' original concept, especially in terms of their digital and social dimensions, they retain the principle of cultural transmission. Drawing on Jenkins' idea of participants as both creators and consumers, the study emphasizes that memes derive their meaning and cultural relevance from the act of participation itself. It analyses memes as communicative acts using frameworks from multimodality, semiotics, and pragmatics. Through close reading of selected examples, the paper demonstrates how memes convey meaning at the intersection of text, image, and social context.

Based on the above, it can be understood that social media meme research is inherently interdisciplinary, combining domains such as linguistics (speech acts, grammar, dialects), semiotics (sign systems, multimodality), sociology and cultural studies (identity, power, participation), communication and media theory (virality, genre evolution), humour studies (incongruity, opposition, satire), and digital politics (propaganda, political memes). Not many studies follow the memes in Malayalam cultural context.

Theoretical framework and methodology

Memes are no longer trivial cultural artifacts—they are now recognized as complex communicative tools that mediate meaning, humour, ideology, and participation in the digital age.

In the present article, the analysis is based on Malayalam memes based on socio-political context. This article follows the perspective taken up by Limor Shifman (2014) in which the writer explores the cultural significance of photo-based internet meme genres—reaction photoshops, stock character macros, and photo fads—through the lenses of truth, temporality, and hypersignification. It argues that these memes highlight the constructed nature of images (hypersignification), treat photographs as material for future creative edits (prospective photography), and act as operative signs—texts meant to provoke further participation and remixing. While these traits existed in traditional photography, they have become dominant in the age of digital media and participatory online culture.

The paragraphs below summarize the three suggested methods—reaction photoshops, stock character macros, and photo fads—using the concept of hypersignification as the central analytical framework.

Reaction photoshops exemplify a meme genre that deliberately manipulates photographic realism to question the assumed authenticity of images. These memes typically remix recognizable media figures or events, placing them in exaggerated or incongruous scenarios that undermine the image's original claim to reality. For example, the superimposition of film actors or politicians into digitally fabricated scenes draws attention to the performative staging inherent in visual media. The continuous digital mediation of reality transforms images into objects of skepticism, aligning with Manovich's and Zylinska's theories of digital ontology that emphasize the fluid, constructed nature of visual truth in the digital era.

Stock character macros function through the exaggeration of familiar social roles and behaviours, making the process of cultural stereotyping both visible and negotiable. These memes usually feature recurring figures—such as the clueless wife, the over-smart student, or the authoritative parent—paired with text that labels and amplifies specific traits. While they can reinforce reductive representations, they also open space for subversion by exaggerating the very stereotypes they depict. This dual potential is central to their polysemic nature, as described in Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model, where meaning is not fixed but interpreted differently across social contexts.

Photo fads represent a meme genre grounded in repetition and performance, where culturally encoded gestures and visual poses become ritualized through digital circulation. These memes often rely on familiar image templates that are replicated and slightly altered across contexts to reflect new social scenarios. The humour arises from recognizing the template while noticing its fresh reinterpretation, thus reinforcing a shared visual grammar. This meme genre also plays a vital role in fostering participatory digital culture, as outlined by Henry Jenkins: users do not passively consume these memes but actively remix and circulate them, sustaining a collective mode of cultural commentary. By exaggerating everyday moments and encoding them in repetitive visual formats, photo fads transform ordinary behaviours into communal rituals of digital play, reinforcing both the performative and participatory dimensions of meme culture.

Discussion and Analysis

Key Form of Hypersignification:	Mechanisms/Techniques:	Cultural/Normative Function:
Analyse how the meme exposes or manipulates the idea that images represent objective reality.	The constructed nature of photographic realism	Identify layers of meaning and "false naturalness" in visual media, highlighting

		how memes break or exaggerate visual conventions
	<p>Shashi Tharoor, renowned for his eloquence and command over the English language, frequently features in internet memes, particularly for his penchant for using complex and rarely used words. His fondness for expressions such as <i>floccinaucinihilipilification</i>, <i>lugubrious</i>, and <i>rhodomontade</i> gained considerable attention. In this context, one meme depicts a ritual associated with Durga Puja, humorously suggesting that instead of initiating children into the Malayalam letters, Tharoor would prefer the use of an obscure term like <i>honorificabilitudinitatibus</i>—a word found in Shakespeare’s <i>Love’s Labour’s Lost</i>. Although Tharoor himself likely did not make such a statement, the meme exaggerates for comic effect, reflecting the content creator's imagination.</p>	
	<p>This meme refers to an announcement by Kerala’s Finance Minister, Mr. Balagopal, regarding an increase in social welfare pensions. However, the meme critiques the announcement by highlighting the delayed disbursement of existing pensions and the accumulation of arrears. It questions the rationale behind increasing pension amounts when timely distribution is not ensured. The meme satirically points out that the declaration only promises enhancement in the amount, not in its actual distribution, thereby exposing the perceived performative nature of policy announcements and challenging institutional conventions.</p>	

Table: 1

Key Form of Hypersignification:	Mechanisms/Techniques:	Cultural/Normative Function:
Examine how the meme is created—specifically the techniques used	Photoshopping / Image manipulation: Assess visual alterations that challenge original context	Analyze how memes parody, subvert, or disrupt the “authentic” image



	<p>Another meme parodies the fervent following of Che Guevara, the iconic revolutionary, especially among segments of the Kerala population. Following the 2024 Lok Sabha election results, an image circulated online featured a face derived from a Malayalam film actor known for his left-leaning sympathies, superimposed in a Guevara-esque manner. This visual parody critiques ideological romanticism in contemporary political discourse.</p>
	<p>In a meme referencing the Indian Space Research Organisation's Chandrayaan-3 mission—particularly the Vikram lander and Pragyan rover—a third, unidentified object is humorously depicted in the moon's vicinity. This addition is used to ridicule a frequent debate participant, known for unsuccessful arguments in televised discussions. The Malayalam idiom roughly translated as “someone in the air” is employed to suggest the individual's rhetorical failure, reimagining the person as a floating, defeated figure.</p>

Table: 2

Key Form of Hypersignification:	Mechanisms/Techniques:	Cultural/Normative Function:
To explore and analyse how the meme makes stereotyping processes visible by	Exaggeration of stereotypes as a method of exposing their construction	The role of cultural signs in encoding identity, behaviour, or social norms.



exaggerating or foregrounding cultural codes.		
	<p>Another meme draws a parallel between a humorous cinematic scene and the typical state of refrigerators in Kerala households post-Onam. The Onam Sadya, a multi-course meal prepared over several days, leads to an overflow of food, requiring substantial refrigeration space. This scenario is humorously likened to a film scene where a car is overcrowded with people, highlighting a familiar cultural practice through visual satire.</p>	
	<p>A related meme critiques the disparity between idealized advertising imagery and lived domestic reality. Advertisements often depict refrigerators filled with appealing items like ice cream, fruits, and chocolates. In contrast, actual household refrigerators commonly contain more mundane, less visually appealing items. The meme subverts the idealism of commercial narratives, offering a more grounded portrayal of everyday life.</p>	

Table: 3

Key Form of Hypersignification:	Mechanisms/Techniques:	Cultural/Normative Function:
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<p>Study how image and text interact to create meaning—especially through: Captioned images with overt labeling: To analyse how direct textual cues guide</p>	<p>Recurring character tropes: Identify familiar figures and their ideological roles. Stereotype amplification: Assess the degree and purpose of exaggerated traits.</p>	<p>Reveal how memes draw from and distort cultural scripts to make meaning.</p>
<p>രാജ്കുമാറിനെ വീരപ്പൻ തട്ടിക്കൊണ്ടുപോയ കേസിൽ വിധി 25ന്</p> <p>സംഭവമുണ്ടായി 18 വർഷത്തിനു ശേഷം വിധി പറയുമ്പോൾ രാജ്കുമാറും വീരപ്പനും ജീവിച്ചിരിപ്പില്ല</p> 	<p>Yama, the Hindu god of death, is a recurring figure in meme culture. This meme references the high-profile case involving Veerappan, the forest brigand, and the kidnapping of Kannada actor Dr. Rajkumar in 2000. Although the Gobi Third Additional District Court delivered its verdict in 2018, both Veerappan and Rajkumar had by then passed away. The meme humorously depicts Yama expressing bewilderment at the possibility of being asked to produce the deceased individuals and a possible case against him for not releasing them.</p>	
<p>മഴക്കാലമാണ് 😊 തിളപ്പിച്ചാറി വെള്ളം മാത്രം കുടിക്കുക 😊</p> 	<p>A seemingly innocuous meme delivers a critical commentary on the issue of spurious liquor production, especially prevalent during the monsoon season. While the message ostensibly advises the consumption of boiled water during the rains, it subtly mocks the clandestine production and consumption of toxic alcoholic substances, which often result in outcomes known as hooch tragedies.</p>	

Table: 4

Key Form of Hypersignification:	Mechanisms/Techniques:	Cultural/Normative Function:
To analyse how posing conventions in memes reflect performed social roles, identity signals, and ritualized behaviours.	Focus on the staged nature of photographic gestures (smiles, stances, facial expressions) as culturally encoded performances	To explore how meme participants act out “front stage” behaviours and social scripts
	In another meme, a popular commercial slogan is subverted to critique social norms. The original advertisement claims that if one loves their wife, they cannot say no to ‘Prestige’ (a well-known kitchen appliance brand). In the meme, however, the product in question is alcoholic in nature, and the husband enthusiastically endorses the adapted slogan, thus parodying the contradiction between socially endorsed advertising and less socially acceptable behaviours.	
	A further example features a student who prepared for a supplementary examination using a YouTube channel, only to be surprised upon encountering the same instructor taking the same examination in person. The meme humorously highlights the inversion of expected social roles and reflects the blurred boundaries between digital learning environments and formal educational institutions.	

Table: 5

Key Form of Hypersignification:	Mechanisms/Techniques:	Cultural/Normative Function:
To examine the visual structure and repetition of meme formats as part of a shared digital grammar.	Study how virality arises from minor variations on familiar formats, showing social understanding through imitation	Understand the meme as a ritualized digital act, with embedded expectations for pose, layout, and labeling
	Here, the visual format is being used to address different context. What is common is the lack of understanding of English language on the part of the wife. In one such meme, a husband asks his wife for suggestions about his greying hair, and she replies he should "die" (a pun on the word "dye").	
	In another instance, the wife wishes her husband a happy "menses" day instead of "Men's Day". Both examples originate from a Malayalam film character known for frequent linguistic missteps, and the meme format has gained widespread popularity despite its reinforcement of gender stereotypes. This meme format has thus become viral and it is repeated in different variations despite the gender bias.	

Table: 6

Key Form of Hypersignification:	Mechanisms/Techniques:	Cultural/Normative Function:
To analyse how memes mirror or mock real-world social behaviours (e.g., dating norms, workplace attitudes, generational habits).	Explore memes as reflections or parodies of everyday cultural rituals—from group selfies to “Instagram face.”	Memes as tools of digital play, community bonding, and ritual expression
	This meme captures a humorous exchange between a customer and a tea vendor. When questioned about a price hike for black tea, the vendor responds by citing an increase in milk prices, despite black tea containing no milk. The customer's confusion reflects a broader commentary on working-class logic and consumer interactions in everyday life.	
	A meme set in the post-COVID context references a government directive requiring class teachers of Grade 10 to resume in-person duties. Here, the teacher declines, stating a preference for teaching up to Grade 9 to retain the convenience of online instruction. The meme gained traction as a satirical take on individual resistance to institutional norms. This was quite popular and this mocks the social behaviour of such individuals.	

Table: 7

Summary of Analysis

Photo-based internet memes—such as reaction photoshops, stock character macros, and photo fads—function as visual texts that both reflect and challenge cultural norms by exaggerating and distorting the idea that photographs offer objective truth. These memes actively manipulate the aesthetics of photographic realism, drawing attention to how visual media is often constructed rather than naturally occurring. For example, memes involving public figures like Shashi Tharoor or those parodying Che Guevara employ exaggerated text, symbolic layering, and image manipulation to reveal how social identities and ideological alignments are visually curated. Memes also disrupt linear notions of time by placing images in unexpected or outdated contexts, such as the depiction of Yama responding to court verdicts long after the subjects have passed away, or the humorous reinterpretation of the Chandrayaan mission. This temporal dislocation turns memes into looping commentaries, where meaning is generated through recurrence, irony, and absurd juxtapositions. On a cultural level, these memes act as hypersignifiers, condensing complex social codes—like post-Onam food habits or advertising clichés—into instantly recognizable and often exaggerated visual cues. By using captions, familiar character types, and parody, memes expose how everyday behaviours and identities are performed, revealing the scripted nature of what might otherwise appear spontaneous. Ultimately, these memes not only entertain but also critically engage with visual culture by making visible the layers of meaning embedded in images, highlighting how digital communities participate in reshaping narratives through remixing, repetition, and subversive reinterpretation.

Findings

1. Reaction photoshops reveal that photographic images are not inherently truthful but are visually curated and ideologically coded, especially when depicting public figures or political icons. Memes often detach images from their original historical contexts to produce humour, irony, or critique—thereby challenging linear temporality and engaging in a looping, recursive meme logic.
2. Stock character macros and image-caption pairings condense complex cultural practices and stereotypes into hyper-legible visual codes, facilitating instant recognition and polysemic readings. Photo fads rely on familiar posing conventions and repeated formats to emphasize the performative nature of everyday behaviour, revealing how identity is scripted, staged, and ritualized.
3. These meme genres demonstrate how digital communities collaboratively engage with and reshape cultural narratives through parody, remixing, and subversive reinterpretation. While memes have the potential to subvert dominant ideologies, they can also reproduce existing stereotypes, revealing the dual potential of internet humour as both critical and conservative.

These findings position memes not merely as ephemeral entertainment but as dynamic cultural artefacts participating in visual discourse and social commentary.

Conclusion

Photo-based memes are more than ephemeral entertainments; they are complex visual texts that interrogate the illusion of photographic objectivity and destabilize hegemonic narratives through strategies of exaggeration, disjunction, and repetition. Reaction photoshops disrupt the aura of media authenticity, stock character macros expose the ideological work of stereotypes, and photo fads perform the social rituals of everyday life in looped and ludic forms. As hypersignifiers, these meme genres reveal how digital cultures engage critically with visual media, creating participatory spaces where meaning is not fixed but continually reimagined. In doing so, memes articulate a visual discourse that challenges dominant representations and affirms the agency of networked communities in shaping contemporary cultural meaning.

Conflict of Interest: Nil

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Limitations

This study focuses primarily on meme genres within Malayalam linguistic/cultural context which are primarily photo-based, and while it draws upon established theoretical lenses, it does not quantitatively analyse user reception or meme virality across platforms. Future research could explore cross-cultural meme circulation, audience interpretation, and algorithmic influence to offer a more comprehensive view of meme semiotics in global digital ecologies.

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