Meme Culture and Language Practices: Constructing Global Generation Z Identities Through Popular Digital Media

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Abstract: This study investigates the role of language practices in meme culture as a means of constructing global Generation Z identities through popular digital media. Memes have become a primary form of expression for Gen Z, serving as tools for humor, creativity, and identity negotiation. The research problem focuses on how language within memes contributes to global identity formation among this generation, while the objective is to explore the ways in which hybrid language, visual elements, and cultural references in memes shape digital identity. A qualitative approach employing Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) was used to examine popular memes from Instagram, TikTok, Twitter/X, and Reddit, considering both linguistic and visual features as well as socio-cultural meanings. The findings indicate that hybrid language in memes generates cross-cultural humor and facilitates identity construction, while visual elements and symbols reinforce shared cultural understanding. Memes function as a "cultural glue," connecting individuals across digital spaces, yet they also present challenges such as identity homogenization and algorithmic bias. This study contributes theoretically to digital linguistics and cultural studies by highlighting the interplay between language, imagery, and identity, and practically to enhancing digital literacy and understanding of identity practices among Gen Z users. Overall, the research concludes that language in memes plays a pivotal role in shaping global Generation Z identities, strengthening cross-cultural solidarity, and redefining youth cultural identity within contemporary digital spaces.

Keywords: Digital Identity; Generation Z; Hybrid Language; Meme Culture; Social Media.

1. Introduction

Internet memes have emerged as one of the most influential forms of communication in the digital era, functioning not only as entertainment but also as a medium for conveying social critique, cultural identity, and political expression in a concise yet meaningful manner. Through the combination of text, images, and symbols, memes enable the rapid circulation of messages across cultures, as seen in the representation of Latino/a identity and communication strategies of both brands and users on Instagram. In this regard, memes also serve as spaces for negotiating cultural identity, as illustrated in the practices of Vietnamese youth and the political participation of young people in the United States.

The development of memes demonstrates increasing diversity in both form and function. For instance, cartoons reproduced in meme form during the COVID-19 pandemic provided humorous responses to a global crisis. In the field of education, meme integration has been shown to foster students' active engagement. Research in China further highlights how multimodal creativity in meme practices contributes to the shaping of digital identities. supporting the view that meme language significantly influences digital culture and collective thinking.

This phenomenon is closely tied to the dynamics of identity formation in the context of globalization. Social and cultural identities are no longer static but are constantly negotiated through linguistic practices and digital interactions. Online humor, such as that found in Arab

communities. or the linguistic styles of Gen Z users in Nigeria. demonstrates how memes function as crucial mediums of self-expression. Generation Z, in particular, negotiates their identities through hybrid language practices, social media interaction, and digital humor.

The implications of this phenomenon extend to education and digital literacy development. The use of home language in transformative pedagogy. the adaptation of digital platforms for linguistic identity modeling. and the role of popular culture in shaping modern English communication indicate that memes serve not only as entertainment but also as cultural and pedagogical resources. Moreover, Gen Z's distinct communication preferences and the design of digital curricula for language skills underscore the importance of understanding memes as integral to broader socio-cultural transformations.

Therefore, examining memes through semiotic and linguistic perspectives becomes relevant in understanding how hybrid language, humor, and popular culture function as a "cultural glue" for Generation Z. This study focuses on the intersection of linguistics, literature, and digital media in shaping Gen Z cultural identity, with the objective of analyzing how language practices within meme culture contribute to the construction of a dynamic global identity.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Meme as Visual-Verbal Language and Group Identity

Meme as a Communication Tool

Memes are a form of digital art that blend visuals, text, and humor to convey messages and emotions, making them a powerful tool for communication and identity construction. They function as multimodal artifacts that not only deliver quick entertainment but also influence how people interpret events and cultural narratives in the digital space. Through humor, irony, and satire, memes are able to simplify complex issues, making them accessible to wider audiences while simultaneously reflecting cultural trends and societal debates. Thus, they serve as a bridge between digital creativity and the construction of meaning within online communities.

Group Identity

Memes foster in-group identity by providing a shared language and cultural references that resonate with specific communities, such as university students, fandoms, or online forums. They allow individuals to signal belonging, differentiate themselves from outsiders, and co-create cultural codes that strengthen community bonds. Beyond entertainment, memes also function as tools for social commentary, amplifying voices within political, economic, and cultural contexts. By reflecting shared struggles or achievements, memes not only unite individuals under common experiences but also reinforce the social fabric of digital communities.

2.2. Language Practices in Popular Media

Hybrid Language and Code-Switching

Code-switching, the practice of alternating between languages or language varieties, is prevalent in digital communication and illustrates the fluidity of globalized interactions. In digital spaces, code-switching can be intentional, used to emphasize meaning, or playful, employed to generate humor and relatability among diverse audiences. Online platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter provide fertile ground for showcasing multilingual practices, where emojis, special characters, and internet slang combine with traditional language to create new expressive forms. This blending of linguistic elements reflects how digital users adapt language creatively to negotiate identity, social relationships, and cultural belonging.

Slang and Emojis

Emojis and internet slang have become indispensable components of digital communication, shaping how individuals express emotions, tone, and context in quick and effective ways. Their use not only enhances the visual appeal of messages but also introduces layers of meaning that might not be captured by words alone. For Generation Z, the playful and dynamic use of slang terms and emoji combinations fosters a sense of belonging and shared understanding in online spaces. These practices reveal how digital users navigate between creativity and efficiency in communication, while also highlighting the cultural significance of humor, trends, and collective identity in shaping digital discourse.

2.3. Generation Z Identity Construction in Digital Spaces
Digital Socialization

Generation Z constructs their identity through digital interactions, actively using platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and livestreaming applications to present themselves as entertainers, entrepreneurs, and global citizens. Such platforms act as arenas where individuals test social roles, experiment with self-presentation, and negotiate their place within broader cultural narratives. Online interactions also foster opportunities for recognition and validation, as likes, comments, and followers become symbolic measures of social capital. Through these practices, digital socialization enables Gen Z to connect personal identity with larger cultural movements, reinforcing their role as digitally native actors in a globalized society.

Global Identity through Memes

Participation in meme culture significantly contributes to the formation of a global identity for Generation Z, as memes provide a platform for expressing shared values, struggles, and experiences across national and cultural boundaries. In particular, memes transcend linguistic and geographical barriers, allowing users from different contexts to engage in collective humor and commentary that strengthens the idea of global citizenship. At the same time, marginalized groups find in memes a safe and creative avenue to express their identities, challenge stereotypes, and gain inclusion within global digital spaces. As such, memes not only function as cultural products but also as instruments of solidarity, enabling diverse voices to be heard in a globally connected generation.

3. Research Methodology

This study applies a qualitative approach using Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) as the central framework. MDA is considered the most appropriate method because memes are inherently multimodal, combining text, visuals, and cultural references in ways that cannot be captured through a single analytical lens. By focusing on both linguistic and non-linguistic features, this approach enables a comprehensive understanding of how meaning and identity are constructed.

The research objects are selected memes circulating on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Twitter/X, and Reddit. These platforms are chosen because they represent spaces where Generation Z is most active in creating, sharing, and interacting with memes, making them highly relevant to the study of digital identity practices.
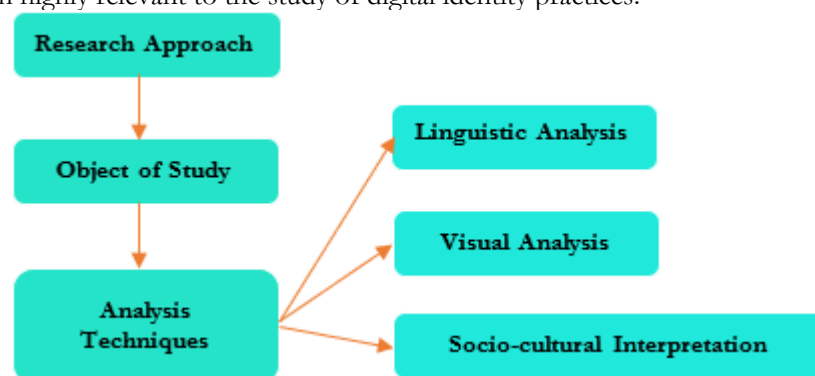

Figure 1. Research method framework.

3.1. Research Approach

This study adopts Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) as the primary approach. MDA is considered suitable because memes are multimodal texts that combine language, visuals, and cultural references. This framework enables an in-depth exploration of how meaning is constructed through the interaction of different semiotic modes.

3.2. Object of Study

The object of study consists of popular memes collected from leading digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Twitter/X, and Reddit. These platforms are chosen because they are the dominant online spaces where Generation Z actively produces, circulates, and consumes memes.

3.3. Analysis Techniques
Linguistic Analysis

The linguistic analysis explores how language is used creatively within memes. This includes examining hybrid language forms, the use of slang, code-switching, and intertextual references. Particular attention is given to how these linguistic features generate humor and contribute to the construction of both individual and collective identities.

Visual Analysis

The visual analysis focuses on the non-verbal components of memes. Images, symbols, and typographic choices are studied to understand how they shape the overall meaning and how visual elements reinforce, contradict, or expand the textual message. This step emphasizes the interplay between visual cues and humor, as well as the social messages conveyed through imagery.

Socio-cultural Interpretation

The socio-cultural interpretation addresses the broader cultural and identity-related aspects of memes. It considers how memes reflect the values, beliefs, and shared experiences of Generation Z. This includes analyzing the ways memes are used to express solidarity, critique, and identity negotiation in a globalized digital environment.

Through this methodological framework, the study aims to reveal how memes operate as cultural and linguistic artifacts that actively contribute to the shaping of Generation Z's global digital identity.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

This study identified four key aspects of meme culture practices among Generation Z. First, the use of hybrid language combining slang, code-switching, and intertextuality creates cross-cultural humor that is more inclusive. Second, memes play a role in strengthening Gen Z's global identity through shared humor, symbols, and transnational narratives. Third, multimodality, which integrates text, visuals, and cultural symbols, fosters creativity while enriching the social meanings embedded in digital interactions. Finally, challenges arise in the form of identity homogenization and algorithmic bias, which risk reducing cultural diversity and reinforcing inequality in digital visibility.

Table 1. Key findings of meme culture and their implications.

Dimension	Key Findings	Implications
Linguistic Practices	Hybrid language, slang, and code-switching create cross-cultural humor	Enables more inclusive global communication
Identity Construction	Memes strengthen Gen Z's global identity through humor and symbols	Builds a sense of belonging across transnational digital communities
Multimodality	Combination of text, visuals, and cultural symbols	Encourages creativity and embeds social meaning in meme practices
Challenges	Identity homogenization and algorithmic bias	Risks reducing diversity and reinforcing digital inequality

*Note: This table summarizes the main research findings and their implications for Generation Z's identity in digital spaces.

In addition, the results highlight that memes are part of a dynamic communication practice. Through humor, visual creativity, and hybrid language, memes not only shape how Gen Z expresses themselves but also create participatory spaces where global identity and solidarity are continuously negotiated. Thus, memes can be understood as cultural phenomena that unite young people within an increasingly complex digital landscape.

4.2. Discussion

The result demonstrate that meme culture functions as a "cultural glue" for Generation Z. Hybrid language use does not only produce humor that transcends cultural boundaries but also serves as a medium for negotiating identity in the context of digital globalization. Memes further strengthen Gen Z's global identity by fostering solidarity and shared belonging across geographical boundaries. The multimodality of memes combining text, visuals, and symbols provides a creative arena that amplifies self-expression and enriches the social meanings contained in digital interactions.

Nevertheless, this phenomenon also presents challenges. The massive virality of memes may lead to identity homogenization, while algorithmic bias in content distribution limits the representation of certain groups. This suggests that although memes hold significant power in shaping identity and digital culture, there remain risks of marginalization and inequality in digital visibility. Overall, the results confirm that memes are not merely digital entertainment but also vital mediums for building global identity, facilitating cross-cultural interaction, and reflecting the social dynamics of Generation Z in the digital age.

5. Comparison

From a theoretical perspective, this study extends the discussion in digital linguistics and cultural studies by showing that memes are not merely humorous artifacts but also complex semiotic texts that actively shape social meaning. Whereas traditional approaches to linguistics often treated language as a stable system, meme practices demonstrate the fluidity of hybrid language, code-switching, and multimodal communication. This provides a new lens for understanding how humor and cultural symbols function simultaneously as entertainment and as mechanisms of identity negotiation in globalized digital spaces. The study therefore reinforces the idea that online discourse is both playful and deeply tied to broader cultural dynamics.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the significance of digital literacy in the lives of Generation Z. Unlike earlier generations who primarily consumed media, Gen Z actively participates in producing, remixing, and circulating content, which means that identity is continuously co-constructed through digital interactions. This has direct implications for educators, who can integrate meme-based practices into pedagogy to increase engagement; for content creators, who must understand cultural codes and hybrid language to effectively connect with audiences; and for policymakers, who need to address challenges related to homogenization of identity and algorithmic bias in digital platforms.

In comparison, the theoretical contribution lies in expanding academic frameworks for analyzing digital communication, while the practical contribution offers applicable strategies for navigating and shaping online interactions. Together, these perspectives illustrate that memes are not trivial forms of expression but rather crucial cultural tools that bridge entertainment, education, and social critique.

6. Conclusion

This study shows that memes play a vital role in shaping humor, cultural identity, and cross-cultural communication for Generation Z. By combining hybrid language, visual elements, and digital creativity, memes serve as cultural glue that strengthens collective belonging while allowing young people to negotiate and express their identities within globalized online spaces.

In addition, the findings highlight both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, memes expand the study of digital linguistics and cultural studies by illustrating how language and symbols function dynamically in online discourse. Practically, they provide valuable insights into digital literacy, offering guidance for educators, content creators, and policymakers to better understand and engage with the communicative practices of Generation Z in the digital era.

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