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Queer Vocabulary Acquisition through Internet Memes

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Abstract:

In recent times, Memes have become a custodian of cultural information and a tool to persuade the viewers of its visual implications to the masses. As a tool to enhance the vocabulary of the internet users, memes have created a significant impact on them to know more about the trending words. In this context, learning about a recent terminology associated with Queer has always been a source to broaden the threshold of opinion and credibility in the socio-cultural framework. The paper envisages to interpret the content and form of specific memes in a particular context, to classify the memes in the context of the terminology used, and to evaluate the usage of the terms associated with Queer vocabulary. With the use of Limor Shifman's three-dimensional model of analysis, the paper aims to study through text and image of a meme, the stance it takes. Additionally, it looks at how in the middle of this entire process, these memes become a source of active vocabulary acquisition.

Keywords: Cisgender, Genderfluid, Genderqueer, Internet, Memes, Non-binary, Queer, Vocabulary.

Queer Vocabulary Acquisition through Internet Memes

The coinage of the term 'Internet Meme' can be traced back to 1993 by Mike Godwin. He describes "meme" as "an idea that functions in a mind the same way a gene or virus functions in the body. And an infectious idea (call it a "viral meme") may leap from mind to mind, much as viruses leap from body to body."

The following graph taken from Google Trends represents the trend in the usage and search of the term 'meme' for the last two decades. And if we track the usage of the term, then we can see that people got a significant awareness about this term after 2016 in India.

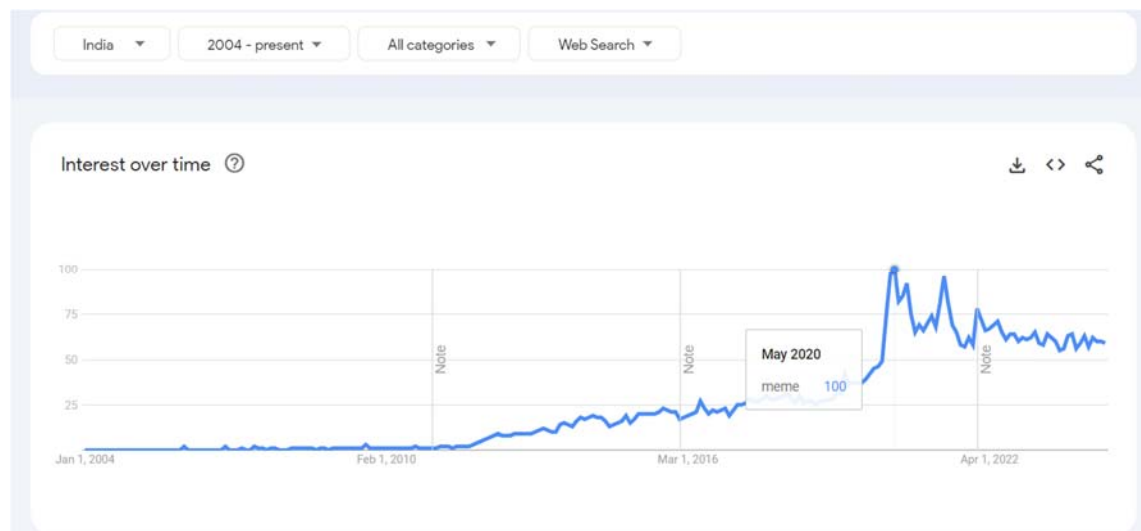


Figure1: Usage of the term 'Meme' in India over the years

Source: Google Trends

<https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&geo=IN&q=meme&hl=en>

However, it was the biologist Richard Dawkins who had introduced the term "meme" to the English language in his book "The Selfish Gene" to explain how cultural information spreads in 1976. Emphatically, memes have become a part of popular culture and have a great influence on the masses to learn more about the recent trends and culture. Interestingly, humans have used memes as a channel for cultural conversations and following the trends as well. We can convey more through memes rather than using only words. In Internet culture, the term is frequently used to describe words, videos, images, or a combination of these that Internet users widely share. In addition, memes function on the foundation of humor and intertextuality. (Knobel and Al).

As a popular culture, Memes have always influenced the masses thereby creating the trend on google and channelizing the cultural conversations to the viewers. Apparently, Memes have accelerated the understanding of new words by presenting the same through pictures and text, giving food for thought to research more about the social implications of 'popular' words as well.

Moreover, Memes are the platform through which any content attractively and specifically can be shared with an indefinite number of people thereby making the word popular and accessible.

The origin of the term ‘queer’ can be traced back to the 1970s and as an umbrella term, the word gained popularity as a movement to voice the communities who identify themselves as representative of a non-normative group. The trend of using the term can be vividly observed in the graph given below:

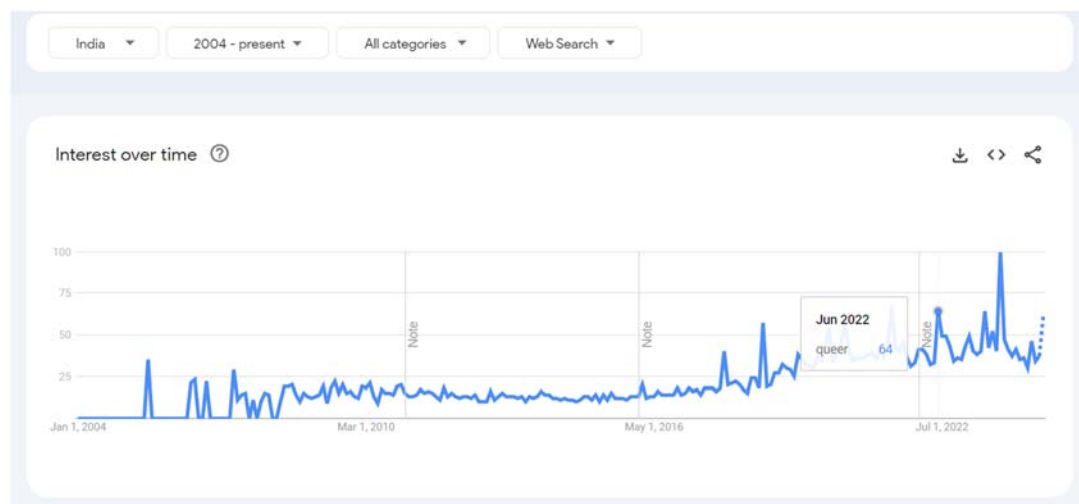


Figure 2: Usage of the term ‘Queer’ in India over the years

Source: Google Trends

<https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&geo=IN&q=queer&hl=en>

Despite the popularity of the memes and the rise of queer sensitivity, it is difficult to distinguish between the opinion and credibility of the memes. There are times when the new words are floating on the internet because of the surge in the usage of the memes. But the understanding of the words from the memes depends on the cultural consciousness of the masses. The paper envisages to seek answers of the following research questions:

- To analyze the memes related to Queer on Instagram
- To investigate the relationship between Memes and socio-cultural effect on the masses
- To use the new words from the memes in vocabulary acquisition related to Queer

As we are witnessing the technological shift, the meme culture on social media is also experiencing the shift in multiple ways. The visibility and credibility associated with the memes on queer community not only affirms their existence but also educates more about them to the

masses. The discourse about the inclusivity and equality of the queer community is also emphasized with the use of memes on social media. Most importantly, the memes have helped in shaping the human acceptance of the vocabulary associated with them.

Like genes, memes are defined as replicators that undergo variation, competition, selection, and retention. At any given moment, many memes are competing for the attention of hosts; however, only memes suited to their sociocultural environment spread successfully, while others become extinct (Chielens and Heylighen).

Notably, the memes have always been custodian to represent the specific trend which is nothing but manifesting the socio-cultural environment. It leads to popularizing a specific meme and extinction of the other memes as it does not address the popularity among the masses. There is a process to attain popularity, that is 'selecting' the memes which would appeal to the masses depending on the trending news, events or socio-cultural framework and processing the memes as per the viability on the social platforms.

Methodology

The main objective behind the research is to interpret the artifacts in the internet memes that incorporate both text and image. In order to collect data, the researchers have chosen an observation method to sort the memes on different social media platforms like Instagram, Google and Pinterest, randomly. A careful examination of each meme on the social media feed, selecting the most relevant ones for the study, later categorizing them based on whether they have incorporated images, text, or both. To analyze the data, a qualitative research method was employed, particularly the three-dimensional model to interpret the themes. The researchers used this model to infer the construed meanings associated with the selected memes. Martyna Sliwa in the forward to *Qualitative Methodologies in Organization Studies: Volume I: Theories and New Approaches* highlights the importance of qualitative methods in the context of organization studies and the rapid methodological developments in qualitative research.

Qualitative research methods allow researchers to gather in-depth, rich, and contextual data that can provide insights into the meanings and experiences of social actors. This is particularly relevant to the analysis of memes, as memes are cultural artifacts that are deeply embedded in social contexts and are subject to rapid evolution and transformation. (Pratiwi et al.)

We can say that Memes are not only used as a source to exemplify the socio-cultural setup of any space, but it adds more to the overall understanding of the transformation in the society. Moreover, analyzing the memes related to queer culture will not only be significant to understand the patterns of the texts and the images, but enable the masses to use memes as a platform for social commentary as well.

The three-dimensional model to interpret Memes

Memes may best be understood as cultural information that passes along from “person to person, yet gradually scales into a shared social phenomenon” (Shifman). Although they can mutate, memes are characteristic of being “contagious” and “infecting minds”, thereby becoming a major source and tool of socio-cultural study (Knobel and Al).

Limor Shifman in her article “Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker”, comes up with a three-dimensional model to analyze memes. She demonstrates and defines “memes as complex systems incorporating three dimensions: content, form, and stance”.

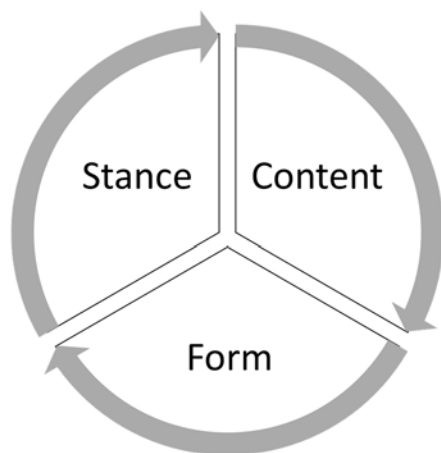


Figure 3: Three-Dimensional Model for Meme Analysis

Three-dimensional model for meme analysis is a discursive set of methods useful to study memes in their internal as well as external context. While the first two dimensions of ‘content’ and ‘form’ ought to provide an insight on the formation of the audio-visual and text-based format, i.e.,

the internal context, the third dimension of ‘stance’ allows an evaluation of the external context based on the study of the memes for addresser/addressee references.

In the case of queer memes, the empathetic alliance, important on the grounds of queer sensitivity, can be assessed through tone and narrative direction of the content and form, placed against other variables of socio-cultural and digital context.

The following Fig 4 is an example of how memes are engaging on and about queer perception across social and digital media. While memes in many forms are circulated freely and abundantly, their relevance relies heavily on whether they are understood by the mass or not. In the meme below the term ‘genderqueer’ becomes the center of meaning. The compensation the ‘genderqueer’ teacher receives for not being referred to with her preferred pronoun ‘they’ is made fun of here, when the pronoun ‘her’ is used in the same sentence. The zoomed in images that focus on the word ‘her’ go hand in hand with the sarcastic look of the man in the first picture.



Figure 4: Queer Meme example

Source: <https://x.com/memeadikt/status/1014906521531150339>

The set of text and image here, representing the first two dimensions of content and form, pair up well together to present to the audience the mockery behind the use and perception of preferred pronouns and the consequent responses to it. The text written in the format of a news headline highlighting an important concern, is ironically met with the mockery of the very thing. While the meme directly mocks the confusion and repercussions of using preferred pronouns, the ‘stance’ here is not apparent to read. As confusing and as specific the system of preferred pronouns has become in terms of queer sensitivity, the empathy towards the use and understanding of the

same is still under progress. The confusion is in fact manifold, when the invisible reporter/writer here is not careful with the use of two conflicting pronouns. The very idea of ‘genderqueer’ collapses with the use of ‘her’ along with ‘they’.

The reception of queer and non-queer audiences can vary in intensity and stance, but what transmits more successfully through this particular meme is the meaning of the word ‘genderqueer’. Similar to the content of the meme where the meaning of the word ‘genderqueer’ is of primary importance to understand the joke, the sensitivity towards the terminologies and pronouns associated with the queer community can be understood only when the meaning and use of these words are understood with clarity.

As a tool, memes have a two-fold benefit in assisting queer sensitization. Firstly, memes are freely produced and circulated with great rapidity. Secondly, they are created and designed to appeal to the general public. Memes often use trending frames of photos or short audio-visual clips. Memes therefore become a testament to the trend of the time, allowing at the same time an engagement to learn, present and represent ideas for mass circulation.

In the case of queer context, memes can be considered a tool of response from the queer community and for the queer community. Social media, where memes transmit at a high number, allows constant engagement, informed or naive, between users. Through this, sensitization and awareness spread simultaneously, even when these are not the primary functions of memes. One major element in this process is the use of specific terminologies. As noted for the above meme, the meaning and relevance of the entire meme is often driven by the meaning of a specific term of concept. ‘Genderqueer’ in the above meme, is one such word that finds its place in the vocabulary of the masses through rapid circulation. Since memes are a trending tool of engagement, such terminologies find a better chance of exposure through meme circulation. This parallel learning of language and social meaning are further driven by and drive the trends of the time. It becomes imperative to read closely how such terminologies are spread and what they contribute to the narrative of queer perception.

Cisgender

The first queer term that has been doing rounds through memes is ‘cisgender’. The recent controversy with Elon Musk’s tweet regarding the same term, has boosted the popularity of the term. Yet the term itself, in the context of queer sensitivity, is used with lesser clarity of

meaning and usage. This is apparent through the number of memes that circulate mocking the exasperation that goes with explaining the term ‘cisgender’.



Figure 5: Memes on the term ‘cisgender’

Sources: <https://makeameme.org/meme/when-educating-cisgender>

<https://muslimskeptic.com/2022/03/28/monday-memes-take-81/>

In the first meme, we see a skeleton on a bench, with the text referring to the state of ‘anyone’ explaining queer sensitive or trans related information to the ‘cisgender’ group. Yet again the meme is understandable only when the receiving audience realizes the meaning and relevance of the term ‘cisgender’. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the term cisgender as “someone whose internal sense of gender corresponds with the sex the person was identified as having at birth.” The second meme uses the famous sarcastic template of Khaby Lame to bring attention to the fact that ‘cisgender’ is synonymous to ‘normal’.

While the first meme uses the stance of pro-queer sensitivity where it shows how difficult it is to explain trans or queer related information to the ‘normal’ people, the second meme mocks this very term ‘cisgender’, alluding to the fact that easier and commoner words could be used to describe such terms. The use of specific terminology and confusing definitions are exasperating on both sides. Queer memes therefore also represent the response of this engagement from and with the queer community, where learning is regarded as important for sensitization.

Genderfluid



Figure 6: Memes on the term 'genderfluid'

Sources: <https://in.pinterest.com/pin/649785052467955997/>

https://www.reddit.com/r/ennnnnnnnnnnnbbbbby/comments/1benzdy/genderfluid_realizing_memes/

In the designated meme, the text focuses on the term 'Gender Fluid' which refers to the people who have issues to stand a clear stand about his/her gender. Apparently, the image of the non-binary selves signify the tussle of those people who are unable to answer to the inquisitive masses about the clear stand about gender defined attire. The use of memes to express the understanding of the term associated with the queer but to the 'normal' people the problem remains the same 'How to express the confusion related to gender'. The text includes a hashtag before 'Gender fluid' to categorize the keyword and to enable better search when it comes to the usage of this specific word. However, the repetition of the word 'extra' emphatically assures the extra confusion the queer community is facing. Nevertheless, the word adds to the socio-cultural implication by balancing the queer problems with the need to express their non-binary identity.

On the other hand, the second image is clearly stating the confusion in the text when it comes to the usage of the pronouns associated with the queer community. The phrase 'keeps changing' is aligned with the internal confusion among the people for the queer and by the queer. There is no specific gender for the 'fluidity' attached with the queer community. Moreover, the word 'Gender fluid' is capitalized to emphasize the new word for the common masses. Most importantly, the word 'preferred' is also not fixed or rather blurred in identifying with the specific role associated

with the queer community. Notably, the image demonstrates the mask on the face of the character, casually exploring the treatment to all those people who have always normalized the unthoughtful use of pronouns for ‘gender-fluid’ people. The intent behind the image and the text is to normalize the use of this term and to include the same as a new word to describe the feeling (particularly the inability to associate with fixed gender). Therefore, both the illustrations are explicitly manifesting the stance ‘identity is in the state of flux’.

Non-Binary People



Figure 7: Memes on the term ‘non-binary’

Sources: <https://www.deviantart.com/nix-achlys/art/HTF-Flaky-Meme-Nonbinary-Struggles-1047332534>

https://www.linkedin.com/posts/felicia-prehn_i-was-trying-to-find-a-funny-meme-about-being-activity-6939517430285139969-_84n/

The two sets of images depicted in the above fig 7, signify the term ‘non-binary’ in queer vocabulary. As per the three-dimensional model, there should be alignment of content, form and stance. The content manifests the struggles and is validated by the usage of the word struggle, just like the onlooker in the first meme is standing clueless, unable to make a choice. This choice between the gendered washrooms, represents inversely, the struggles of a ‘non-binary’ person whose identity does not fall between the binary gender divisions. Falling out of the set binary of gender is a problem manifested in the non-binary community as well as the gendered spaces of society.

This kind of conundrum is unsolvable, and rather leads to more confusion. Also, the blurring of the boundaries based on gender is unresolved even with new terminologies. This then is the main identity crisis of the queer community. In the second meme here, non-binary people running away from gendered languages is comparable to supernatural haunting. Unable to fit into any gendered system the non-binary is running away. This emphasizes the element of confusion and insolubility.

This confusion is the new normal for not just the queer community but anyone attempting to define or understand the stance of the queer. In both these memes centering on the term ‘non-binary people’, one sees apparent confusion and struggle.

Conclusion

With all these examples we realize that memes mostly function on the popularity index by the masses. Some vocabulary is retained in the mind of the masses as the trending words come on the news feed on the social platform. Evidently. Memes bridge the gap between the general understanding and casual usage of the word against the specificity of their definition, as is vital for queer vocabulary.

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