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Abstract

Introduction: Internet memes are a ubiquitous part of internet culture and a common communication tool among students. Because they are a good medium for expressing ideas and concepts in a concise and fun manner, memes are a potentially valuable tool for teaching and engaging students.

Statement of the Problem: Instructors may not know how to use memes in classroom assignments or activities to support learning objectives.

Literature Review: Students finding or creating their own class-related content is an empirically-supported way to enhance learning. Instructors can enhance learning by using multimedia approaches (pictures/videos in addition to words), which is a good fit for the use of memes. We include examples of ways that memes have already been used in psychology classrooms.

Teaching Implications: Incorporating meme assignments or activities in the classroom could be beneficial.

Conclusion: We describe how students can explain or generate memes that illustrate concepts related to course material. Instructions and supporting information and resources, as well as calls for research into the effectiveness of the use of memes in the classroom, are included.

Getting Psyched About Memes in the Psychology Classroom

Connecting class content to topics and formats that students already are familiar with can enrich student learning and engagement (Purnama, 2017). To that end, educators have begun to incorporate social media in class activities, such as having students use Pinterest for sharing class-relevant content (Schmidt, 2016), learn how to network with LinkedIn (Gerard, 2012), and receive content on Twitter and Facebook that reinforces core concepts (Blessing et al., 2012).

Memes are a major means by which students and others communicate on social media. According to the American Psychological Association (APA, n.d.), an *internet meme* is "an idea (e.g., a word or phrase, hashtag, hyperlink, picture, or video), usually rooted in popular culture, that is widely popularized and distributed on the World Wide Web, for example, via social networks, blogs, e-mail, and news sources" (Definition 1; for psychology meme examples see "What Makes for a Good Meme" section below). Despite the popularity of memes among educators from other disciplines (e.g., Underwood & Kararo, 2020; Wells, 2018), psychology educators have yet to fully embrace using memes in the classroom. We believe psychology educators are well positioned to consider and investigate the potential of memes to improve student learning and engagement (e.g., Riser et al., 2020). In this article, we review some reasons why using memes as class activities could be beneficial. In addition, we provide activity examples that involve students engaging with memes to review and communicate about psychology concepts.

These exercises go beyond the instructor adding a meme on a PowerPoint slide (something many of us have done!); they involve students explaining or creating memes. This article begins with a theoretical foundation, followed by a brief description of the nature of memes and how they have been used in educational contexts. We then describe examples of how

memes can be used in psychology classrooms and cautions in use, including ways these activities

could be elaborated on, and empirically studied.

Theoretical Foundation

Some instructors include content-relevant memes in their lecture slides (Reyes et al.,

2018), and there is some evidence that using memes in that passive way could be beneficial.

According to a review of the science of learning through multimedia, including pictures in

learning materials can engage students' visual memory pathways to support the movement of

knowledge into long-term memory (Mayer, 2008). Moreover, Mayer summarized experimental

research demonstrating that including relevant images alongside written content (compared to

words alone) and adopting a conversational (rather than formal) style in lesson delivery is highly

beneficial for learners. Drawing from this research, it is possible that tying memes to essential

course material and presenting them in a conversational manner may enhance memes'

educational effectiveness for improving student learning outcomes.

Students are often the passive consumers of memes both within and outside of the

classroom. By having students find/explain or create memes, the present activities go beyond the

practice of just including memes in lecture slides. These activity examples help students

consider, in a more mentally engaging way, what class content means and how it can be

explained in a concise and memorable manner. What students learn about a topic must be

distilled to its essential nature for inclusion in a meme, rather than a memorized definition. These

more active ways of using memes in the classroom may be reflected in higher levels in Bloom's

taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). We also connect explaining and creating memes in

relation to the learning outcome categories described by Kraiger et al. (1993).

There is educational value in having psychology students find or create their own class-related content. For example, rather than just passively watching instructor-chosen videos, students can actively co-create learning experiences with each other and the instructor by finding and sharing relevant content (Schmidt, 2016; Tyler et al., 2009). Such experiences create a learning environment in which students are actively involved in determining how class concepts connect to real-world content (Schmidt, 2016).

Recently, educators across a variety of disciplines have used memes in the classroom—for example, to teach economic concepts, build students' critical thinking and literacy skills, enrich medical students' learning in an online physiology class, and even prepare students for a chemistry final exam (see Engel et al., 2014; Harvey & Palese, 2018; Subbiramaniyan et al., in press; Underwood & Kararo, 2020; Wells, 2018). Psychology is starting to join in, with memes used within psychological statistics lectures as "bell ringers" to start classes on an engaging note (Peters, 2018). Moreover, memes have been used with anecdotal success across different universities' psychology classes with varying numbers of students: a psychological statistics class in Toronto (Metz, 2020), an introductory industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology class in North Carolina (McGonagle, 2020), a developmental psychology class in Pennsylvania (Conry-Murray, 2019), a general psychology class in Oregon (Kleinknecht, n.d.), a work and organizational psychology class in Dresden, Germany (Dörfel, 2020), and a psychological statistics and research methods course in Virginia (Katz, 2021). Although some teaching interventions are best suited for a particular subdiscipline or classroom size, meme assignments have been well received in a variety of classroom settings. Such assignments are flexible enough to be used across the psychology curriculum. There are typically two main types of meme assignments: meme explanation and meme generation.

Meme Activities: Two Ways

Having Students Explain Memes

One approach to using memes in a class activity is to have students *explain* how existing memes are connected to class content (Metz, 2020). Research suggests that asking students to generate explanations helps them learn (VanLehn et al., 1992). Students can be directed to social media accounts that are publicly accessible and asked to select a meme relevant to the course content. Next, students can be instructed to explain the meme in their own words, connecting the meme to content covered in class. Sample assignment instructions and some places to look for psychology-related memes are available in this paper's online Open Science Framework (OSF) project (see Kath et al., 2022a). In the context of Bloom's taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), this exercise would fall under the *analysis* category. In the context of Kraiger et al.'s (1993) taxonomy of learning outcomes, this exercise would be a demonstration of a cognitive learning outcome.

Having Students Create Memes

Another approach to using memes is to put the focus on students *creating* memes of their own based on course content (Conry-Murray, 2019). Sample assignment instructions and some information on how to make memes is included on OSF (see Kath et al., 2022b). In the context of Bloom's taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), this exercise would fall under the *synthesis* category because students are creating a new product that summarizes a key concept in a concise, humorous manner. In the context of Kraiger et al.'s (1993) taxonomy of learning outcomes, this exercise would be a demonstration of a skill-based learning outcome related to scientific communication skills.

What Makes for a Good Meme

Creating memes is a challenging task that involves identifying a concept, choosing a still image or GIF that matches the concept, and writing captions. Literat and van den Berg (2019) note that the perceived value of a meme depends on the target population. For example, I-O psychology-related memes are geared towards practicing I-O psychologists and current/former students of the subdiscipline. In an introductory I-O psychology course, it is typical to cover reliability and validity issues associated with unstructured employment interviews (see Campion et al., 1998). The widespread use of unstructured interviews rather than structured interviews is disheartening to most I-O psychologists. This concept will be used to describe how memes can be created to convey this point.

One thing that has been noted as a key ingredient to a successful meme is having a "certain inside-joke quality" (Hellyer, 2015, para. 5). To create a meme using this concept, it would be helpful to know both the facts (structured employment interviews are preferable to unstructured ones) and frustration associated with the topic, because both help create that inside-joke quality. Thus, the topic fits with the target audience (Literat & van den Berg, 2019), and the person crafting the meme then needs to present it in a way that is culturally meaningful to the target audience. For example, successful memes often depict content from popular TV shows (e.g., The Office) or movies (e.g., The Avengers) or universally-recognized content, such as cute cats and dogs or relatable facial expressions. The appropriate image and text help make a meme salient to the audience.

There are several meme templates that could be chosen to illustrate the concept of using standardized interview questions for all candidates. One such template comes from the movie Spider-Man: No Way Home and depicts fellow Avengers Wong and Doctor Strange

(https://twitter.com/iopsychmemes/status/1438472934578966534). Wong, depicted in the meme as an I-O psychologist, says, "Please don't make up questions when you interview people," to which Doctor Strange, depicted as the hiring manager, replies, "Fine, I won't." In the next frame, Wong leaves through a portal, and in the last frame, Doctor Strange winks at the camera, implying he has no intention of following Wong's instructions. Another option is to choose a popular template of Robert Downey Jr., with his hand on his chest, eyes closed, mouth slightly open, and a look of relief on his face (https://www.instagram.com/p/B8OfN0GAz_4/). Above the picture is the caption: "When interview questions are used consistently across candidates to reduce bias." This template highlights a benefit of using structured interview questions, which is that they reduce bias. Both of these images represent people or characters the target audience is likely to know, and the meme templates are ones people may have, in fact, seen before. Thus, there is a cultural familiarity and relevance (see also Cautions section below).

The two aforementioned memes are good quality because they highlight information that I-O psychologists know and acknowledge a point of shared frustration. Because memes must be short and witty, getting the wording "just right" is both challenging and important. Further, to see a superhero and/or actor communicating this concept is humorous because of the contrast with one's image of an I-O psychologist (i.e., nerdier than Wong or Robert Downey Jr.).

Finer Points for Application/Adaptation

Grading

You may choose to grade memes on a credit/no credit basis, with a quick glance to determine a basic level of clarity/accuracy, but you may wish to create a more detailed grading scheme. Obviously, defining good performance is a key component of identifying grading criteria. To help students think about what constitutes good performance on a meme creation

assignment, you can simply ask them to share thoughts about what makes for a good meme or a bad meme, assuming you have good attendance and robust discussion among your students. You may discuss who the intended audience is for the meme: Are you hoping students will evaluate or incorporate some scientific communication skills so that the concept would be understood by those without specialized training (as one of the authors did when assigning meme creation to graduate students)? Or is it simply enough that the instructor and classmates are able to understand and enjoy the meme?

One way to review others' efforts and reward those who are exhibiting good performance on a meme creation assignment would be to identify the top few memes from the class and submit them for peer voting, as suggested by Marshall and colleagues (2021). You could also put students into small groups to review each other's memes and provide feedback for improving them, as a way of honing communication skills.

If the learning objective includes scientific communication skills, then a recent paper by Chew and colleagues (2020) could prove very useful. They present a typology of communication contexts that connect with Goal 4 in the APA's (2013) guidelines underscoring the development of effective communication skills for the undergraduate psychology major. Their Table 3 (see Chew et al., 2020, p. 301) outlines a rubric for grading on clarity, coherence, mechanics, APA style/formatting (not applicable for memes), and content/source (which is typically not included in memes themselves). This rubric could also be applied to explanations of memes or other written assignments submitted alongside the meme.

Memes could also be used as part of a quiz or exam, but care would need to be taken to ensure that the meme was accessible across various cultures, experiences, and abilities. For example, some memes work best when the viewer has experience with the pop culture element

depicted. Other memes may rely on colloquialisms that are not easily understood by non-native English speakers. For these reasons, we recommend that instructors stay away from using memes in high-stakes assessments until the meme has been pilot tested with the target student audience for its broad accessibility (a bit more on this issue is discussed below in Cautions).

Adaptations

In addition to being a stand-alone activity, the meme activity can be used in conjunction with other written exercises. For example, asking students to include a relevant meme with a submitted written exercise could help students learn about a particular topic more effectively. The meme could act almost as a summary or abstract of the topic.

The best memes that students create could even be featured in future semesters of the course. Memes from a previous semester could be presented as a "sneak peek" of what students will learn later in the semester. Seeing a meme that a student from a previous semester made might pique interest in a topic to follow. Then, once the topic has been covered, the meme could be shown again, at which point students should be able to understand (and explain) the meme. Memes from previous semesters could also be used at the end of a concept's presentation to summarize/reinforce the concept. Because memes are highly visual and concise, they could serve as a memory aid for students (Mayer, 2008).

Cautions

One important caution to consider would be ensuring that this activity was accessible to those with visual impairments. Memes posted on social media may lack the alternate text necessary to make the graphics accessible (Greenspan, 2020). We recommend consulting guides for how to make memes more accessible (e.g., Gleason et al., 2019), talking with your university's student disability services office, and/or checking in with your students with visual

impairments about the potential for accessibility issues with memes to make sure the assignment works for all of your students.

Another caution to consider is that memes often depict human beings. As such, we encourage psychology instructors and students to "remember the human" (see Shea, 1994, p. 35) in their memes. For example, journalists (e.g., Hess & O'Neill, 2017) and scholars (e.g., Sobande, 2021) have observed non-Black individuals' excessive use of reaction GIFs[1] depicting Black individuals—an example of *digital blackface*, which is "the act of inhabiting a black persona [and] employing digital technology to co-opt a perceived cache or black cool" (Jackson, 2017, para. 10). Such behavior is disturbing because it appropriates and dehumanizes the experiences of Black individuals, whose emotional expressions are being used for humor (Outley et al., 2021). Non-Black individuals' overuse of memes such as "Oprah's 'You Get a Car'" (n.d.) or "Sweet Brown / Ain't Nobody Got Time For That" (n.d.) perpetuates stereotypes portraying women of color as overly emotional (Hess & O'Neill, 2017) and, often, can amount to acts of digital racism (Sobande, 2021). Psychology instructors and students should be aware of these issues when creating and sharing memes depicting individuals. To quote Dr. Lauren M. Jackson (2017) in a *Teen Vogue* op-ed:

> Now, I'm not suggesting that white and nonblack people refrain from ever circulating a black person's image for amusement or otherwise . . . . There's no prescriptive or proscriptive step-by-step rulebook to follow, nobody's coming to take GIFs away. But no digital behavior exists in a deracialized vacuum. We all need to be cognizant of what we

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[1] A reaction GIF is "a GIF of someone or something (such as a celebrity or an animal) that is sent or posted in reply to something (such as a text message or a social media post or comment) and that typically depicts and expresses a reaction" (Merriam-Webster, n.d., Definition 1).

share, how we share, and to what extent that sharing dramatizes preexisting racial

formulas inherited from "real life." (para. 6)

Implied in the quote above is that concerns about digital blackface and other racially insensitive

depictions should be balanced with concerns about lack of representation of underrepresented

individuals.

Finally, it is helpful to remember that some of these memes are connected to cultural

experiences that may make it difficult for students and/or instructors with different cultural

backgrounds to fully appreciate the memes that are created from a U.S. cultural perspective.

Most memes are designed to leverage fairly universal facial expressions or situations. In fact,

meme images posted from a U.S. cultural lens have been translated into other languages for

sharing (e.g., Arabic [https://twitter.com/OmarAlbaraidi/status/1471501433249812482], Malay

[https://twitter.com/DrAliziAlias/status/1469570763694829571]), indicating that they have the

possibility of translating across cultures. Nevertheless, we suggest that when you use memes in

the classroom, you give your students choices. In the "Having Students Explain Memes" activity,

McGonagle (2020) allows her students to choose a meme related to the course content, which we

think reflects best practices for this assignment. This allows students not attuned to the U.S.

cultural context to pick a meme that is more universally appreciated. In the "Having Students

Create Memes" activity, students will naturally gravitate towards meme templates that they

understand and appreciate. Taken together, we encourage instructors to discuss issues of

accessibility, diversity, equity, and inclusion as part of meme assignments in their classes.

Need for Empirical Research

There is a paucity of research on memes in the psychology classroom. One notable

exception is Riser et al.'s (2020) study incorporating meme creation in a lifespan development

course. Over the course of three years, four courses were given a traditional APA-style research essay ($n = 190$), and four courses were given a scientific meme writing assignment ($n = 216$). The meme assignment was of equal difficulty as the traditional writing assignment, based on grades assigned to the experimental and control group; however, more students turned in the meme assignment (99.1%) than the traditional writing assignment (93.4%), which is an indication that it may have been more engaging. Students reported that they appreciated having the opportunity to share their knowledge through the meme on their social media accounts and felt positive emotional responses to engagement from their social media community members. Qualitatively, students also reported greater knowledge in scientific literacy and application skills. Although the focus of Riser et al. (2020) was a lifespan development course, we can see the value of meme assignments in other courses.

We encourage more researchers to investigate the effects of meme evaluation and generation on learning outcomes. For example, because memes involve translating psychology concepts for a new audience, it seems possible that meme creation could increase concept retention, which could be tested with an experimental research design. In addition, research on how faculty use memes in their courses currently would provide a baseline knowledge of how pervasive memes are in the classroom. The use of memes in lectures should also be studied as this approach is commonly used by faculty to improve slide design and presumably student engagement.

Conclusion

In sum, we believe that meme assignments can be a fun and memorable way to encourage students to spend extra time thinking about course concepts in a unique way. Memes are ubiquitous on the internet these days, and as such, memes may be leveraged as powerful learning

tools. We often want our students to be able to not just regurgitate concept definitions, and memes can make them think about how these concepts can be illustrated for others. We think memes can be a powerful tool in our student engagement toolkit. By asking students to be active participants in explaining or generating short, powerful ideas, instructors can help students distill knowledge into an easily shareable form.

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