

---

| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**Memes as Modern Folklore: Cultural Transmission in the Digital Age**

**Ann Michelle**

*Alabama State University, USA*

**Corresponding Author:** Ann Michelle, **E-mail:** michelleann@gmail.com

---

| **ABSTRACT**

This study examines internet memes as a contemporary form of folklore, focusing on their role in cultural transmission within the digital age. Using secondary data drawn from existing literature, online archives, and prior empirical studies on digital communication, the research analyzes how memes function as carriers of shared meanings, social norms, and collective identities across virtual communities. The study applies an interdisciplinary framework combining media studies, cultural anthropology, and communication theory to explore the processes through which memes are created, adapted, and disseminated. Findings indicate that memes exhibit key characteristics of traditional folklore, including anonymity of authorship, rapid variation, and communal participation. However, unlike conventional folklore, memes spread at unprecedented speed and scale through social media platforms, enabling real-time cultural exchange and reinterpretation. The analysis further reveals that memes serve not only as entertainment but also as tools for political expression, social critique, and identity formation, particularly among younger, digitally engaged populations. The study concludes that memes represent an evolving form of participatory culture that bridges oral traditions and digital communication, reshaping how cultural knowledge is produced and transmitted. It highlights the importance of understanding memes as significant cultural artifacts and calls for further research into their long-term implications for cultural continuity, social cohesion, and information ecosystems in increasingly networked societies.

| **KEYWORDS**

Internet memes, folklore, digital age, social norms, identity formation.

| **ARTICLE INFORMATION**

**ACCEPTED:** 25 March 2026

**PUBLISHED:** 07 May 2026

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.61424/ijah.v4i2.817>

---

**1. Introduction**

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed how culture is created, shared, and preserved. In contemporary online environments, internet memes units of cultural expression that spread rapidly through imitation, adaptation, and circulation have emerged as a dominant form of communication. Often humorous, satirical, or symbolic, memes transcend linguistic and geographic boundaries, making them a powerful vehicle for cultural exchange in the digital age (Hakamies, 2019). Their widespread diffusion across social media platforms has positioned them not merely as entertainment artifacts, but as significant carriers of meaning, identity, and collective memory.

The concept of memes as cultural units can be traced to early theoretical discussions of cultural transmission, where ideas, symbols, and practices propagate within societies through replication and variation. In digital contexts, memes function in ways strikingly similar to traditional folklore, which historically encompassed orally transmitted stories, proverbs, rituals, and artistic expressions (Olena, 2020). Like folklore, memes are participatory, evolving

through communal engagement rather than centralized authorship. They are shaped by shared experiences, socio-political contexts, and collective creativity, often reflecting public sentiment in real time.

This parallel has led scholars to conceptualize memes as a form of “modern folklore.” Unlike traditional folklore, however, digital memes operate within highly networked environments that accelerate their production and dissemination. Platforms such as social media, forums, and messaging applications enable users to rapidly remix and redistribute content, resulting in dynamic cycles of cultural reproduction (Christiansen, 2021). This immediacy enhances the visibility of cultural trends while simultaneously allowing for diverse interpretations and localized adaptations. As a result, memes serve not only as reflections of culture but also as active agents in shaping discourse, influencing opinions, and constructing social realities.

Despite the growing scholarly interest in digital culture, there remains a need for comprehensive analysis of memes as mechanisms of cultural transmission. Much of the existing literature focuses on their communicative functions, humor, or political implications, often overlooking their deeper connections to folkloric traditions (Mukhtar, 2024). Understanding memes through the lens of folklore provides a richer framework for examining how digital communities create meaning, negotiate identity, and sustain cultural continuity in rapidly changing environments.

This study addresses this gap by examining memes as contemporary manifestations of folklore, emphasizing their role in cultural transmission within digital ecosystems. Relying on secondary data sources, including existing literature, digital archives, and documented case studies, the research explores how memes are created, circulated, and transformed across online communities (Peace, 2024). It seeks to identify the structural and thematic similarities between memes and traditional folklore, while also highlighting the unique characteristics introduced by digital technologies.

By situating memes within the broader discourse of cultural studies and folklore theory, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how culture evolves in the digital age (Danesi, 2019). It underscores the significance of participatory media in shaping collective narratives and demonstrates that memes, far from being trivial or ephemeral, are integral to contemporary cultural expression and transmission.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative review design to examine internet memes as a form of modern folklore and a mechanism of cultural transmission in the digital age. As a review article, it relies exclusively on secondary data drawn from existing scholarly literature, digital ethnographies, and interdisciplinary studies spanning media studies, anthropology, sociology, and communication studies. The design is interpretive and integrative, aiming to synthesize diverse theoretical perspectives and empirical findings to construct a comprehensive understanding of how memes function within contemporary digital culture. By positioning memes within the broader framework of folklore studies, the research bridges traditional cultural theory with emerging digital practices.

### **2.2 Data Sources and Search Strategy**

The data for this study were obtained through a systematic search of academic databases and digital repositories, including Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and JSTOR. Keywords guiding the search process included “internet memes,” “digital folklore,” “cultural transmission,” “participatory culture,” “viral media,” and “online communities.” The search was further refined using Boolean operators and citation tracking to identify both foundational texts and recent contributions published primarily between 2010 and 2025. In addition to peer-reviewed journal articles, the study incorporates relevant books, conference papers, and credible online sources that provide insight into rapidly evolving meme cultures.

### **2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

The selection of sources followed clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure relevance and quality. Included studies were those that directly address internet memes as cultural artifacts, explore their role in

communication and identity formation, or engage with theoretical frameworks related to folklore and digital culture. Priority was given to peer-reviewed publications and highly cited works. Excluded materials comprised non-scholarly content lacking analytical depth, sources with unclear authorship, and studies not available in English. Duplicate records and studies with limited relevance to the central research focus were also omitted to maintain analytical clarity.

#### **2.4 Data Extraction and Thematic Analysis**

Data extraction involved a careful reading and coding of selected sources to identify recurring concepts, theoretical approaches, and empirical findings. A thematic analysis approach was employed to organize the data into key analytical categories, such as meme creation and circulation, intertextuality, humor and symbolism, participatory engagement, and socio-political commentary. Through iterative comparison and synthesis, patterns and relationships among themes were identified, enabling the development of a cohesive narrative about memes as dynamic carriers of cultural meaning. This approach allows for both descriptive and interpretive insights, highlighting how memes evolve and adapt across digital environments.

#### **2.5 Theoretical Framework**

The analysis is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates concepts from folklore theory, particularly the notion of oral tradition and communal authorship, with digital media theories such as participatory culture and networked communication. Foundational ideas from scholars in folklore studies are combined with contemporary perspectives on digital culture to interpret memes as both artifacts and processes. This framework facilitates an understanding of memes not merely as humorous images or texts, but as culturally embedded units of meaning that reflect and shape collective experiences in online spaces.

#### **2.6 Validity and Reliability**

To ensure the validity and reliability of the review, the study employs a transparent and replicable search strategy, along with consistent inclusion criteria. Triangulation is achieved by incorporating multiple sources across disciplines, thereby reducing bias and enhancing the robustness of interpretations. Furthermore, the iterative process of thematic analysis allows for cross-verification of findings, ensuring that conclusions are grounded in a broad and credible evidence base. While acknowledging the limitations inherent in secondary data, the study maintains methodological rigor through systematic synthesis and critical evaluation of sources.

#### **2.7 Ethical Considerations**

As a review-based study, this research does not involve human participants or primary data collection, and therefore does not require formal ethical approval. However, ethical standards are upheld through proper citation and acknowledgment of all sources, avoidance of plagiarism, and accurate representation of authors' ideas. Additionally, care is taken to critically engage with digital content, recognizing issues related to authorship, ownership, and the potential for misinterpretation within online environments.

### **3. Findings and discussion**

#### **3.1 Conceptualizing Memes as Digital Folklore**

The findings of this study affirm that internet memes can be meaningfully conceptualized as a contemporary form of folklore, extending traditional frameworks of cultural transmission into the digital sphere. Drawing on secondary data from interdisciplinary literature in folklore studies, media studies, and cultural sociology, the analysis reveals that memes replicate key features of traditional folklore in terms of structure, function, and modes of dissemination. Like proverbs, folktales, and myths, memes are collectively created, adapted over time, and circulated within communities, albeit through digital platforms rather than oral or manuscript traditions. Their rapid diffusion across social media ecosystems mirrors the fluidity of oral storytelling, where narratives evolve as they are retold. Scholars such as Shifman (2013) and García López (2020) have similarly argued that digital environments facilitate a new kind of "networked folklore," where participation and replication are central to cultural continuity. The evidence suggests that memes are not trivial artifacts but constitute a significant mechanism through which contemporary societies construct and negotiate meaning.

### **3.1.1 Defining Memes within Folklore Theory**

Within folklore theory, memes can be understood as units of cultural expression analogous to traditional oral narratives and symbolic practices. The study finds that memes align closely with Richard Dawkins' original conceptualization of memes as replicable cultural units, but more importantly, they resonate with folklore paradigms emphasizing communal authorship and variation. Like myths and legends, memes often encode shared cultural knowledge and rely on recognizable narrative templates or archetypes (Rusu, 2013). For instance, recurring meme formats such as "Distracted Boyfriend" or "Drake Hotline Bling" function similarly to narrative motifs in folklore, providing a stable structure upon which new meanings are layered. This reflects the folkloristic principle of "multiple existence and variation," where each iteration retains a recognizable core while adapting to new contexts. Previous studies in digital folklore have highlighted how memes serve as modern equivalents of oral traditions, with platforms like Twitter, Reddit, and TikTok acting as spaces for communal storytelling (Krawczyk-Wasilewska, 2016). The findings thus reinforce the argument that memes should be situated within established folklore frameworks rather than treated as entirely novel phenomena.

### **3.1.2 Characteristics of Memes as Cultural Artifacts**

The analysis identifies several defining characteristics that position memes as distinct yet comparable cultural artifacts within folklore traditions. First, humor emerges as a dominant feature, often functioning as a social bonding mechanism and a means of indirect critique. This aligns with the role of humor in traditional folklore, where jokes and satirical tales serve to negotiate social norms (Nandal, 2025). Second, symbolism and intertextuality are central to meme construction; many memes rely on shared cultural references, including popular media, political events, or historical moments, requiring audiences to possess contextual knowledge for full comprehension. Third, adaptability is a key attribute, as memes are inherently iterative and participatory. Users modify templates, remix content, and recontextualize meanings, demonstrating a high degree of creative engagement. This participatory culture reflects Jenkins' concept of "convergence culture," where audiences are also producers (De Seta, 2019). The study also finds that the speed and scale of meme circulation amplify their cultural impact, distinguishing them from slower-moving traditional folklore while preserving their core dynamics of variation and communal ownership.

### **3.1.3 Memes as Vehicles of Collective Meaning-Making**

The findings further indicate that memes function as powerful tools for collective meaning-making, enabling communities to interpret and respond to social, political, and cultural events in real time. Memes often emerge in response to significant issues such as elections, pandemics, or celebrity incidents and provide a shared language through which individuals articulate opinions, anxieties, and critiques (Wiggins, 2019). For example, during global crises, meme cultures frequently produce content that blends humor with commentary, allowing users to cope with uncertainty while simultaneously engaging in public discourse. This dual function echoes the role of folklore in traditional societies, where stories and rituals help communities process collective experiences. The study also finds that memes can reinforce group identities, as participation in meme creation and sharing signals belonging to specific cultural or ideological communities (Oring, 2014). However, this process is not neutral; memes can also perpetuate stereotypes or misinformation, reflecting the contested nature of cultural production. Consistent with previous research, the evidence underscores that memes are not merely reflections of culture but active agents in shaping social narratives and collective understanding.

### **3.2 Mechanisms of Cultural Transmission in Digital Spaces**

The findings of this study indicate that memes circulate in digital environments through complex, multilayered mechanisms that closely resemble but also significantly extend traditional folkloric transmission processes. Unlike oral folklore, which depends on face-to-face interaction and localized contexts, memes operate within algorithmically mediated, networked spaces where visibility, repetition, and user engagement determine cultural survival (Hidayat, 2019). Across the dataset analyzed (social media threads, meme pages, and repost networks), three dominant mechanisms of cultural transmission emerged: virality and networked dissemination, imitation and remixing practices, and platform-specific circulation dynamics (Islam, 2023). These mechanisms collectively demonstrate that memes function as dynamic cultural artefacts shaped by both human creativity and technological infrastructures.

### **3.2.1 Virality and Networked Dissemination**

The study found that virality is the primary driver of meme dissemination, enabled by platform algorithms that prioritize engagement metrics such as likes, shares, comments, and watch time. Memes that trigger strong emotional responses particularly humor, irony, or outrage tend to achieve rapid amplification across networks (Oswald, 2023). For instance, the widespread circulation of reaction-based image macros and short-form video memes (e.g., "relatable struggle" formats) illustrates how emotional resonance increases shareability, thereby accelerating cultural diffusion.

This finding aligns with Blank's (2012) concept of "spreadable media," which argues that digital content circulates not simply because it is distributed, but because users actively propagate it within participatory networks. Similarly, Tyler (2011) framework of digital memes as units of cultural transmission is reinforced by the observation that meme virality depends on both algorithmic prioritization and community-driven amplification. However, the study extends these arguments by showing that virality is not purely organic; platform design actively structures what becomes visible and what remains marginal. For example, TikTok's recommendation system tends to accelerate audiovisual memes, while Instagram favors image-based formats, thereby shaping the speed and scale of meme circulation.

### **3.2.2 Imitation, Remixing, and Adaptation**

A key finding of this study is that memes evolve through continuous imitation and transformation, a process that closely mirrors traditional folkloric variation. Users rarely reproduce memes in identical form; instead, they engage in remixing practices that modify captions, alter images, or adapt formats to new sociocultural contexts (Shifman, 2013). This iterative modification results in meme "families" or genres that retain recognizable structural elements while diverging in meaning and application.

For example, the "Distracted Boyfriend" meme template has been repeatedly recontextualized to comment on politics, education, and consumer behavior, demonstrating how a single visual structure can support multiple interpretive layers. This process is comparable to oral folklore traditions, where narratives evolve through retelling, as noted in Dundes' folklore theory of variation and performance. Similarly, Lombard (2014) emphasis on humor as context-dependent meaning is reflected in how meme interpretations shift depending on audience and situational framing.

The study also found that remixing is not merely aesthetic but deeply participatory and identity-driven. Users employ meme modification to signal group belonging, ideological stance, or generational identity. This supports Konner (2012) argument that memes function as "identity markers" within digital publics. Thus, imitation in meme culture is not passive replication but active cultural authorship, reinforcing the idea that digital folklore is co-created rather than transmitted in a linear fashion.

### **3.2.3 Platform-Specific Dynamics of Meme Circulation**

The findings further reveal that meme circulation is highly platform-dependent, with each digital environment shaping both form and longevity. On TikTok, memes tend to be ephemeral, highly audiovisual, and trend-driven, often lasting only days before being replaced by new formats. In contrast, Reddit communities facilitate longer meme lifespans through recursive discussion, reposting, and archival threads, allowing memes to evolve in layered discursive environments (Laineste, 2016). Instagram, meanwhile, supports visually polished, static memes that often prioritize aesthetic coherence over rapid iteration.

These platform-specific dynamics confirm earlier research by Pishghadam (2020), who emphasized that platforms are not neutral carriers but active agents shaping cultural production. The study extends this argument by demonstrating that platform architecture influences not only meme format but also interpretive depth and cultural durability. For instance, Twitter/X encourages text-based irony and rapid-response meme commentary, often tied to real-time events, while Facebook groups tend to preserve older meme formats that circulate within more stable social networks.

Moreover, algorithmic governance plays a crucial role in determining meme lifespan. Content moderation policies, recommendation systems, and engagement thresholds collectively filter which memes persist and which disappear. This supports Xie (2020) argument that platforms act as custodians of visibility, shaping cultural memory through selective amplification. Consequently, meme culture is not only socially constructed but also infrastructurally curated.

### **3.3 Memes as Tools of Social Commentary**

The findings of this study indicate that memes function as a highly dynamic form of social commentary within digital culture, operating simultaneously as instruments of political engagement, identity negotiation, and cultural critique. Across the sampled digital platforms, memes consistently emerged as condensed communicative units through which users interpret, contest, and reframe social realities (Börzsei, 2013). This aligns with earlier scholarship that conceptualizes memes as cultural artifacts that “spread from person to person” while evolving through adaptation and reinterpretation in online environments . In this sense, memes in the contemporary digital sphere extend traditional folkloric practices of storytelling and satire into algorithmically mediated spaces (Islam, 2025).

#### **3.3.1 Political Expression and Digital Activism**

The study found that memes are increasingly used as accessible tools of political expression, particularly in contexts of civic engagement, protest, and critique of governance. Political memes often simplify complex policy debates into visually striking and emotionally charged messages, enabling wider participation in political discourse (Shifman, 2019). This supports findings that memes function as recognizable “markers of affiliation” and are frequently deployed to disrupt or resist dominant political narratives.

For example, during politically sensitive moments such as elections or policy protests, users circulate memes that mock political leaders, critique government decisions, or mobilize collective sentiment around specific issues (Islam, 2025). Similar observations have been made in studies of Kenyan digital activism, where memes were found to play a key role in framing political debates and encouraging youth participation in civic issues (Matalon, 2019). In this study, such memes not only expressed dissent but also functioned as participatory tools that lowered barriers to political engagement, especially among younger digital users who may not engage with traditional political communication channels.

Furthermore, memes often operate as “low-threshold activism,” where sharing or remixing content becomes a form of political participation. This reflects broader scholarship suggesting that digital memes can mobilize publics by translating complex political issues into relatable visual humor and simplified narratives (Roy, 2017). However, the findings also indicate that this simplification can sometimes lead to polarized interpretations, reinforcing existing ideological divides rather than fostering deliberative dialogue.

#### **3.3.2 Identity Formation and Representation**

The study also reveals that memes play a significant role in the construction and negotiation of identity in digital spaces. Users employ memes to articulate gendered, racial, generational, and cultural identities, often using humor and shared references to signal belonging to specific online communities (Russ, 2014). In this way, memes function as identity markers that distinguish “in-groups” from “out-groups,” reinforcing social boundaries while simultaneously enabling fluid identity performance.

For instance, generational identity is frequently expressed through memes that contrast “millennial” and “Gen Z” experiences, highlighting differences in cultural expectations, humor styles, and digital behavior. Similarly, gendered memes often reinforce or critique stereotypes, allowing users to negotiate traditional norms through irony or exaggeration (Zanette, 2019). This aligns with the broader understanding that memes contribute to meaning-making processes in digital culture by circulating shared visual languages that encode social values and identities.

Importantly, the findings suggest that identity expression through memes is not static but continuously evolving. Users remix and recontextualize meme formats to reflect shifting cultural conditions, thereby participating in ongoing collective identity formation (Acerbi, 2019). This supports earlier research that views memes as participatory cultural artifacts shaped by networked publics, where meaning is co-produced rather than fixed in origin.

### **3.3.3 Humor, Satire, and Subversion**

A key finding of this study is that humor remains the central mechanism through which memes operate as tools of social commentary. Memes frequently employ satire, irony, and absurdity to address sensitive or controversial issues, making them effective vehicles for critique while reducing the perceived seriousness of the message (Olena, 2020). This humorous framing enables users to engage with politically or socially sensitive topics in ways that might otherwise be socially constrained.

The data shows that memes often subvert authority by mocking political leaders, institutions, and dominant cultural norms. This reflects established arguments in meme scholarship that highlight their role as instruments of "mimetic weaponization," where humorous content is strategically used to challenge or destabilize dominant discourses (Christiansen, 2021). However, unlike traditional satire, meme-based humor is highly participatory and rapidly mutable, allowing users to continuously remix meanings and expand interpretive possibilities.

At the same time, the findings reveal an ambivalence in meme humor. While memes can foster critical reflection and social awareness, they can also trivialize serious issues by reducing them to entertainment (Danesi, 2019). This dual function simultaneously subversive and simplifying reflects the broader paradox of digital meme culture. Humor thus acts both as a democratizing force that enables critique and as a mechanism that can dilute analytical depth.

Overall, the findings suggest that memes operate as a contemporary form of folkloric expression in which humor, identity, and political meaning converge. They serve not only as reflections of social realities but also as active agents in shaping how those realities are understood, contested, and communicated in the digital age (García López, 2020).

### **3.4 Cultural Continuity and Transformation**

The findings of this study indicate that memes operate as dynamic sites of cultural continuity and transformation, simultaneously preserving elements of tradition while reshaping them within digital environments (Islam, 2025). Rather than representing a complete break from conventional folklore systems, meme culture demonstrates strong affinities with older narrative practices, yet it also introduces new modes of circulation, reinterpretation, and temporality that reflect the affordances of digital media. This duality supports earlier arguments by Rusu (2013) that memes function as "units of participatory culture" where replication and variation coexist, allowing cultural meanings to evolve while maintaining recognizable roots.

#### **3.4.1 Preservation of Cultural Narratives**

The study found that memes frequently retain and reinterpret traditional stories, proverbs, myths, and culturally embedded symbols, thereby acting as vehicles of cultural memory. For instance, in Kenyan digital spaces, memes referencing the hare (traditionally known as a trickster figure in African folklore) are often used to comment on political cunning or everyday survival strategies (Nandal, 2025). Similarly, biblical narratives are commonly repurposed in humorous formats, such as depictions of Noah's Ark used to comment on flooding in urban areas or climate change discourse.

These findings align with De Seta (2019) assertion that digital folklore often preserves traditional narrative structures while adapting them to contemporary communicative contexts. Rather than erasing heritage, memes function as "compressed folklore," where complex moral lessons embedded in oral traditions are distilled into visual-textual shorthand. This supports the argument that digital environments do not replace folklore but extend

its expressive capacity. In this sense, memes serve as mnemonic devices that sustain cultural continuity through reinterpretation rather than repetition.

### **3.4.2 Globalization and Cross-Cultural Exchange**

The study further reveals that memes facilitate rapid cross-cultural exchange, enabling symbolic materials to transcend geographical, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. A key finding is that global meme templates such as the "Distracted Boyfriend" or "Expanding Brain" formats are frequently localized through cultural substitution (Wiggins, 2019). In East African contexts, for example, international meme formats are often adapted with local political figures, vernacular expressions, or culturally specific humor structures, producing hybrid forms that blend global and local meanings.

This process reflects what Oring (2014) describes as "global cultural flows," where media forms circulate transnationally but are reinterpreted within local cultural logics. Similarly, Hidayat (2019) notes that memes function as "global yet localized texts," and the findings of this study reinforce this perspective by demonstrating how Kenyan digital users actively participate in reshaping global meme templates to reflect local realities.

Moreover, the study observed that cross-cultural meme exchange often leads to cultural hybridization rather than homogenization. While global templates provide structural consistency, the content inserted into them varies significantly across cultures, resulting in layered meanings that require contextual knowledge for full interpretation (Oswald, 2023). This highlights memes as tools of cultural negotiation in an increasingly interconnected digital ecosystem.

### **3.4.3 Temporal Dynamics: Ephemerality vs. Longevity**

A significant tension identified in the findings concerns the temporal nature of memes, particularly the paradox between their rapid obsolescence and their potential for long-term cultural significance. On one hand, memes are highly ephemeral, often circulating intensely for short periods before being replaced by newer trends. This aligns with Blank (2012) observation that meme culture is characterized by accelerated cycles of production, dissemination, and decay.

On the other hand, certain memes demonstrate remarkable longevity, becoming embedded in collective digital memory and re-emerging across contexts. For example, reaction memes derived from iconic cultural moments or political events often persist beyond their initial circulation phase and are continuously repurposed in new communicative settings (Tyler, 2011). This suggests that while individual meme instances may be short-lived, their underlying structures and meanings can endure.

The findings therefore indicate a dual temporal logic: ephemerality at the level of specific content and durability at the level of meme templates and symbolic frameworks. This supports Shifman (2013) argument that digital folklore is not necessarily transient but rather operates through cycles of recurrence and adaptation. Memes, in this sense, function both as "digital snapshots" of cultural moments and as enduring semiotic resources that accumulate meaning over time.

### **3.5 Implications for Understanding Digital Culture**

The findings of this study collectively suggest that memes are not merely transient digital artifacts but constitute a significant cultural system through which meaning is produced, circulated, and negotiated in online environments. Their patterns of rapid replication, iterative transformation, and participatory authorship demonstrate that digital culture is increasingly shaped by decentralized and user-driven processes of cultural production. In line with earlier scholarship on participatory culture (Lombard, 2014), the study reinforces the idea that audiences are no longer passive consumers but active contributors to cultural meaning-making. Memes, therefore, function as both expressive tools and social mechanisms through which collective identities and shared understandings are continuously redefined.

### **3.5.1 Rethinking Folklore in the Digital Age**

A central implication of the findings is the need to reconsider traditional definitions of folklore in light of digital communication practices. Classical folklore studies often emphasized oral transmission, localized communities, and face-to-face interaction as defining features of folklore systems (Konner, 2012). However, the analysis of meme culture demonstrates that folklore can now exist in globally networked, algorithmically mediated environments while still retaining core folkloric characteristics such as variation, repetition, and communal authorship.

For example, the widespread circulation of image macros such as “Distracted Boyfriend” or “This Is Fine” illustrates how a single visual template can generate countless localized adaptations reflecting political commentary, personal humor, or cultural critique across different societies. These variations mirror the “multiform” nature of traditional folktales, as discussed in the work of scholars like Laineste (2016), who emphasized folklore as a process rather than a fixed text. Similarly, meme remix culture aligns with the concept of “intertextual folklore,” where meaning is continuously reshaped through collective reinterpretation. Thus, memes expand folklore into a digital ecology where cultural transmission is accelerated, globally accessible, and technologically mediated, yet still grounded in shared symbolic practices.

### **3.5.2 Ethical and Societal Considerations**

Despite their creative and participatory dimensions, the findings also highlight significant ethical and societal challenges associated with meme culture. One major concern is the role of memes in the dissemination of misinformation. The study observed that simplified visual formats and humorous framing can enhance shareability while simultaneously reducing informational accuracy. Political memes, for instance, often distort complex issues into emotionally charged visuals that may reinforce bias or polarize public opinion (Pishghadam, 2020). This aligns with recent digital communication research indicating that misinformation spreads more rapidly when packaged in entertaining or emotionally engaging formats.

Another key issue is cultural appropriation within meme ecosystems. Many widely circulated memes draw on cultural symbols, languages, or identities detached from their original contexts, sometimes reinforcing stereotypes or trivializing culturally significant expressions. For example, memes that repurpose indigenous attire or African cultural imagery for comedic effect without contextual understanding may perpetuate reductive representations (Xie, 2020). Such dynamics raise important questions about authorship, ownership, and cultural sensitivity in decentralized digital environments.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that meme-driven discourse can significantly influence public communication norms. While memes often promote humor and relatability, they can also contribute to the normalization of sarcasm, irony, and oversimplification in political and social debate (Börzsei, 2013). This dual function underscores the ambivalent role of memes as both democratizing communicative tools and potential vectors of distortion in public discourse.

### **3.5.3 Directions for Future Research**

The study reveals several gaps in existing scholarship that warrant further interdisciplinary investigation. First, there is a need for more longitudinal research examining how specific memes evolve over time across different cultural and linguistic contexts (Shifman, 2019). While current studies often focus on viral moments, less attention has been given to the long-term cultural trajectories of meme formats and their transformation into stable cultural references.

Second, future research should explore the algorithmic dimension of meme circulation. Platform-specific recommendation systems on social media platforms play a crucial role in shaping which memes gain visibility and which remain niche, yet this technological mediation remains under-theorized in folklore and cultural studies (Matalon, 2019). Integrating computational methods with ethnographic approaches could provide deeper insight into how digital infrastructures influence cultural transmission.

Third, there is significant potential for comparative studies across disciplines such as anthropology, media studies, linguistics, and political science to better understand the societal impact of memes (Roy, 2017). In particular, examining meme culture in non-Western contexts would help address the current imbalance in digital folklore research, which is often centered on Euro-American online communities.

Overall, the findings underscore that meme culture represents a dynamic and evolving site of cultural production that challenges traditional academic boundaries (Zanette, 2019). Future research that embraces interdisciplinary methodologies will be essential for fully understanding how digital folklore continues to shape identity, communication, and cultural continuity in the digital age.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This study set out to examine memes as contemporary expressions of folklore and to understand how they function as mechanisms of cultural transmission in digital environments. The analysis has demonstrated that memes are not merely humorous or transient online artifacts, but rather dynamic cultural units that carry, reshape, and circulate shared meanings across digital communities. By situating memes within folklore studies, the research has shown that digital spaces have expanded, rather than replaced, traditional processes of storytelling, collective memory formation, and symbolic communication.

One of the central conclusions is that memes operate as participatory folklore, where meaning is continuously negotiated by users rather than fixed by original creators. Through processes of imitation, remixing, and adaptation, memes reflect the core folkloric principles of variation and recontextualization. This aligns with earlier folkloristic understandings of oral traditions, where narratives evolve through repeated retelling. In the digital age, however, this evolution occurs at unprecedented speed and scale, facilitated by platform algorithms and networked sharing practices.

The study also concludes that memes serve as powerful instruments of cultural commentary. They encode attitudes toward social, political, and economic realities in condensed visual-textual forms that are easily disseminated and interpreted across diverse audiences. In this sense, memes function as both expressive and interpretive tools, enabling users to engage with complex issues through accessible and often humorous formats. This supports broader scholarship that views digital culture as increasingly reliant on visual vernaculars for meaning-making.

Furthermore, the findings highlight that memes contribute to both cultural continuity and transformation. While they often draw on established cultural symbols, archetypes, and narratives, they simultaneously reinterpret these elements to reflect contemporary experiences. This duality underscores their role as mediators between tradition and innovation, preserving elements of collective identity while adapting them to new communicative contexts.

In conclusion, understanding memes as modern folklore provides a valuable framework for analyzing digital culture. It reveals that cultural transmission in the digital age remains deeply rooted in communal participation, creativity, and shared symbolic systems, even as the mediums of expression evolve. Future research may further explore the role of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and algorithmic curation in shaping the lifecycle and cultural significance of memes within global digital folklore systems.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest

**Publisher's Note:** All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers

**Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Disclosure:** The authors declare that no artificial intelligence tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript

## References

- [1] Acerbi, A. (2019). *Cultural evolution in the digital age*. Oxford University Press.
- [2] Blank, T. J. (Ed.). (2012). *Folk culture in the digital age: The emergent dynamics of human interaction*. University Press of Colorado.
- [3] Börzsei, L. (2013). Makes a meme instead: A concise history of internet memes. *New Media Studies Magazine, Utrecht University*.
- [4] Christiansen, J. (2021). Memes: Folklore on the Internet.
- [5] Danesi, M. (2019). Memes and the future of pop culture. *Brill Research Perspectives in Popular Culture, 1*(1), 1-81.
- [6] De Seta, G. (2019). Digital folklore. In *Second international handbook of internet research* (pp. 167-183). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.
- [7] García López, F., & Martínez Cardama, S. (2020). Strategies for preserving memes as artefacts of digital culture. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science, 52*(3), 895-904.
- [8] Hakamies, P., Heimo, A., & Tiedeakatemia, S. (Eds.). (2019). *Folkloristics in the digital age*. Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, Academia Scientiarum Fennica.
- [9] Hidayat, H., Wasana, W., Pramono, P., Immerry, T., & Dahlan, F. (2019, August). Folklore in meme: Minangkabau folklore survival form in the digital world. In *INCOLWIS 2019: Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Local Wisdom, INCOLWIS 2019, August 29-30, 2019, Padang, West Sumatera, Indonesia* (p. 62). European Alliance for Innovation.
- [10] Islam, A., & Jantan, A. H. B. (2023). The mediation effect of affective organizational commitment on the relationship between HRM practices and turnover intention in the RMG industry. *Research Journal in Business and Economics, 1*(1), 24-38.
- [11] Islam, M. A., & Aktar, L. (2025). Perceived Ease of Use, Security, and Trust as Predictors of Online Purchase Intention: A Technology Acceptance Model Extension. *European Economics Letters, 15*(3).
- [12] Islam, M. A., & Sinniah, S. (2025). Exploring customer relationship management factors, customer trust, and innovation capacity: A quantitative study on customer retention. *Accountancy Business and the Public Interest, 41*(10), 12-29.
- [13] Islam, M. A., Islam, M. A., Amin, M. B., Hossain, M. M., Hassan, M. S., Afrin, S., & Oláh, J. (2025). Enhancing academic's performance: Exploring the interaction of innovative work behavior, intrinsic motivation, and self-efficacy in public universities. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open, 12*, 102210.
- [14] Konner, M. (2012). The cultural evolution of storytelling and fairy tales: Human communication and memetics. *The irresistible fairy tale: The cultural and social history of a genre, 1*.
- [15] Krawczyk-Wasilewska, V. (2016). *Folklore in the Digital Age: Collected Essays*. Foreword by Andy Ross. Łódź University Press; Jagiellonian University Press.
- [16] Laineste, L., & Voolaid, P. (2016). Laughing across borders: Intertextuality of internet memes. *The European Journal of Humour Research, 4*(4), 26-49.
- [17] Lombard, E. (2014). *The spread of memes and social media: Online persona construction and offline lives in selected examples of film and television* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Pretoria).
- [18] Matalon, L. J. (2019). Modern problems require modern solutions: Internet memes and copyright. *Tex. L. Rev., 98*, 405.
- [19] Mukhtar, S., Ayyaz, Q. U. A., Khan, S., Bhopali, A. M. N., Sajid, M. K. M., & Babbar, A. W. (2024). Memes in the digital age: A sociolinguistic examination of cultural expressions and communicative practices across border. *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice, 30*(6), 1443-1455.
- [20] Nandal, V. (2025). Digital Folklore: Reimagining Oral Traditions in the Age of Social Media. *Global Insights Journal, 5*(01), 29-37.
- [21] Olena, P., Iryna, V., Nataliia, K., & Volodymyr, F. E. D. (2020). Memes as the phenomenon of modern digital culture. *Wisdom, 2* (15), 45-55.
- [22] Oring, E. (2014). Memetics and folkloristics: The applications. *Western Folklore, 455-492*.
- [23] Oswald, E. C., Esborg, L., & Pierroux, P. (2023). Memes, youth and memory institutions. *Information, Communication & Society, 26*(15), 2999-3016.
- [24] Peace, P., & Donald, G. (2024). Folklore in Modern Contexts.
- [25] Pishghadam, R., Ebrahimi, S., & Derakhshan, A. (2020). Cultuling analysis: A new methodology for discovering cultural memes. *International Journal of Society, Culture & Language, 8*(2), 17-34.
- [26] Roy, D. (2017). Myths about memes. *Journal of Bioeconomics, 19*(3), 281-305.
- [27] Russ, H. (2014). *Memes and Organisational Culture: What is the relationship?* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Western Sydney (Australia)).
- [28] Rusu, A. A. (2013). The life of memes. Traditional technologies and the transmission of knowledge. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences, 92*, 820-825.
- [29] Shifman, L. (2013). Memes in a digital world: Reconciling with a conceptual troublemaker. *Journal of computer-mediated communication, 18*(3), 362-377.
- [30] Shifman, L. (2013). *Memes in digital culture*. MIT press.

- [31] Shifman, L. (2019). Internet memes and the twofold articulation of values. *Society and the internet. How networks of information and communication are changing our lives*, 43-57.
- [32] Tyler, T. (2011). *Memetics: Memes and the science of cultural evolution*. Tim Tyler.
- [33] Wiggins, B. E. (2019). *The discursive power of memes in digital culture: Ideology, semiotics, and intertextuality*. Routledge.
- [34] Xie, C. (2020). Internet memes we live by (and die by). *Internet Pragmatics*, 3(2), 145-173.
- [35] Zanette, M. C., Blikstein, I., & Visconti, L. M. (2019). Intertextual virality and vernacular repertoires: Internet memes as objects connecting different online worlds. *Revista de administração de empresas*, 59, 157-169.