

**Ironic Mirrors of Public Discourse:
Framing Analysis of Kazakhstani Popular Internet Memes**

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Abstract

This exploratory study will investigate and conceptualize the cultural seasoning of Internet memes in online digital space of Kazakhstan. While Kazakhstani online news media do cover key events of Kazakhstan's rich and dynamic political and social life by exposing "officially" approved agendas, the Internet memes offer additional layer of public agendas. We argue that the Internet memes are powerful weapons of public agenda setting: they crystalize key phrases of political discourse, highlight historical moments, expose "unspoken truths," and ironize many other challenges of living a Kazakhstani life. Using a grounded theory approach, the authors aim to investigate the following **research questions**:

RQ 1: *What key agendas of public discourse are reflected in Kazakhstani popular memes?*

RQ2: *How are these key agendas framed in those memes?*

RQ3: *What do these frames suggest?*

Biologist Richard Dawkins (1976) originally coined the term "meme" and defined memes as small cultural units of transmission, similar to genes, which are spread by copying and imitation. That definition has narrowed over the years to include online content (Shifman, 2014). Today, we live in highly competitive era of the marketplace of attention (Webster, 2014). Thus, we argue that memes are a powerful digital medium to respond to political and social events within one cultural space. While communication scholars are still defining the concept of memes from diverse

perspectives, three things stay central about memes: a) they are reflection of the culture in which they were created; b) they are digital units created or generated by users by copying or imitation; c) they are spreadable and viral online (Blackmore, 1999; Aunger, 2010; Shifman, 2014).

Kazakhstani memes represent a unique layer of the cultural universe, a spectrum of additional political agendas, a digital bank of culturally flavored frames. Entman (1993) defines framing as selecting some aspects of perceived reality and making them salient in a communicating text with a goal of promoting a specific “*problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or recommendation* for the item described” (Entman, 1993, p. 53). Thus, this exploratory study will investigate the framing patterns in top 100 Kazakhstani memes.

The findings of the study might be potentially interesting to scholars interested in cross-cultural investigations of memes.

Key words: *Kazakhstani memes, framing analysis, public discourse, grounded theory*

Introduction: Media in Kazakhstan

This exploratory study is unique in the sense that it aims to explore “local” framing in Kazakhstani memes to gain insights about cultural dimensions in the study of memes from one hand, and to explore “global” formulas of memes, remediated in Kazakhstan, to contribute to the media and communication studies of Kazakhstan from the other.

According to agenda-setting theory media do not tell us “what to think,” but rather “what to think about” (McCombs & Shaw, 1993). Agenda-setting enables researchers to think in terms of broader themes or ideas which are given comparatively more attention in the media. In Kazakhstan, a country with limited press freedom, official state narratives dominate the marketplace of ideas. Often, the Kazakhstani media report the news using a framing where the state-approved and/or self-censored views dominate. This does not necessarily mean the public agenda is only set by official narratives from government sources. Globalization, digitalization and the attention economy have sparked a new dynamic of communication in Kazakhstan’s public sphere. The so-called marketplace of ideas has graduated to the “marketplace of attention.” This means, today communicators must not only introduce their agendas in the media, but they should also compete for the attention of the audience finding them in their informational enclaves (Webster, 2014). In other words, it is not enough to set a public agenda via official narrative delivered through traditional channels, the public agenda is subject to remix, remediation, and competition across multiple channels.

In this context, Internet memes have the potential to be powerful agenda-setters in public discourse in Kazakhstan, because the visual and humorous nature of memes enable viewers and creators to visibly question official narratives in a non threatening way. We argue memes have become popular in Kazakhstan for five reasons;

- 1) proliferation of smart phones in Kazakhstan provided the population with affordances to share information digitally and without a cost;
- 2) simple actions by individuals as *viewing*, *liking*, and *sharing* became a powerful force when embraced by digital users;
- 3) memes represented easily spreadable and digestible laconic capsules of information generated by users: they are “mobile,” “versatile” and often “viral;”
- 4) for Kazakhstani society, engaging with memes seemed to be a logical continuation of the “anekdot” telling ritual; this ritual was the legacy from the Soviet past;
- 5) finally, memes offer alternative agendas and frames in the public discourse; they inform the public in a simple and entertaining way via humor adding a layer of “imagined” interpretations of the official statements and public narratives.

Because of these reasons, Internet memes have become unofficial agenda-setters in the newly formed “attention economy” growing within the country due to the popularity of social media and messaging apps, such as Facebook or WhatsApp. Within this context, this exploratory study aims to investigate the popular Kazakhstani Internet memes.

The Trouble with Studying Memes

Memes are frequently referred to as a conceptual troublemaker (Shifman, 2013). The concept was developed in the mid-to-late 1970s but died out almost as quickly as it emerged. It was picked up again in the late 1990s and early 2000s once the term meme began to leak into the popular vernacular. There are at least two competing definitions of a meme; the popular culture definition in which a meme is an image macro, .GIF, video or other digital content made popular

on the internet, and the other is the academic definition of a meme as being a unit of culture or an idea that is able to replicate itself over time under the same conditions as genes (Foster, 2014). The academic definition, however, can be further divided into smaller categories. For example, Shifman (2013) argued meme studies fall into either meme as gene-like or memes as virus-like categories. In media studies (and memetics in general) the biology metaphor is still used to describe memes, even at the risk of obscuring many of the messier elements of culture.

Social anthropologist, Maurice Bloch (2000) argued meme theorists, “ignore the great majority of anthropological work, which they simply do not know or have heard of at second-or-third-hand.” (192). In short, meme theory is a cultural theory created by biologists and perpetuated by many in the social sciences without a fully refined definition of a meme. Meme theory, in its many forms, lacks both the sophisticated nuance to explain the complicated, entangled parts of cultures, and the basic understanding of power structures within a society that exude a great imbalance of influence over elements of culture. When applying meme theory media scholars lose track of the one important element in the equation of any cause and effects research – the audience, and all the complicated inner workings of the humans within it. Understanding that memes are a cultural phenomena linked to other aspects of culture in both mediated and physical worlds, this paper aims to highlight the entangled cultural elements at play within popular Kazakh memes, to enrich scholarship related to the study of digital culture, Internet memes and media framing in Central Asia.

A Brief History of Memes

The person most frequently credited for creating meme theory is Richard Dawkins (1976). Dawkins (1976) derived the term from the Greek word *mimeme* or to imitate. Within his book, *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins (1976) argues that genes are not unique as replicators and uses culture

as an example of an equally powerful replicator. The splintering of meme theory happens almost immediately in the 1970s. Dawkins, a zoologist, likens culture to genetics and uses a biological metaphor to describe its development. Robert Aunger, a biological anthropologist, caught on to the idea and attempted to build the theory with some existing knowledge of other cultural theories by narrowing the focus from any cultural unit to ideas contained within the mind (Aunger, 2010).

Once the scholarship was picked back up in the late 1990s, the theory became closely related to digital content. The term meme begins to crop into popular culture as the development of the personal computer and the Internet begin to generate their own inside jokes and closed communities. At this point, mass communications scholars begin to pull the term into their own literature in an attempt to establish a means for studying digital culture and communications. Susan Blackmore (1999) tried to make a distinction between these new “technological memes” and Dawkins original proposal – just any cultural unit of analysis – by calling them “tememes” in her book, *The Meme Machine*, but by that time the term meme had become synonymous with digital content. Because mass media scholars are focused on content, the new definition of a meme given by Limor Shiman (2014) is, “digital content units with common characteristics, created with awareness of each other, and circulated, imitated, and transformed via the Internet by many users” (pg. 7). However, any student of anthropology knows culture cannot be thought of in discrete units of analysis (Bloch, 1999). So, despite Shifman’s efforts to redefine the theory of memetics for the specific purpose of digital content this definition of memes still lacks important input from the work of social-cultural anthropology making the study of memes as both all-encompassing culture in the physical world and digital content online very difficult.

Media Studies Unique Problem with Memetics

Mememes defined as digital content are conceptually difficult to pull apart. This is in part due to the unique history and common values of the field of mass media studies. To argue for a better approach to studying what appears to be an influential digital phenomenon we must acknowledge the dominating factors that blind mass communications scholarship from connecting the physical and digital spaces to understand the translation of culture from one to the other. First, the field is directly tied to the rapid growth of technology giving it a technological determinist mindset. Second, the scholarship was defined by the objectives and paradigms of the war effort in the 1940s and 1950s as technology developed and America began to play a dominant role in defining and transmitting neoliberal cultural values. Third, and finally, mass communications are interdisciplinary and lack a true identity for itself.

The rapid growth of technology in the early 20th century drew scholars from many disciplines, among them Marshall McLuhan, who is considered one of the founders of the field of mass communications. His theorizing of “the medium is the message” and the “global village” predate, but eerily predict, the Internet. However, these works take a strong technological determinist point of view. Because media scholarship was originally concerned with the effects of media and technology scholars often over value technology’s influence over culture. This is particularly problematic because many of mass communications first theories and practices developed within the U.S. or Allies War Departments during WWII and the Cold War (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2009). Fear of Nazi and Soviet propaganda lead researchers and practitioners to develop counter-measures to protect and support American cultural values. Media scholarship still disproportionately values or examines Western media or applies Western standards of journalistic practices to other countries in comparative studies.

This is important because meme theory has a large open gap in how it explains hegemonic powers disproportionate influence culture. To liken it to the biological metaphor, consider if CRISPER was available to the rich and powerful from the beginning of human genetic evolution. In other words, what we see as digital culture or memes online are greatly influenced by the situation of powerful actors determining what is acceptable or unacceptable communications. For example, consider the Rubber Duck meme used to confound Chinese censors online during the anniversary of Tiananmen Square.

Digital communications are greatly monitored in China, this includes a restriction of the famous “Tank Man” image. However, several years ago a clever person jumped on the popularity of the rubber duck meme to spread the “Tank Man” image before censors were able to find it. The creation, symbolism, and indeed importance of this meme is directly tied to the imbalance of power over communication tools in China. This is not unique to totalitarian governments, it also occurs in developed democracies to a degree. This is especially true when considering early scholarship in digital communications in the United States, because the only people who could afford to participate in these digital meme-making processes had money for a personal computer and the internet. This would mean the implicit rules for digital meme-making were outlined originally by predominantly white middle-to-upper class Americans giving them a disproportionate influence on the evolution of this form of culture. In his account of the “three ages of Internet studies,” Barry Wellman (2004) discusses how each new wave of technology is met with excitement, but scholars look “at online phenomena in isolation” (pg. 124). “They assumed that only things that happened on the internet were relevant to understanding the internet,” Wellman (2004) critiqued (pg. 124). Wellman (2004) outlines each of the ages of Internet studies as being divided along commentary lines for the development of scholarship. The first age is marked by pro-or-con-punditry for the

technological advancement, the second is the establishment of users and uses studies, and finally the field of Internet studies adopted deeper analytical tools moving away from what he qualified as “low-hanging fruit with analysts using standard social scientific methods” (Wellman, 2004, pg. 127), including meme theory.

Finally, mass media scholars come from a variety of disciplines and the noise of all those theories, methods, and research designs can cause scholars to lose track of the interconnected nature of the study of communications and culture. Frequently, meme studies in mass communication will slice off a part of the digital map to look at, but do not do a great job of contextualizing findings to specific cultural practices. Indeed, the attempt to generalize scholarship to people as a whole, leaves research without the enrichment of the unique cultural processes that informed the communication.

Research Questions

Given the complexity of memes, this paper will serve as an exploratory study to investigate and conceptualize the cultural seasoning of Internet memes in online digital space of Kazakhstan. While Kazakhstani online news media do cover key events of Kazakhstan’s rich and dynamic political and social life by exposing “officially” approved agendas, the Internet memes offer additional layer of public agendas. Internet memes are powerful weapons of public agenda setting: they crystalize key phrases of political discourse, highlight historical moments, expose implicit truths, and use irony to offer commentary on many other challenges of Kazakhstani life. Using a grounded theory approach, the paper aims to investigate the following **research questions**:

RQ 1: *What key agendas of public discourse are reflected in Kazakhstani popular memes?*

This question will help in understanding public agendas and interests, because memes are primarily are user-generated content. While the Kazakhstani government attempts to maintain

control over the official news content, the Internet memes enjoy a certain political independence from the establishment's power.

RQ2: *How are these key agendas framed in those memes?*

This question will help in defining the creative boundaries in memes creation.

Kazakhstani memes may use visual signifiers from the “global cultural bank of ideas,” may add Kazakhstani context to those signifiers by adding Kazakh or Russian catch phrases, and, finally, may season all these elements with local humor. Answering this question will help us generate a list of possible scenarios that are underplay in the analyzed memes.

RQ3: *What do these frames suggest?*

This question will help in defining the list of what the discovered frames mean and suggest. Because memes are cultural units, the meaning of each frame or framing pattern may not always be explicitly clear to users from a different cultural background. Thus, this research question will attempt to explain what those hidden implicit meanings suggest.

Methods

To approach the study of memes in Kazakhstan, a grounded analysis approach was used to triangulate what were the most popular memes during the last 5-6 years, and what sort of agendas or frames were present in those memes. First, a Google search with the key words “Kazakhstani Memes” (“казахстанские мемы”) was used to generate journalist-created lists of the “top” memes in Kazakhstan. Many websites and digital publications will curate lists of memes that have either caught the attention of the public or for a year-end recap of popular culture online. Using traditional media to generate lists of memes is common to the scholarship of Internet memes, Knoble and Lankshear (2007) used the news media to narrow their study of popular memes to six memes that had made headlines in broadcast news outlets. For this study the researchers consulted the lists to

determine which memes were the most popular by either appearing on multiple lists or by generating individual lists or news coverage of their own. No restrictions on subject areas were placed, so the sample included memes commenting on politics and social life. A final list of 20 memes was compiled for qualitative analysis.

Using thick description, the researchers noted observations about the memes both from a localized and foreign perspective. Using a “local eye,” researchers made notes on the linguistic and implicit cultural and political messages within the memes. Using a “foreign eye,” researchers then made note of the images and cross-cultural symbols contained in the memes - including memes that exist across the Internet. Researchers then used the analytical tools provided by Shifman (2013, 2018) to contextualize the notes generated from the initial observations. Shifman (2013) proposes that memes serve three purposes, they are economically driven, provide a social logic of participation, and work from a cultural aesthetic logic. Shifman (2018) later characterized image macro memes into three distinct categories or genres -- photo reaction memes, stock character macros, and photo fads. Photo reaction memes were created from existing photographs within the news or on a personal social media account, stock character macros were created from existing characters within a larger meme database, and photo fad memes encompassed “challenges” or trends - this includes examples such as planking or the model challenge.

Video memes were not considered for this paper because many of the lists generated by the search focused on image-based macro memes. In addition to the use of Shifman’s frameworks (2013, 2018), the researchers used the benign-violation theory of humor to understand the ironic framing of political and social events in the memes. Benign-violation theory states that humor evolved from threat-assessment, so for something to be funny it has to violate an accepted norm, but that the violation was rendered benign through psychological, emotional, or physical distance

from the subject. (McGraw and Warren, 2010). McGraw and Warren (2010) argue a violation is determined to be benign if there is 1) an accepted alternative norm, 2) a weak connection or commitment to the person or norm violated, or 3) there is a psychological or emotional distance from the violated norm. The theory is useful as an analytical tool for understanding the framing of events or people within memes because the irony or humor in memes are frequently drawn from violations of both accepted norms in society, but also of physical editing or cutting of the body by photoshop, and while many meme studies focus on older forms of humor studies, such as absurdism or Plato's theory of humor -- benign-violation theory, with roots in cognitive-psychology and evolutionary theory, offers a new means for analyzing the design and language choice of meme creators to generate humorous commentary on political and social life. (Foster, 2014).

Findings and Analysis

The following is an analysis and discussion of the 20 memes examined. One current ran through most of the memes - the use of humor to propose an alternative agenda or frame to the existing frame used in other media. The memes also appear to follow a collective set of rituals -- perhaps stretching back to the tradition of *anekdot* existing during the days of Soviet rule in Kazakhstan. One thing is clear after this exploratory grounded analysis -- memes clearly rely on a web of cultural and technological affordances to frame and set public agendas, sometimes counter to the official narratives distributed through traditional media channels. Several topics were covered in the memes, including; pension age increase, state promotion of the affordable communal apartments' idea, Almaty transportation innovations versus the reality of transportation within the city, the coldness of the capital city Astana (now Nur-Sultan), hosting expensive

international projects like EXPO in Kazakhstan, Kazakh hospitality, and more examples of Kazakh culture in general.

Discussion

Memes exist in a media environment which operates within an attention economy, where *likes* and *shares* have developed as a form of currency. To compete in this environment, memes need to rely on existing popular media and sentiments to reach a broad audience. Memes also provide an affordance for minimal participation in political and social movements or discussions, meaning there is little-to-no risk in sharing an existing meme given its viral nature it can spread rapidly making it almost impossible to track down to an original source -- though machine learning is making it possible to catch up to their origin. Within the sample, we noticed memes were frequently used to question or provide an alternative frame to the official agenda set in the media. These include alternatives that range from the political to the social -- for example, several memes commented on the bitter cold of the city of the capital city Astana (now Nur-Sultan), however others became more politicized as they critiqued the local government's handling of frequent floods in the streets within another megapolis of Kazakhstan - Almaty city. The memes also enabled users to imagine a deeper explanation for policies that were not - in the eyes of the meme creators -- adequately explained by official sources. For example, some memes commented on the vague, unhelpful answer for why the pension age was being raised, while others created an alternative or imagined explanation - which was usually outrageous.

The kinds of memes used varied. Many of the photo reaction memes included the faces of Kazakhstan government officials, usually pulled from newsphotos of press conferences or official events. The stock characters used often served as stand-in for the Kazakh people as a whole, or as amorphous government policies. Not many photo fad memes were used, and no challenges

appeared present (Except for Nicolas Cage memes, maybe?). However, it is important to note the use of foreign guests or celebrities, such as Nicholas Cage and Donald Trump. Kazakh celebrities and athletes were also made appearances in the sample. One very popular set of memes that lived outside the scope of the Shiman (2018) framework for meme genres was the popular “Authentic” memes drawn in a classic cartoon style by Murat Dilmanov. These memes were the most difficult for a “foreign eye” to extract meaning from, given their political-cartoon style and originality in both cultural-context and creation. Because the “Authentic” memes function as both an original piece of art and a popular meme, it was difficult to analyze them in the framework of remixed and brecolored pieces of culture.

_____The term meme comes from a biologist’s attempt to explain cultural logic and evolution. The study of Internet memes can not be without an acknowledgement that this digital phenomena is a ritualized form of cultural communication. Functioning much like folklore, memes are a form of community authored, performed storytelling that enables the author to edit or remix the material to fit different situational needs without losing the integrity of the narrative. Memes function as small morality tales highlighting the inconsistencies in both public policy and social life. The use of benign-violation to critically examine an existing norm without fear. While memes may be accessible to a global audience, they also function as boundary-setters in a globalized world. Much the same as theme park rides that denote a person should “this tall” to experience the ride, frequently memes require the viewer to be “this informed” to understand the humor in the meme. The Kazakhstani memes were no exception. Frequently, the memes referred to both political and social events that require viewers to be familiar with the history, culture and current events of Kazakhstan. Beyond a language barrier set within the memes, a cultural barrier is set. This again seems to fly in the face of Dawkins and other’s theorizing of memes as being analogous to genetics

or viruses, because the meme itself is setting a boundary to access - limiting its own ability to propagate beyond a selected audience. In this way, memes resemble folktales and other forms of cultural narratives, rites, and practices. Folklore is not just about storytelling, instead folklore is used to inform members of a society or “folk” of how they should act - and why (Bauman, 2019; Hafstein, 2012; Noyes, 2012). Folklore is sometimes used as a boundary for a social group, allowing members of the group to discuss and mediate social morays without fully disclosing them to outsiders (Bauman, 2019; Hafstein, 2012; Noyes, 2012). Memes function in a similar way, but on a digital space - enabling members of a society to openly discuss and mediate social or political ills without fully disclosing the deeper thought processes or critiques.

Key Observations and Conclusion

Both local and global visual signifiers can be found in Kazakh memes. The “signifieds” often reflect the events or experiences of Kazakhstani social life or political realities. It is clear that one needs to have cultural and temporal proximity to the “signifieds” within each meme. Without this personal experience, it becomes harder to decode the benign-violation used to make the meme humorous. It was clear that some global meme formulas were used as vehicles to communicate a Kazakh-specific meaning or event. However, phrases in the Kazakh language or national patterns of embroidery signify that the means have a Kazakh flavor to them despite using a more globally recognized meme pattern. This finding indicates that there is some degree of universality to the construction of memes, however the localized cultural artifacts contained within the meme determine its usefulness to a community. This, again, is much the same as existing patterns of culture analyzed by anthropologists or literary scholars -- while a folktale may follow a similar logical construction its contents may reflect a completely different set of cultural norms. The specific Kazakh symbols, such as language and visual Kazakh ornaments,

create an additional layer in which the benign-violation of an accepted norm works and is rendered funny.

In general, the sample collected within this grounded analysis demonstrates that memes highlighted and listed by journalists often represent reflections of the key current events that generated the most news coverage in general within Kazakhstani public discourse. In this way, memes may also serve as a sort of feedback loop or an agenda-setter both influencing-and-being-influenced by another agenda-setter. By this we mean, it is possible the journalists covering these larger events looked for memes related to events they felt were important via their own news judgement, but it is also possible that the wide coverage of these events generated more memes because it was set within the public imagination by the media. While this qualitative exploratory study did not yield any statistical tests to definitely say that memes function as important markers of agenda-setting, it is clear that a link between memes and the public agenda exists and is worth exploring more in depth within future studies.

After reviewing the memes, it is clear that Kazakhstani users express a great sense of humor, and they are able to laugh at themselves. This indicates Kazakhstani users are able to look at themselves through a critical lense -- both for political and cultural matters. Humor helped Kazakhstani citizens to ease public anger and turn this frustration into constructive collective criticism. The findings also indicate benign-violation theory of humor could be a useful tool in examining culturally-specific uses of humor as a means of critique. Given humor within the memes were built on a benign violation of an accepted cultural norm, the key aspect in understanding the memes is hidden. To unearth the meaning, researchers must define the boundaries of the discourse, the universe, and the cultural or political space in which the mocked event or person exists. Humor is also individualized and varies from person-to-person, so

extracting universal humor from the memes is difficult. Thus, a bigger space of knowledge about an event or the norm being violated is needed for deeper analysis. Kazakhstani users have more resources to explore and create different memes for different audiences, because they have a richer cultural “portfolio” of instruments to build the meme from, including an understanding of U.S. popular culture, Russian popular culture, and finally their own “Kazakh” culture. This sample demonstrates Kazakhstani memes draw signifiers from all three of these cultural domains, and indicates that future meme studies should focus not just on a content analysis of the elements present within the mean, but the specific cultural web in which the meme was generated.

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