Mapping the Meme-scape: A Bibliometric Analysis of Meme Research in India

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Abstract - This study presents a bibliometric analysis of meme-related research in India between 2019 and 2024, using data retrieved from Google Scholar and Scopus. The analysis investigates publication patterns, dominant research themes, key contributors, and institutional engagement within the growing field of meme studies. Utilizing tool 'Lens.org' for visualization, the study identifies an upward trend in academic interest, particularly within the domains of artificial intelligence, communication studies, and cultural analysis. Key themes include semantic and algorithmic analysis of memes, their role in political discourse, and their application in marketing and social movements. The findings reveal that institutions such as the Indian Institute of Information Technology and Bennett University are emerging as leading centres for meme research. By mapping the intellectual landscape of meme studies in India, this paper highlights critical knowledge gaps and offers directions for future interdisciplinary exploration.

Keywords: Memes, Bibliometric analysis, Meme culture, India, Humour, Social-media

1.   Introduction:

In today's hyper-connected digital landscape, memes have evolved from simple internet jokes into powerful cultural symbols that communicate complex social, political, and emotional ideas. Far from being trivial, memes now play a central role in shaping public discourse and fostering community identities across digital platforms. Their power lies in their brevity, relatability, and participatory nature, traits that allow them to transcend geographic, linguistic, and cultural barriers. The origin of the term "meme" can be traced back to the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, who coined it in his seminal work The Selfish Gene (Dawkins, 1976). Dawkins used the word to describe an element of culture that spreads from person to person, much like genes transmit biological information. Although his concept was rooted in evolutionary biology, it laid the foundation for understanding memes as units of cultural transmission. In the digital age, this idea has taken on new meaning, especially as memes proliferate rapidly on platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp.

Scholars such as Limor Shifman (2014) have argued that internet memes are not merely humorous content but structured expressions that allow individuals to engage with politics, social issues, and personal experiences in creative ways. In her widely cited book Memes in Digital Culture, Shifman explains how memes contribute to participatory culture by enabling people to remix, adapt, and respond to shared ideas. Similarly, scholars like Ryan Milner (2016) and Tim Highfield (2016) have explored how memes function as instruments of civic discourse, especially in shaping narratives around activism, identity, and collective action.

The Indian context offers a particularly rich terrain for studying memes. India's young, digitally-savvy population, combined with affordable internet access and rising smartphone penetration, has turned social media platforms into fertile grounds for meme creation and circulation (Kumar, 2021). Memes in India are more than just jokes—they are reflections of political ideologies, social struggles, religious sentiments, and cultural peculiarities. For instance, during the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests and the 2019 general elections, memes became prominent tools for mobilizing youth, voicing dissent, and reshaping narratives (Mehta, 2022; Nayar P. , 2020).

Despite the explosion of meme usage in public discourse, scholarly engagement with Indian meme culture remains limited. Much of the existing academic literature either borrows heavily from Western frameworks or treats memes as peripheral objects of study. While global research on memes has flourished across disciplines such as media studies, semiotics, communication, and digital humanities, India still lacks a cohesive and data-driven scholarly examination of its meme landscape. The fragmented nature of Indian meme studies calls for a systematic approach to understand how memes are being studied, who is studying them, and what themes dominate the discourse.

This paper addresses that need through a bibliometric analysis of meme-related research conducted in India between 2019 and 2024. By systematically examining academic outputs from databases such as Google Scholar and Scopus, the study identifies key publication trends, prominent research themes, and the leading contributors in the field. Specifically, the research aims to: (1) trace the growth trajectory of meme scholarship in India, (2) categorize the main thematic areas of focus, and (3) assess institutional and authorial participation in meme studies. In doing so, the paper situates Indian meme research within the broader global academic conversation and highlights areas that warrant deeper exploration in the future.

Theoretical Framework

To ground this bibliometric analysis in a conceptual foundation, this study draws upon media ecology, and participatory culture theory. The concept of memetics, introduced by Richard Dawkins (1976), offers a foundational perspective for understanding memes as replicable units of culture that evolve through imitation and variation. Although originally biological in orientation, memetics has been adapted to explain the viral nature of digital content in online ecosystems, making it relevant for exploring the spread and transformation of memes in the Indian social media landscape.

Complementing this, media ecology theory (McLuhan, 1964; Postman, 1970) posits that the medium shapes the way content is perceived and interpreted. In the context of Indian meme culture, the dynamics of platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter influence how memes are created, circulated, and consumed. This framework underscores how digital platforms condition the communicative power and societal function of memes. Lastly, the study incorporates participatory culture theory (Jenkins, 2006), which highlights how audiences are not passive consumers but active producers and co-creators of media content. Memes, particularly in India, have become tools of political commentary, social resistance, and identity expression—aligning closely with Jenkins' idea of grassroots creativity and collective intelligence in digital spaces.

Together, these theoretical lenses provide a multidimensional understanding of how memes function as cultural, technological, and participatory artifacts in India's evolving communication landscape.

Research Objectives:

1.   To explore the status of meme research in India

2.   To identify key themes and categories within Indian meme research

3.   To evaluate the contributions of academic institutions to meme research.

2.   Literature Review:

Meme studies have evolved significantly over the past two decades, with researchers examining their impact on culture, communication, and society. Globally, memes are recognized as powerful tools for expression and social critique. In India, memes have emerged as a vital medium for political satire and social commentary. They reflect public sentiments on various issues, including governance, social justice, and cultural norms.

2.1   Memes as Tools of Participatory and Political Communication

Internet memes have increasingly been recognized as instruments of participatory communication, enabling users to express opinions, mock authority, and critique sociopolitical issues. Scholars argue that memes form a part of "vernacular creativity" (Mehta, 2022), allowing individuals—especially youth—to engage in public discourse outside

traditional institutional structures. Milner (2016) conceptualizes memes as "public conversations" that embody participatory media, contributing to meaning-making in the digital commons.

In the Indian context, memes have become a popular form of political expression during protests and elections. For instance, Pooja (2022) explores how memes were utilized during the anti-CAA protests as tools of digital resistance. Similarly, Nayar (2020) highlights how memes mediated affective publics during the 2019 Indian general elections. These memes not only reflected public sentiment but actively shaped political engagement, especially among urban youth.

2.2   Ideological Framing, Cultural Identity, and Civic Engagement

Beyond humor, memes are embedded with ideological and cultural symbols that reflect social hierarchies, religious tensions, and cultural pride. Highfield (2016) notes that memes contribute to everyday politics, often mediating expressions of identity, community belonging, and exclusion. Shifman (2014) adds that memes carry "polyvocal" messages, capable of being interpreted and recontextualized across different user groups.

In India, meme creators often localize content to reflect regional languages, festivals, caste tensions, and political rivalries. Sharma (2022) investigates Indian meme pages on Facebook, revealing how memes serve as mirrors of societal anxieties and cultural pride. Similarly, Das (2023) analyses meme content through a media psychology lens, emphasizing how humor is used to frame civic issues in relatable formats. These studies emphasize that memes are not neutral—they reflect power structures, reinforce ideologies, or disrupt them.

2.3   Memes in Digital Marketing, Education, and Communication Research

A growing body of literature is examining the application of memes in marketing, branding, and pedagogy. Memes are considered effective tools for engaging digital-native audiences due to their viral appeal and cultural relevance. Mukhopadhyay (2022), in a bibliometric study, highlights the rising use of memes in digital marketing strategies in India, particularly among startups and youth-centric brands. Kamath and Alur (Kamath & Alur, 2024) suggest that integrating meme theory with marketing frameworks can enhance customer engagement and brand recall.

Moreover, memes are entering educational settings as well. Grover (2021) explores how memes are being used in Indian classrooms to teach media literacy and digital rhetoric. The emerging consensus is that memes serve as pedagogic and persuasive tools, helping to simplify complex ideas and promote engagement.

2.4   Research Gap

While global scholarship has extensively examined memes as tools of digital communication, participatory media, and political satire, research on meme culture in India remains comparatively limited and fragmented. Most existing studies either focus on specific events (protests, elections) or explore meme usage in isolated domains such as marketing or education. There is a lack of comprehensive, data-driven analysis that maps the scope, evolution, and thematic diversity of meme-related academic work within the Indian context. Moreover, few studies employ bibliometric methodologies to evaluate institutional contributions, authorial networks, or thematic clusters in Indian meme research. This gap underscores the need for a systematic inquiry into the academic landscape of meme studies in India, particularly between 2019 and 2024—a period marked by rapid digital expansion and meme proliferation.

Despite the growing presence of memes in everyday life, academic research on this subject in India remains limited and scattered. Most studies focus on isolated themes such as protest movements, digital marketing, or meme aesthetics, but rarely adopt a holistic or bibliometric approach to map the broader academic landscape. This study seeks to address that gap.

3.   Methodology

This study employs a quantitative bibliometric research design to systematically examine meme-related academic publications in India between 2019 and 2024. Bibliometric analysis, a well-established method in scient metric research, facilitates the evaluation of scholarly outputs by mapping publication patterns, citation networks, and thematic developments within a specific field (Zupic & Cater, 2015). By using this method, the study aims to uncover the intellectual structure and emerging trends in meme research in the Indian context.

3.1   Sampling and Data Collection

Data for this study were collected from two major academic databases: Scopus and Google Scholar, selected for their extensive coverage across disciplines and reliable indexing of peer-reviewed content. A keyword-based search strategy was employed using combinations of terms such as "memes," "internet memes," "meme culture," "social media," "meme marketing," "political memes," and "India." The search was restricted to documents published between January 2019 and February 2024 to capture recent developments in this fast-evolving area.

To ensure relevance and academic rigor, inclusion criteria were applied: only peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and book chapters written in English and focused on the Indian context were selected. Non-academic sources such as blogs, news articles, and opinion pieces were excluded, along with duplicate entries and studies not directly related to meme culture or communication. After applying these criteria, a curated dataset of 200 publications was finalized for bibliometric analysis.

Essential metadata such as author names, publication titles, abstracts, keywords, years, citations, and institutional affiliations were extracted and cleaned using Microsoft Excel. For the analysis, tools such as Lens.org and VOS-viewer were utilized. Lens.org enabled the mapping of keyword co-occurrence and citation frequency, while VOS-viewer was used to visualize author collaboration networks and thematic clusters. These tools facilitated the identification of core research areas, leading contributors, institutional participation, and annual publication trends.
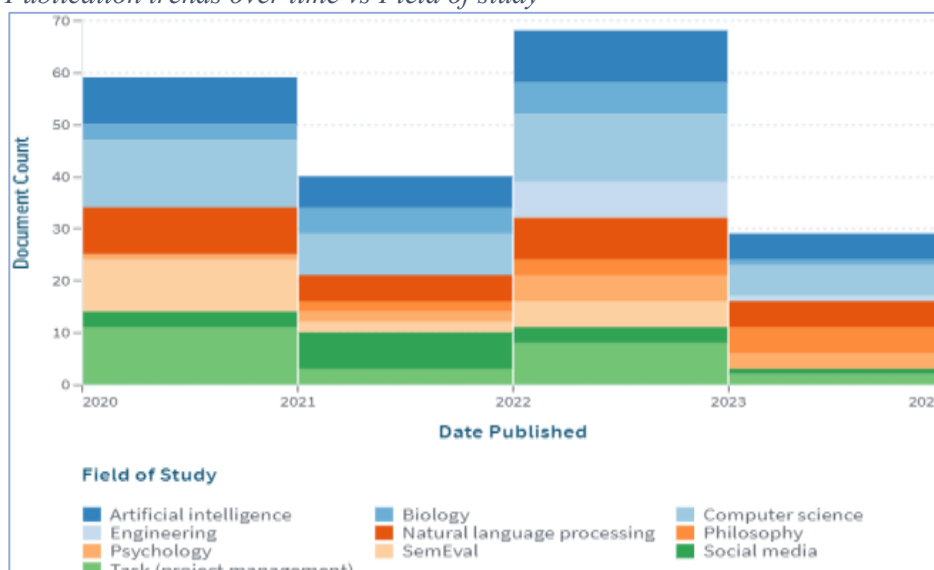
3.2   Ethical considerations

As the research exclusively used publicly available academic data and did not involve human participants or confidential information, ethical approval was not required. Nonetheless, all sources were cited appropriately, adhering to academic integrity protocols.

Despite its contributions, the study is not without limitations. It focuses solely on English-language publications and relies on two databases, which may omit relevant works published in regional languages or indexed in other repositories. Furthermore, keyword-based searches can sometimes miss relevant studies that use alternative terminologies or theoretical frameworks. These limitations suggest that future studies may benefit from broader data sources and more inclusive criteria.

4.   Findings and Discussion:

The analysis revealed an increasing trend in meme-related publications over the past decade, indicating growing academic interest in this area.

Figure 1 Publication trends over time vs Field of study

4.1 Publication Trends Over Time:

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The analysis revealed an increasing trend in meme-related publications over the past decade, indicating a growing academic interest in this area. This figure illustrates the growth of meme-related publications over time across various fields of study. It aligns with the first objective by demonstrating how meme culture has evolved academically and highlights the increasing recognition of memes as a legitimate subject for scholarly inquiry. Between 2022 and 2023, research publications in this field were notably high in areas such as artificial intelligence, biology, language, philosophy, social media, psychology, and engineering. In 2020, the number of research publications peaked, but there was a slight decrease in 20021-22 before it increased again in 2022-2023. However, in 2024, the number of publications is expected to fall again. Additionally, most publications in artificial intelligence and computer science occurred in 2020-2021 and 2022-2023. Other fields, such as language, social media, and engineering, showed slight fluctuations in yearly publication numbers.

Figure 2 Key Themes Studied by Authors

Figure 2 Key Themes Studied by Authors This visual categorizes the primary themes explored by researchers in meme studies. It addresses the second objective by identifying key areas of focus, such as semantic analysis, algorithmic analysis, and interdisciplinary applications, which include sociology and economics. This highlights where academic attention is concentrated within meme research. Most of the research has focused on the semantic analysis of memes within the contexts of social media, project management, artificial intelligence, and biology. There is also some work on the algorithmic analysis of memes. Interestingly, research has also been conducted on meme communication in the

field of medicine. In addition, memes have been examined in relation to genetics, geography, economics, archaeology, sociology, and engineering.
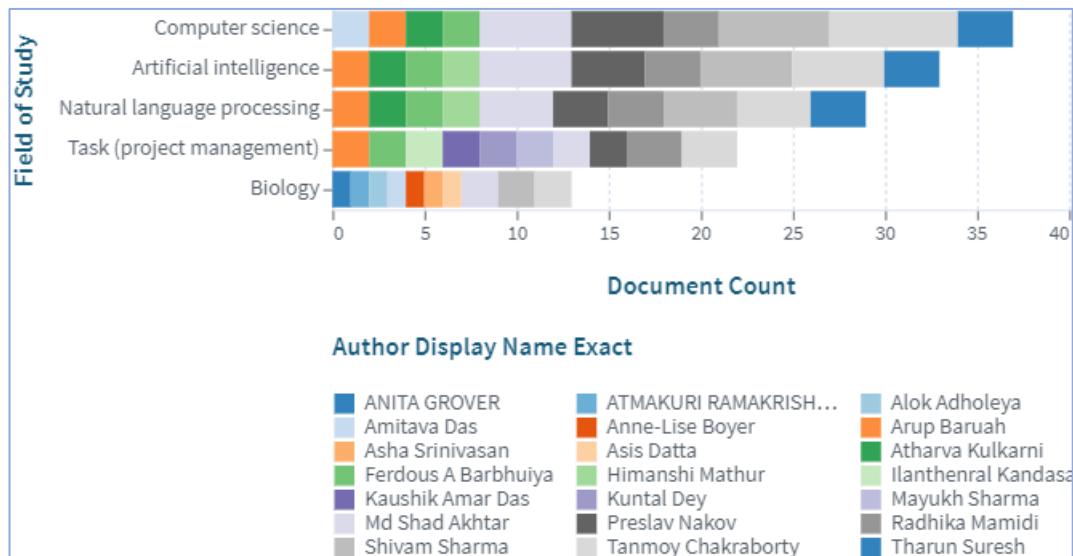

Figure 3 Most active authors by field of study

Figure 3 Most active authors by field of study This figure highlights the most prolific authors in meme research, categorized by their respective fields. It offers insight into the leading researchers, indicating potential collaboration opportunities among scholars working on similar themes. For instance, Anita Grover has conducted research in computer science, artificial intelligence, and natural language processing. Following her work could provide valuable insights into meme research in the future.

Many scholars continuously contribute valuable insights in the fields of artificial intelligence, genetics, computer science, and task management. Notably, both Preslav Nako and Radhika Mamidi have explored memes in the context of artificial intelligence, computer science, semiotics, and biology.
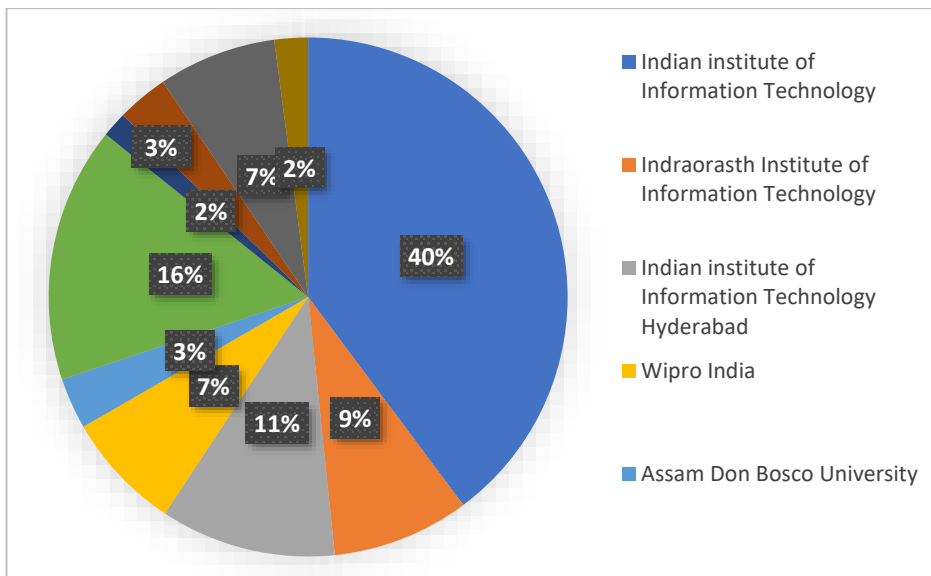

Figure 4 Contribution of academic institutes in meme research

Figure 4 Contribution of academic institutes in meme research This pie chart illustrates the contributions of various academic institutions to meme research in India. It supports the third objective by quantifying institutional involvement and highlighting which universities are leading in this emerging field.

From the data, we can see that half of the sampled population indicates that the Indian Institute of Information Technology has researched memes. Following that, Bennett University is the second most active institution in meme

research. Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) Delhi and IIT Gandhinagar rank as the third most contributing institutions in this study area.
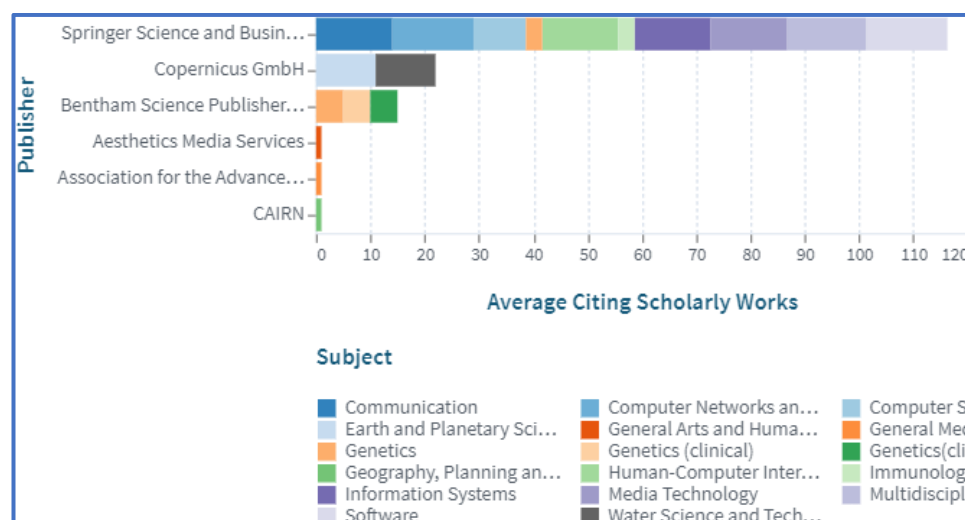

Figure 5 Publishers vs subject

Figure 5 Publishers vs subject This figure compares different publishers against various subjects related to meme studies. It shows which journals are most receptive to publishing work on memes and can guide future researchers on where to submit their findings. Springer Science and Business Journal is the most cited scholarly journal in communication, computer networks, computer science, genetics, geography, information systems, media technology, and multidisciplinary subjects. Here it is easily understood that the contribution of Springar journal for meme-related scholarly works is more than other journals like Copernicus, Bentham Science, Aesthetic Media etc.

5. Discussion:

The findings suggest that memes significantly shape public discourse in India. Their use as tools for political engagement indicates their relevance in contemporary society. The discussion section of this bibliometric study on meme research in India reveals several critical insights into the evolving role of memes within the socio-cultural and political landscape of the country. Memes have emerged as a powerful cultural force, significantly impacting social interaction, political discourse, and communication (Deccan-Chronicle, 2023).They serve as a mirror reflecting societal beliefs, anxieties, and aspirations, effectively summarizing complex issues into relatable content that resonates with diverse audiences. This study highlights how memes facilitate political expression and critique, especially among the youth, who are increasingly using them to engage with pressing social issues and challenge established norms (Gunawat, 2023).

Additionally, the analysis underscores the dual nature of memes; while they can promote social awareness and foster community engagement, they also have the potential to spread misinformation and contribute to internet toxicity (Kapoor & Behl, 2024). The findings indicate that during significant socio-political events, such as elections or protests, memes play a crucial role in shaping public opinion and mobilizing collective action (Pooja & Khanna, 2022). Furthermore, the accessibility of meme creation through various digital platforms has democratized content production, allowing for diverse voices to participate in cultural discourse. However, this also raises concerns about the quality of information disseminated through memes and their potential misuse for propaganda or disinformation campaigns (Sharma R. , 2022).

Overall, this study emphasizes the need for further research to explore the implications of meme culture in India, particularly regarding its impact on public discourse and societal values. Addressing these complexities will enhance our understanding of how memes function as both tools of expression and instruments of influence in contemporary society.

6. Conclusion:

This bibliometric analysis provides valuable insights into the trends of meme research in India. As memes continue to evolve as a form of communication, understanding their implications becomes increasingly important for researchers and practitioners alike. This study successfully addresses its three primary objectives by providing a comprehensive

bibliometric analysis of meme research in India. First, it highlits the increasing trend in meme-related publications over the past decade, demonstrating a growing academic interest in this area and the evolving recognition of memes as legitimate subjects for scholarly inquiry. The analysis reveals that between 2022 and 2023, significant research activity occurred across various fields, including artificial intelligence, social media, and psychology, with notable peaks in publication numbers in 2020 and subsequent fluctuations. Second, the thematic analysis identifies key areas of focus within meme studies, such as semantic and algorithmic analysis, showcasing where academic attention is concentrated.

This insight aligns with the objective of mapping the evolving landscape of meme culture and its applications across disciplines. We have seen that contributions of various academic institutions to meme research and the institutions like the Indian Institute of Information Technology and Bennett University are at the forefront of this emerging field. This institutional involvement underscores the collaborative efforts necessary for advancing meme studies in India. In conclusion, this bibliometric analysis not only sheds light on current trends and themes in meme research but also lays the groundwork for future inquiries that can further explore the complexities of memes within cultural, social, and political contexts. As memes continue to influence public discourse and digital culture, understanding their implications will be crucial for both researchers and practitioners alike.

6.1   Limitations and Future Research:

This bibliometric study on meme research in India has several limitations. First, the analysis is restricted to publications in English and sourced from specific databases (Google Scholar and Scopus), which may exclude relevant literature published in other languages or platforms. Additionally, the focus on peer-reviewed articles may overlook valuable insights from non-peer-reviewed sources, such as blogs or social media posts, that contribute to the understanding of meme culture. The methodology also relies on keyword searches, which may not capture all relevant publications due to variations in terminology used by different authors.

Future research should aim to address these limitations by expanding the scope to include non-English publications and a broader range of sources, including grey literature and social media content. Investigating the impact of memes across diverse demographic groups and their role in various cultural contexts within India would provide deeper insights. Additionally, interdisciplinary studies that incorporate perspectives from sociology, psychology, and communication studies could enhance understanding of the complexities surrounding meme dynamics. Finally, exploring strategies to combat misinformation propagated through memes while leveraging their potential for positive social engagement is crucial for future inquiries.

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