

**Investigating the Impact of Memes on Language
and Identity: Case Study of M1 Students of Ibn Khaldoun
University of Tiaret**

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Abstract

In the digital era of social media, memes have progressed beyond temporary expressions of humor, functioning as a means of communication, cultural transmission, and self-expression. This research examines the role of memes on language and identity. Therefore, the researcher opted for the mixed method approach in which open-ended questionnaires were delivered to 100 M1 Linguistics' students at Ibn Khaldoun University of Tiaret to understand their perceptions and attitudes towards meme culture, and a classroom observation was conducted to examine students' real-time engagement and interaction with memes. The findings proved that memes can influence students' language and cultural identity by influencing their linguistic expressions, reinforcing cultural references and enhancing social belonging within online communities. Therefore, further interdisciplinary research on memes is necessary to examine their role in language change and identity convergence. This process may promote an ethically responsible approach to meme culture across generations.

Keywords: digital communication; memes; online communities; real-time engagement and interaction; social belonging; students' language and cultural identity

Introduction

In the digital age, online platforms have emerged as fundamental aspects of social and cultural interaction. Within these spaces, the rapid proliferation of memes with concise textual elements has become a noticeable form of digital communication, as memes can demonstrate social commentaries and cultural expressions through humor. Therefore, they can significantly contribute to the study of language in relation to identity and culture. Youth, as the most active and adaptable demographic in the digital era, use memes not only for entertainment but also as a medium for self-expression and belonging.

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The research significance lies in its understanding of the interconnected relationship between language, culture, and identity. Thus, the study investigates the impact of memes on language and identity. This incentive stems from the role of memes in digital communication and how they influence students' language and cultural identity, particularly M1 linguistics' students at Ibn Khaldoun University of Tiaret. To achieve this, a mixed-method approach was employed; an open-ended questionnaire was distributed to M1 students to analyze their perceptions towards the impact of meme culture on their language use and identity, and a classroom observation was carried out to examine students' real-time engagement with memes. To this end, the following questions are raised:

- How does meme culture influence students' use of language?
- How do memes influence students' cultural identity and self-expression?

Based on the research questions, the formulated hypotheses are as follows

- Meme culture can significantly impact students' language use by adopting new linguistic patterns, such as code-switching and code-mixing, and informal expressions.
- Memes can influence students' cultural identity and self-expression by enhancing digital communication, linguistic trends, and culturally relevant experiences.

1. Language, Culture, and Identity

It is undeniable that language shapes and influences our thoughts and perceptions, leading to social integration as members of a given society. Masoud Mahmoodi Shahreabki defines language as "*a tool for the realization of one's identity*"¹, as both cultural and linguistic identity interconnect to highlight that individuals cannot exist without either.² Anthropologists, such as Bolinger,³ have approached language from a social and cultural perspective, considering it as the roadmap of culture and an umbrella representing the identities and origins of people. Hence, language is a system of sounds, symbols, and gestures that are shared and used by speech community or culture⁴. However, it is also approached from a cognitive lens, viewed as a psychological phenomenon deeply rooted in the human mind⁵. To that end, it is worth noting that language is an interdisciplinary concept studied and interpreted in various ways.

Given the reciprocal relationship between language, culture, and identity, Bryam⁶ asserts that language is a fundamental component of identity, which is inherently embedded in our cultural backgrounds. As identity mirrors people's behaviour, represents who they are, and how they relate to others in society, it acts as a serving marker distinguishing one group from another⁷, as individuals can have the ability to deliver their cultural identity through verbal communication⁸. However, anthropologists, such as Malinowski⁹ and Radcliffe-Brown,¹⁰ have overlooked the role of language here, leading to a complete disregard of how it can contribute to culture. Their focus was primarily on studying material culture, social organization, and kinship systems. Language was often seen as a tool of communication rather than a fundamental aspect of culture. Nonetheless, a broader perspective acknowledge that language, culture, and identity are noticeably interconnected aspects of human life; it is due to language that meaning is successfully delivered, and due to culture that societies are shaped, and it is due to individuals' identities that they shape and are shaped by the language they speak.¹¹

2. Social Media and Language

Social media has seemingly become a profound source of communication and social interaction¹². More than just a means of communication, it serves as a threshold for social and cultural networking while influencing public opinion. Social media users can rapidly adapt to emerging trends, thereby facilitating the swift dissemination of information.¹³ Additionally, it offers a platform where language learning occurs naturally within real-world interactions. When users engage in conversations, share content, and participate in particular online communities, they are exposed to language change in practical contexts. Consequently, it may enhance vocabulary retention, idiomatic expressions, and cultural references through providing an environment for self-expression and expanding the social horizons of users a global scale¹⁴. However, it is not devoid of limitations; as much as it helps individuals to connect and socially interact it may also lead to informal use of language, thereby leading to the erosion of standard grammar and spelling, which in turn leads to creating a generation struggling with formal writing skills.¹⁵

3. Visual Memes as Agents of Language Change and Cultural Identity

According to Google Trends, memes are widely used and understood by individuals irrespective of age, gender, and cultural backgrounds. This growing prominence highlights their role in bridging national cultures and influencing identities within cyber communities. The concept of “internet meme” is a term used to express and demonstrate a piece of content, such as jokes, images, videos, phrases, and ideas from one person to another via the internet. Since memes often evolve through user-generated adaptations, they can notably influence individuals’ language use and cultural identities.¹⁶ Therefore, memes are “*cultural symbols and ideas that spread online at lightning speed, often edited and adapted by the most ordinary internet users.*”¹⁷ Memes language can allow individuals to overcome cultural and linguistic barriers, as it becomes a tool for self-expression through which individuals can share values, humour, and commentary, further shaping their sense of belonging in online communities.¹⁸

Research Methodology

This research investigates the impact of memes on students’ language change and cultural identity by examining their linguistic features, cultural references, and how students interpret and engage with them.

3.1 Population and Sampling

The research was carried out at Ibn Khaldoun University of Tiaret, particularly with M1 students of the English Department. The sample consists of 100 M1 linguistics students to understand their perspectives on the research topic. This type of sampling was more convenient due to its relevance to the research objectives.

3.2 Data collection instruments

The researcher opted for the mixed-method approach, employing quantitative and qualitative data to gather the necessary information about the target population. Therefore, two research instruments were selected; open-ended questionnaires were distributed to M1 linguistics' students to understand their perceptions, experiences, and attitudes towards the impact of memes on their language use and identity. On the other hand, a classroom observation with M1 students to analyse their real-time engagement with memes, focusing on their language choice and cultural adaptations.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data obtained from the participants is carefully analysed and interpreted consistently; the questionnaire is exhibited graphically, whereas the observation is stated to present the key findings that highlight students' language choice, and cultural adaptations.

5.3.1 *Students' Questionnaire*

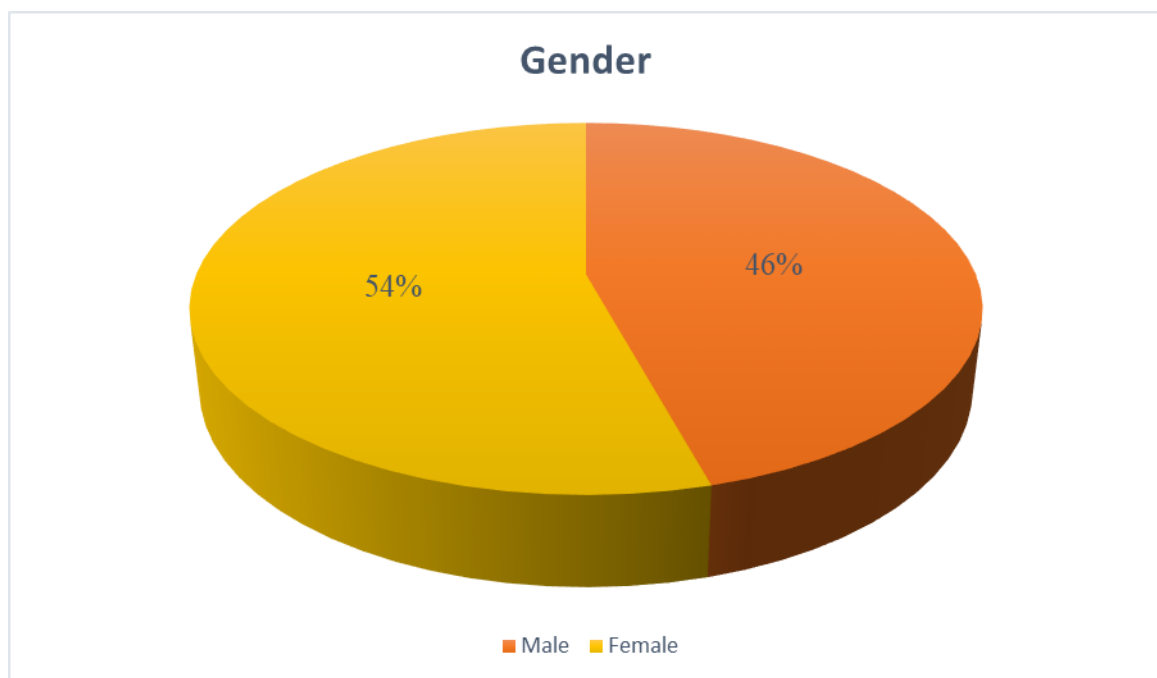


Figure: (1) Gender

Higher education institutions often have a higher enrollment of female students in comparison males; a pattern reflected in this study's sample. As it is observed in Figure 1, female students (N=51) constitute 54% of the population, whereas males (N=43) comprise 46%

- What does the word “meme” mean to you?

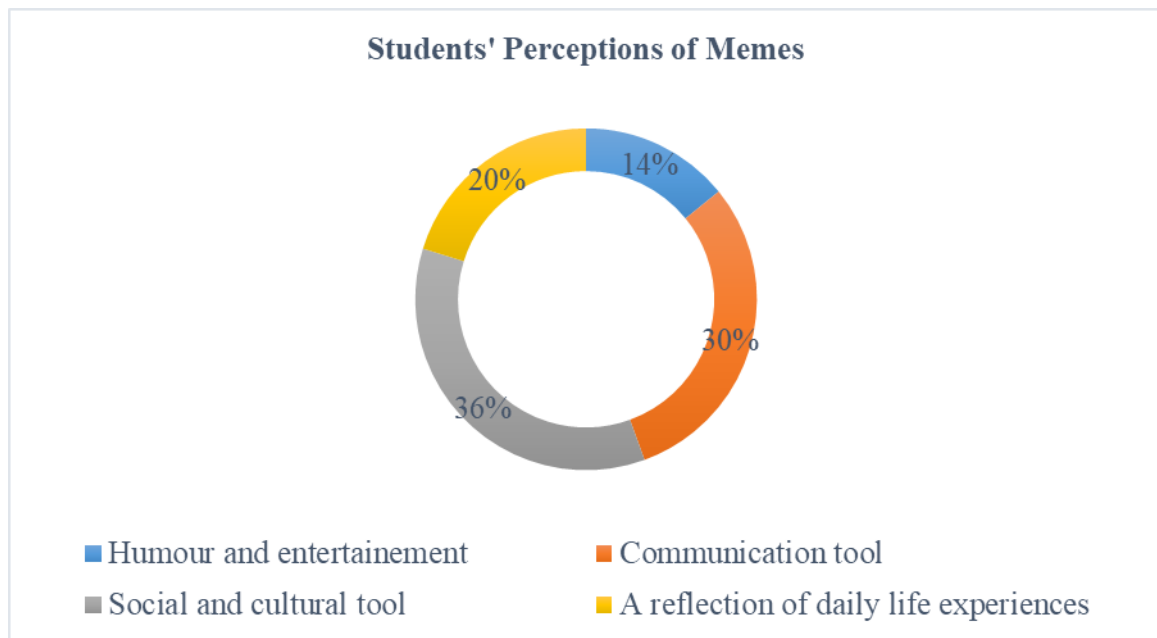


Figure: (2) Students' Perceptions of Memes

The second question examines students' perceptions of memes to assess their understanding of their role in communication, identity, and cultural expression. As illustrated in Figure 2, 36% of students (N=35) view memes as a social and cultural tool, indicating that memes act as a medium for conveying social norms and cultural values. On the other hand, 30% (N=35) consider memes as a communication tool. This suggests that memes can also deliver ideas, express emotions, and facilitate communication. Interestingly, only 14% (N= 14) of students primarily associate memes with humour and entertainment, which implies that while humour remains a key feature, the majority of students acknowledge their broader significance, recognizing memes as tools for cultural expression and social communication. Meanwhile, 20% (N=20) of students perceive memes as a reflection of daily life experiences, highlighting their role in mirroring real-world situations in a relatable manner.

- **How frequently do you come across memes on social media?**

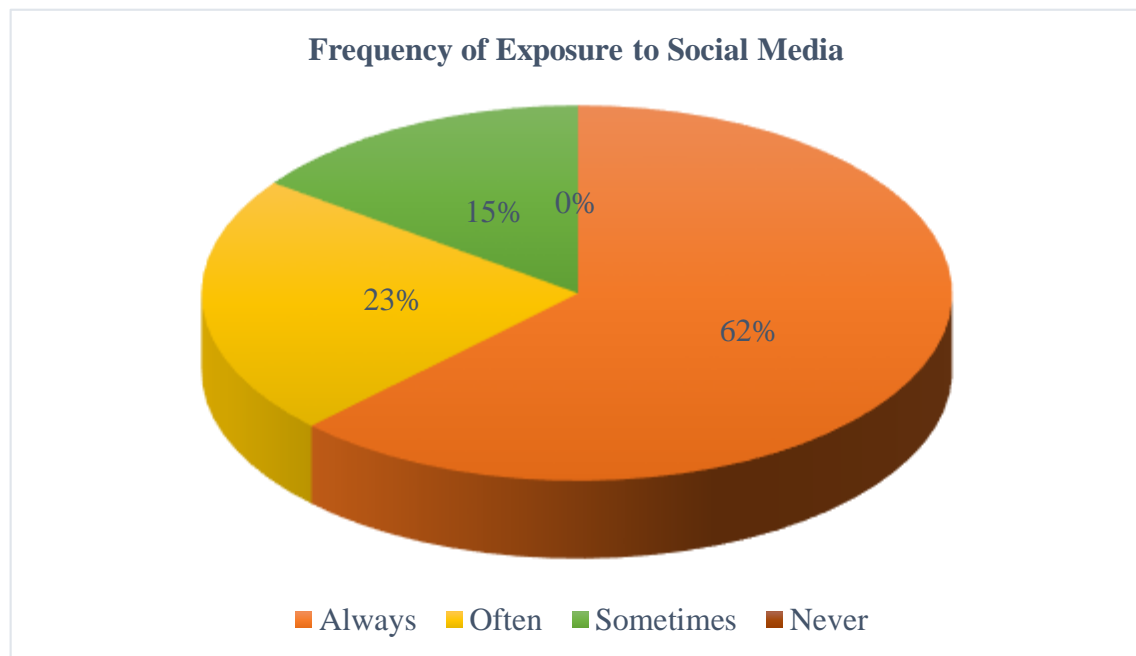


figure: (3) Frequency of Exposure to Memes on Social Media

As Figure 3 reveals, students were asked about the frequency with which they come across memes on social media. The data indicates that memes are highly prevalent on social media among students. 62% of students (N=50), representing the majority, encounter memes consistently, while 23% (N=18) indicated frequent exposure. This suggests that memes can noticeably constitute a fundamental and global aspect of digital interaction that serve as vehicles for communication, cultural exchange and social engagement. On the other hand, 15% (N=12) of students reported “occasionally” and 0% selected never, which emphasizes the ubiquity of English memes in digital spaces.

- **Which online platform do you use most often to view or create memes?**

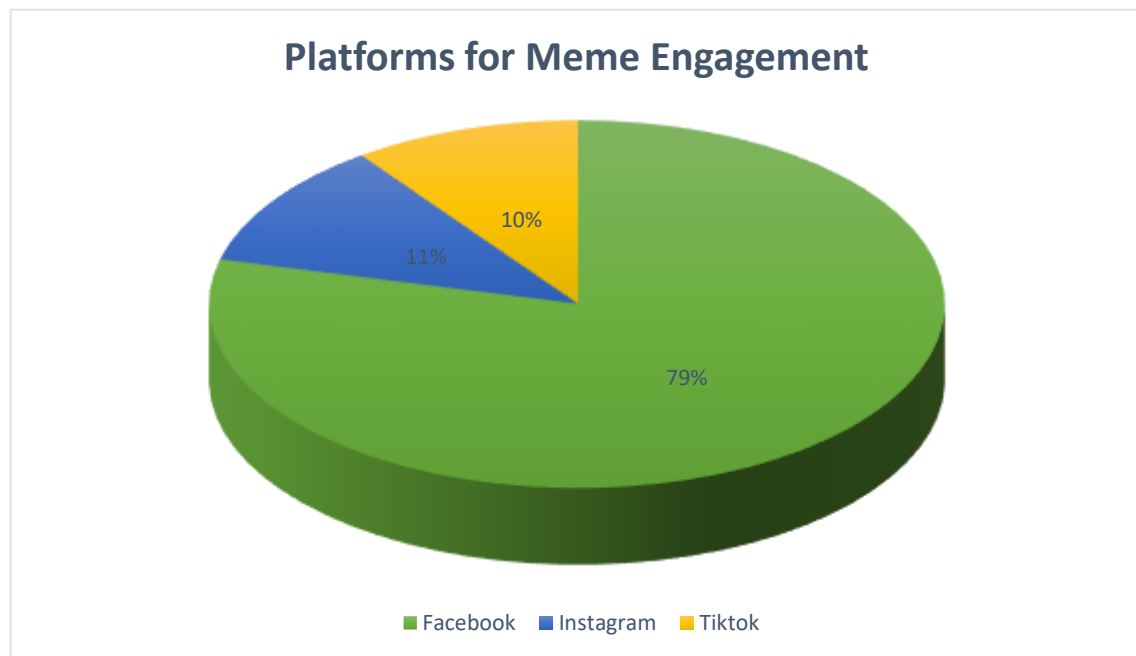
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figure: (4) Platforms for Meme Engagement

Figure 4 encompasses the platforms students use to create and engage with memes. As the figure illustrates, 79% (N=70) of students primarily view and create memes on Facebook. This indicates that Facebook is the dominant platform for meme engagement, likely due to its diverse user base, sharing features, and accessibility. In contrast, 11% (N=10) of students prefer to use TikTok, highlighting its growing influence as a platform for visual content. On the other hand, 10% (N=9) of participants use Instagram, indicating that while it is a popular social media platform, it is not the primary space to engage with memes for students.

- **What languages are most commonly used in the memes you view or share?**

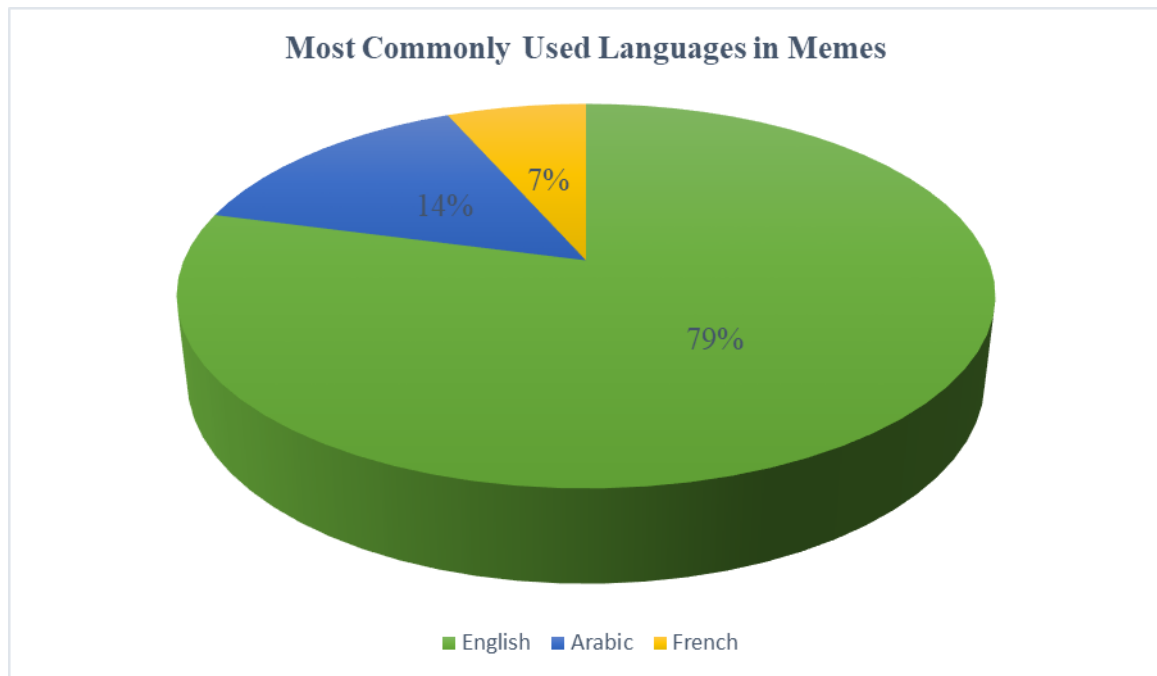


Figure: (5) Most Commonly Used Languages in Memes

The data highlights the most commonly used languages in memes, showing that 79% (N=71) interact with memes in English as the primary interactive language. This suggests that English, functioning as a lingua franca of digital communication, exerts a dominant influence on meme culture due to its global accessibility. However, the presence of Arabic at 14% (N=14) highlights the importance of students' native language in expressing their culture and humour, which indicates that regional linguistic identity remains salient in online interactions. Last, 7% (N=6) of students engage with French-language memes, which demonstrates that students may favor English for its global reach and Arabic for their cultural expression.

- **Do memes influence the way you use certain words or phrases in your daily conversations or experiences you relate to?**

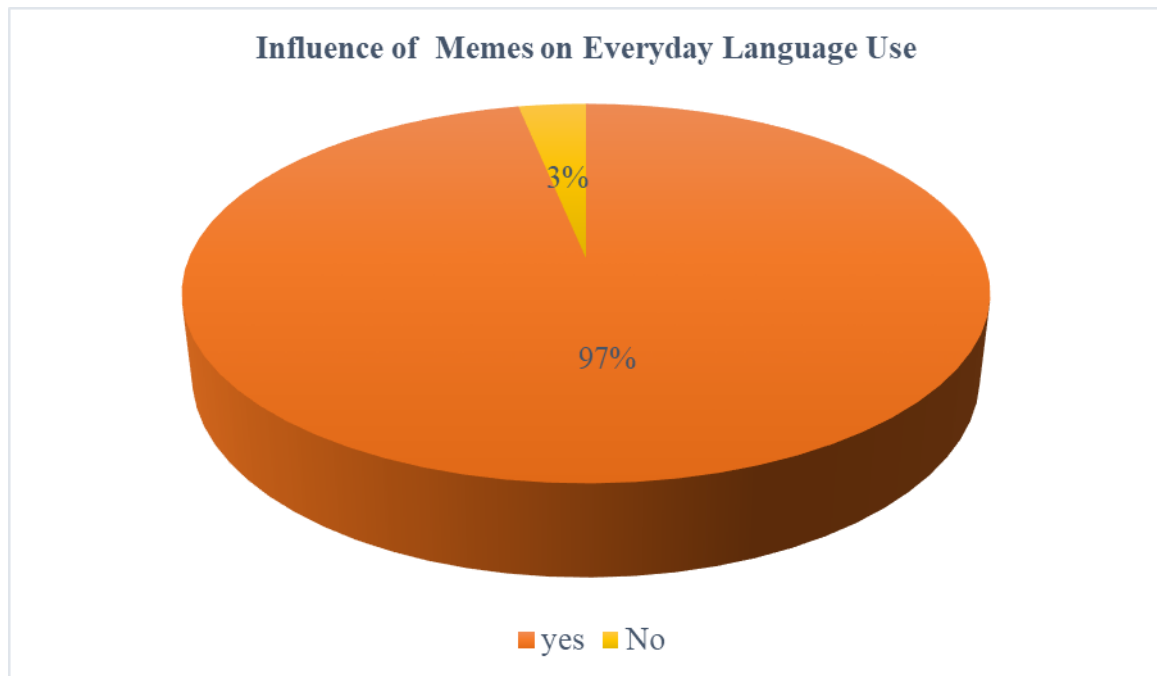


Figure: (6) Influence of Memes on Everyday Language Use

The figure n°6 investigates the impact of memes on students' language use. Notably, 97% (N=90) of students recognize the influence of memes on their everyday language use, highlighting that memes serve as a linguistic input that contributes to the adoption of specific words, phrases and expressions in students' everyday communication. The 3% (N=) of students who did not perceive any influence may have a limited engagement with digital culture or a strong adherence to their native language. Therefore, these students may engage with memes without adopting any associated cultural elements.

- **Have memes ever shaped how you express your identity?**

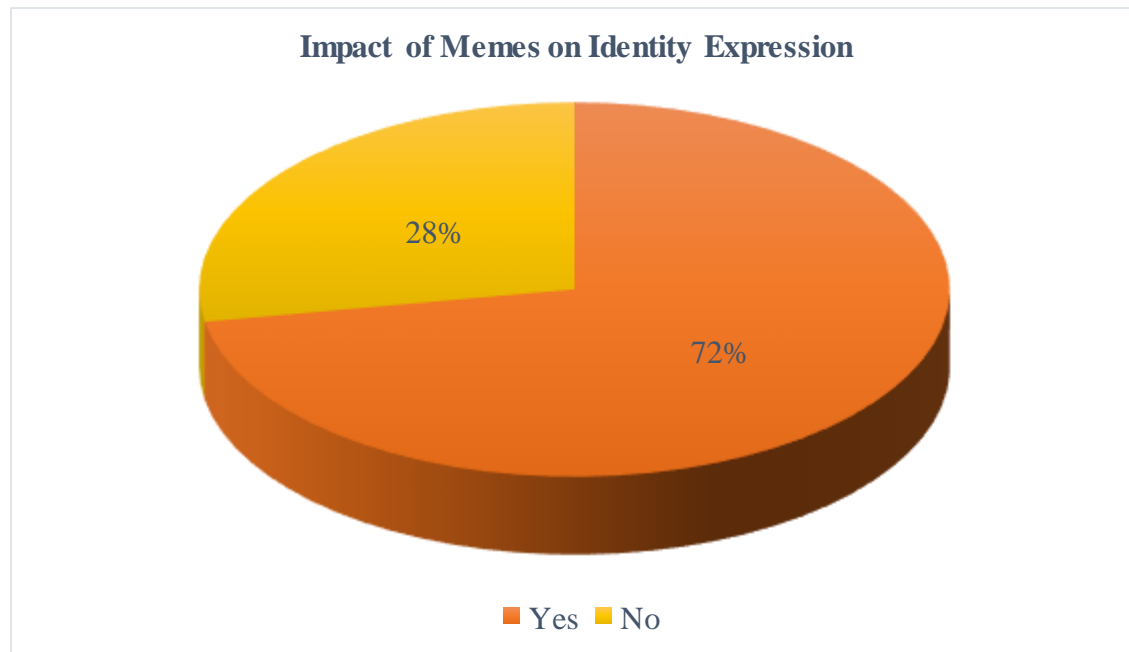
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figure: (7) The Impact of Memes on Identity Expression

The data presented in Figure 7 reveals the impact of memes on students' identity expression. The majority of students, 72% (N=65), believe that memes can have a noticeable influence on their identity by exposing them to new cultural references, humor styles, and linguistic expressions. They often reflect shared social values, relatable life experience and ideologies that reinforce students' identities. Conversely, 28% (N=25) of students disregard their influence on their identity expression; they view memes primarily as entertainment. Their linguistic and cultural identities are mostly rooted in real-life environments such as family, education, and local cultures.

- **Which language do you use the most when commenting on memes? Explain.**

The data indicates that 75% (N=70) of students code-switch between English and their mother tongue when commenting on memes, highlighting the dominance of digital communication and its influence on students' code-switching. Students navigate between English and their mother tongue to enhance communication, humor, and relatability. On the other hand, 25% (N=23) of students, representing the minority, exclusively communicate in English due to their language proficiency and linguistic confidence, which enables them to engage in English without relying on their mother tongue. Furthermore, the influence of English internet culture can noticeably contribute to this preference.

- **Do you prefer using memes or language when communicating with others?**

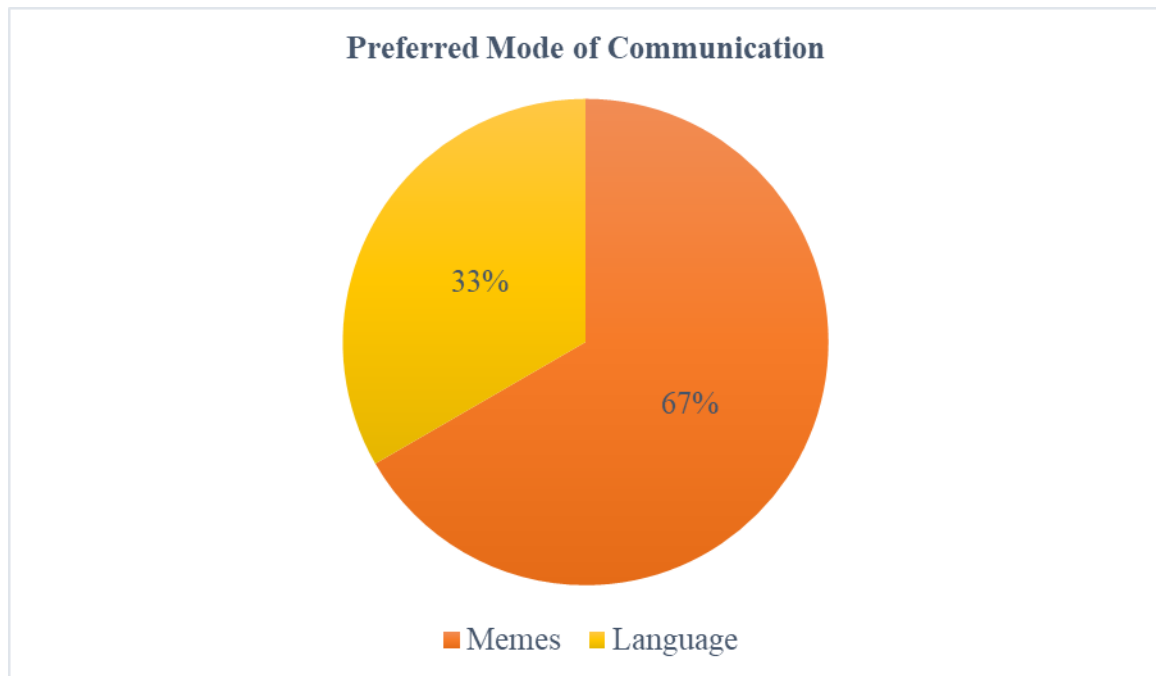


Figure: (8) Preferred Mode of Communication

Figure 8 reveals the preferred mode students use to communicate. The data indicates that 67% (N=60) of students favor memes over traditional language when communicating with others. They view memes as a concise, relatable, and culturally embedded doorway to deliver emotions, opinions, and humor. Additionally, they believe that memes allow for rapid information processing, often conveying messages in an accessible, entertaining, and engaging format. On the other hand, 33% (N=30) of students prefer using language for clarity and direct expression. Since the culture of memes is not acknowledged by every internet user, delivering messages through language can reduce misinterpretation for those who may not be familiar with meme-based communication. This highlights that while memes dominate informal digital interaction, linguistic communication remains essential and critical for conveying precise meaning and ensuring clarity in contexts where visual memes cannot deliver it.

- **Do you think that memes are more expressive than language?**

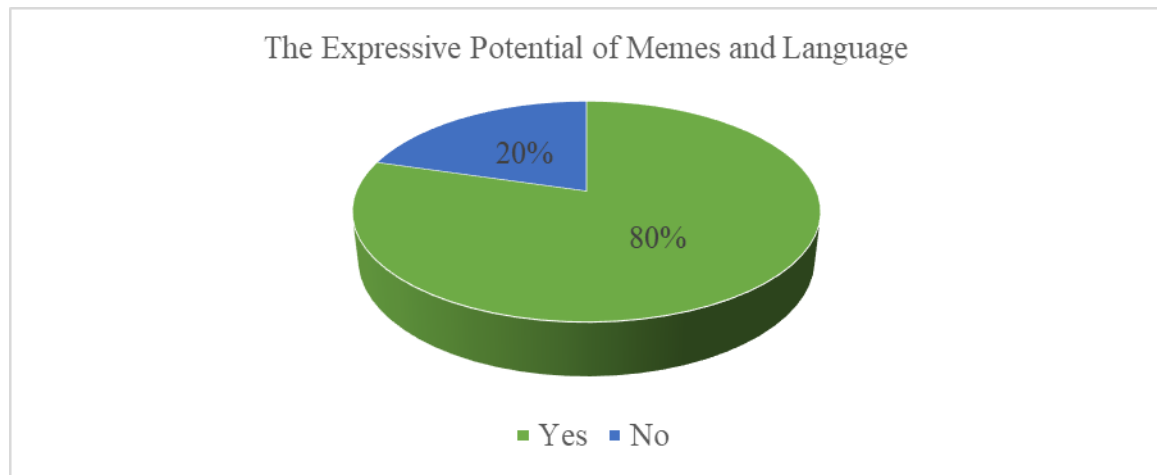


Figure: (9) The Expressive Potential of Memes and Language

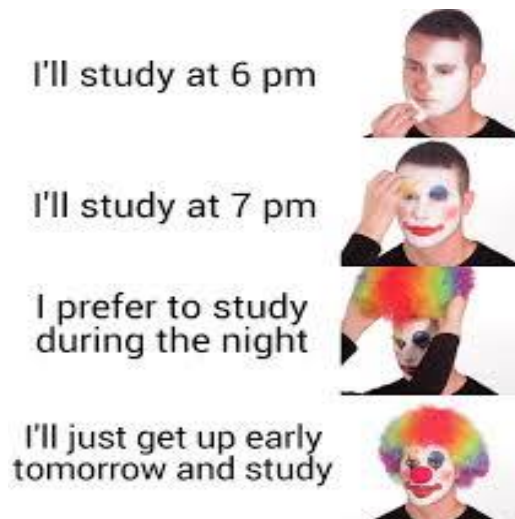
Figure n° 9 investigates students' perceptions of the expressive potential of memes in comparison to language. The data indicates that students perceive memes as more expressive than language, demonstrating a prevailing tendency among students to favor digital memes for conveying emotions and ideas. This can be attributed to their multimodal nature in integrating visual, textual, and cultural elements to enhance meaning. To this end, their widespread use in digital spaces further reinforces their noticeable role in social bonding and identity expression. On the other hand, 20% (N=25) prefer language use to be the primary tool of communication due to its capacity for precision and contextual adaptability, such as formal and academic settings.

5.3.2 Classroom Observation

The researcher opted for a classroom observation to examine how students engage and interact with memes. The incentive behind this is to analyze their language choice and cultural adaptation of digital expressions. The analysis examines 4 selected memes; two exclusively in English and two incorporating a blend of English and students' mother tongue.

➤ **Meme 1:**

Fig.1. A humourous meme illustrating students' procrastination, featuring code-switching between English and students' mother tongue



The first figure humorously depicts students' experiencing distress upon realizing an impending deadline, despite procrastinating throughout the academic term. During the classroom observation, the use of code-switching was widely observed among students. Comments, such as “*Miss, hada ana!*” (Miss, that’s me!) and “*Ga3 l3am hak miss!*” (*the whole year has been like this!*) highlight students’ instinctive use of linguistic resources to convey relatability and identity expression. On the other hand, the phonetic transcription, /gæʃ lʃæ:m hæk mɪs/ and / mɪs’hæ.dæ ’ʔæ.næ/) reflect the regional and linguistic identity of the students. To this end, their interaction indicates that digital humor serves as a medium for presenting local identity while interacting with global linguistic features. Furthermore, integrating English terms such as “miss” highlights the students’ bilingual competence to navigate between English and their mother tongue based on social context.

➤ **Meme 2:**

Fig.2. A meme illustrating the physical strain of Taraweeh prayers and humorously comparing it to “leg day” in fitness culture



The second figure humorously captures “leg day”, a common term in fitness culture, with “Taraweeh”, which is the lengthy prayers performed during Ramadan. Noticeably, this meme blends elements of global fitness culture with Islamic religious practice to reflect how digital humor bridges cultural contexts. During the classroom observation, students reacted with laughter and remarks, such as “*Sah! Moraha mantigch nemchi*” (/sʰaħ mu:ˈra:ha monˈtʰiqʃ nımʃi/), meaning “*True, after that, I can’t even walk*” which demonstrates how humor not only entertains but also reflects shared experiences within a specific community.

➤ **Meme 3:**

Fig.3. A meme illustrating the contrast between personal responsibilities and the spiritual atmosphere of Ramadan



The third figure visually represents a stark contrast between external responsibilities and internal priorities during Ramadan. During the classroom observation, students engaged actively in this meme through sharing personal anecdotes about their struggles to balance academic responsibilities with spiritual and social aspects of Ramadan. This dual engagement of balancing between academic stress and religious devotion demonstrates how memes act as a linguistic and cultural bridge medium through which students articulate their lived experiences in a relatable manner. Linguistically, this meme demonstrates code-mixing between English and Algerian Arabic, mirroring how students naturally alternate between languages, particularly in informal settings. Moreover, the use of Algerian Arabic rather than Modern Standard Arabic makes it more relatable for students, as it aligns with their everyday speech patterns.

➤ **Meme 4:**

Fig.4. A meme illustrating students' perception of academic pressure



The fourth figure encapsulates a common academic challenge students encounter, particularly the mental exhaustion associated with continuous study. Noticeably, the significant engagement observed among students indicates that digital humor functions as a communication and social tool; comments, such as “*Ikr!*” (an abbreviation for ‘I know right’), “*No cap needed*”, and “*Miss this is so true! Rana ga3 hak*” transcribed as /mis ðis iz soʊ tru: 'rānā gaʃ hāk/ reflect students' linguistic and social identity. The phrase “No cap needed”, which is derived from digital and youth slang, exemplifies students' propensity to affirm the veracity of the statement, thereby highlighting the impact of digital

culture on everyday communication practices. Furthermore, code-switching provides a sense of belonging and mutual understanding. When used in memes, it reinforces social cohesion, as students validate each other's experiences through humor and informal discourse.

4. Conclusion

This research examines the impact of memes on students' language change and cultural identity. The results indicate that memes can influence students' social, cultural, and linguistic lens. As digital communication becomes central to students' social interactions, exposure and integration of meme-derived language into their daily communication influences their vocabulary retention and language use. Furthermore, by engaging with memes, students tend to participate in a shared cultural discourse through including themselves with specific social groups, humor styles, and ideological perspectives. Moreover, based on the research findings, memes can noticeably foster student engagement and interaction. Meme culture encourages peer-to-peer communication and contributes to linguistic adaptability, which in turn reinforces cultural connections and adapting familiar linguistic patterns and references from students' everyday language. Additionally, students use memes as a means of self-expression and communication to convey emotions, opinions, and perspectives in a socially engaging manner. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers analyze the formal integration of memes in language learning classrooms while maintaining academic rigor. Furthermore, future research could examine how memes, despite their inherently informal nature, contribute to linguistic development and identity expression across generations and different educational levels. To this end, it is worth noting that memes provide a sense of belonging, as students engage with online communities composed of individuals from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. As a result, this interaction exposes them to different linguistic styles, expressions, and cultural references that contribute to language change and identity convergence.

5. Footnotes

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