



FROM BRAINROT TO DIGITAL DISCOURSE: STUDENT PRAGMATIC COMMUNICATION IN MEME CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates university students' engagement with brain rot and meme culture within digital communication environments, focusing on the pragmatic functions embedded in meme-based interactions and the extent to which meme culture shapes students' digital discourse and communication practices. Employing a mixed-methods research design, the study involved undergraduate students as participants. Data were gathered through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and pragmatic competence assessments, and subsequently analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative techniques. The findings reveal that meme culture has become deeply embedded in students' everyday digital interactions, serving multiple pragmatic purposes in online communication. Memes function not only as tools for entertainment and social bonding but also as mechanisms for expressing attitudes, negotiating meaning, conveying humor, and facilitating contextual understanding in digital discourse. Furthermore, the results indicate that sustained exposure to meme culture significantly influences students' communicative behavior, shaping their interpretation of messages, language use, and interactional strategies in online environments. The study concludes that memes should be viewed as more than merely recreational digital artifacts; they constitute meaningful communicative resources that support effective digital interaction and contribute to the development of pragmatic competence among university students. These findings underscore the growing significance of meme culture as a linguistic and sociocultural phenomenon in contemporary digital communication.

Keywords: *Brainrot Culture, Digital Communication, Digital Discourse, Internet Memes, Pragmatics, Speech Acts*

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology has fundamentally transformed contemporary communication practices, particularly through social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and X (Zulkifli et al., 2022; Patty & Noiya, 2023; Morrel, 2022). University students increasingly rely on these platforms to express ideas, emotions, humor,

and personal experiences in their daily interactions. Among the most prominent forms of online expression are internet memes, which function as creative and participatory tools for communicating shared experiences, social criticism, sarcasm, and humor. According to Ali and Husain (2024), memes represent a form of digital comedy that facilitates the transmission of social meanings within online interactions. Consequently, memes have

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emerged as a significant component of students' digital communication practices.

Alongside the proliferation of meme culture, the phenomenon commonly referred to as *brain rot* has gained considerable attention in digital environments. Brain rot describes the excessive consumption of online content that shapes individuals' linguistic behaviors, communication patterns, and interactional practices in virtual spaces (Idikut Özpençe, 2024; Putri et al., 2023). Owens (2025) characterizes brain rot as a participatory digital culture driven by repetitive, chaotic, and highly humorous content. Although such content often appears absurd or trivial, it frequently conveys complex meanings, emotions, and collective experiences. In this regard, brain rot memes extend beyond mere entertainment and have become integral elements of students' communicative repertoires in online interactions.

From a pragmatic perspective, successful digital communication requires users to comprehend not only the literal meanings of messages but also the implied meanings conveyed through contextual cues, humor, irony, and shared cultural knowledge. Pragmatic competence enables individuals to interpret and produce contextually appropriate communicative acts across diverse social situations. Seli et al. (2023) argue that effective communication depends on the ability to employ language purposefully and appropriately within specific contexts. This competence becomes particularly important in digital environments, where communication is frequently mediated through indirect expressions, visual representations, and multimodal resources such as memes. Accordingly, memes can be viewed as communicative acts that embody intentions, attitudes, and social meanings extending beyond their surface-level content.

The theoretical framework of speech act theory provides a useful lens for understanding the communicative functions of memes. Searle (1979) conceptualizes speech acts as communicative actions performed through

language to achieve particular purposes. Speech act theory encompasses locutionary acts, illocutionary acts, and perlocutionary acts, all of which can be identified in meme-based communication. Through humor, satire, irony, criticism, and implicit meanings, memes frequently perform various communicative functions while eliciting responses from audiences. Supporting this perspective, Grundlingh (2017) contends that memes can be understood as speech acts because they communicate intentions and invite interpretation and reaction from their recipients.

Despite the widespread use of memes in digital communication, they are often perceived merely as humorous online content. In reality, memes frequently embody nuanced meanings, including sarcasm, social critique, irony, and emotional expression, all of which require contextual interpretation. Therefore, memes should be recognized not only as entertainment artifacts but also as meaningful communicative resources. Nevertheless, existing scholarship has largely emphasized the humorous and recreational aspects of memes while paying comparatively limited attention to their pragmatic dimensions. Furthermore, there remains a lack of comprehensive research examining the extent of students' engagement with brain rot and meme culture, the pragmatic functions manifested in meme-based communication, and the influence of meme culture on students' digital discourse and communication styles.

Previous studies have highlighted the significance of memes in digital communication from various perspectives, including humor in social media interactions (Ali & Husain, 2024), meaning negotiation through meme sharing (Dyner, 2024), implicature in internet memes (Romadhon, 2024), speech act functions in meme-related discourse (Dan'Azumi et al., 2025; Jaya et al., 2025), and perlocutionary effects in digital communication (Kesi, 2025). Other scholars have emphasized the role of memes in facilitating political discourse and fostering

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online communities (Anderau & Barbarrusa, 2024; Olmsted, 2021). However, limited attention has been devoted to investigating students' frequency of engagement with brain rot and meme culture, the pragmatic functions embedded in their meme-based interactions, and the broader influence of meme culture on their digital communication practices.

To address these gaps, the present study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How frequently do university students engage with brain rot and meme culture content in digital communication?
2. What pragmatic functions are reflected in students' meme-based communication?
3. How does meme culture influence students' digital discourse and communication styles?

Accordingly, this study aims to explore university students' engagement with brain rot and meme culture in digital communication, identify the pragmatic functions manifested in meme-based interactions, and examine the influence of meme culture on students' digital discourse and communication practices.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the fields of pragmatics, speech act theory, and digital discourse studies by providing insights into the communicative functions of memes within contemporary online environments. Practically, the study enhances understanding of memes as meaningful communicative resources shaped by intentions, emotions, and social responses. The findings may also provide valuable implications for researchers, educators, and students interested in digital communication, internet culture, and the evolving role of memes in contemporary society.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Communication in Digital Media

Digital communication is the process of conveying information and meaning via internet-based platforms and digital technologies. Digital media has made communication more interactive and participatory, allowing users to be both message producers and audience members. Similarly, Manuel Castells (2015) outlines how online communication enables people to form relationships and identities through networked digital worlds.

In social media culture, communication is frequently communicated through comedy, graphic texts, internet slang, and memes. Students frequently utilize online humor and odd language to convey their experiences, emotions, and social beliefs. Because digital communication relies largely on context and interpretation, pragmatic analysis is useful for understanding communication practices in online meme culture.

2.2 Pragmatics and Speech Act Theory

Pragmatics is a field of linguistics that studies meaning in relation to context and language use during communication. According to George Yule (1996), pragmatics is concerned with how speakers convey meaning and how listeners comprehend statements beyond their precise meanings. Context, internet culture, and audience perception all have an impact on meaning in digital communication, especially in funny online interactions such as memes.

Furthermore, language in communication serves not just to convey information but also to conduct certain acts and intentions toward the audience. This concept is described by John Searle (1969), who claims that utterances serve as communicative acts in social interactions. Speech acts include locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary actions that transmit literal meaning, speaker intention, and communicative effects on the audience.

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Memes, which use satire, sarcasm, extreme comedy, and contextual references, are common examples of speech actions delivered digitally.

As a result, speech acts in digital communication are strongly tied to internet memes and brainrot culture, which regularly employ comedy, irony, and contextual expressions in online interactions. This requirement makes speech act theory applicable to understanding communication patterns in meme discourse.

2.3 Internet Meme and Brainrot Culture

Internet memes are pieces of digital content that are shared and replicated via online platforms and social media. Limor Shifman (2014) defines memes as collections of digital artifacts that share common traits and are distributed, mimicked, and modified by internet users. Memes are forms of communication that reflect thoughts, emotions, comedy, and societal critique in addition to being entertainment media.

Recently, brainrot humor has become a prominent trend in internet culture, particularly among young social media users. The term "brainrot" refers to repetitious, ridiculous, exaggerated, and overstimulating digital information that is regularly consumed on social media and short-form platforms. According to Aysi et al. (2025), brainrot is linked to excessive exposure to digital media and online information, which affects students' attention, conduct, and communication patterns. Brainrot comedy is widely seen in online interactions as spontaneous jokes, sarcasm, gibberish expressions, and excessive meme transmission.

As a result, memes and brainrot humor can be viewed as types of communicative discourse rather than simply entertainment content. Because meme communication relies largely on context and audience perception, digital discourse theory is critical for

understanding meaning production in online communities.

2.4 Digital Discourse

Digital discourse refers to communication practices carried out using internet-based platforms and digital media. Rodney H. Jones (2015) defines digital discourse as language use, interaction, and meaning-making processes impacted by online environments. Social media allows people to engage in participatory communication by creating discourse using texts, graphics, videos, and memes.

In meme culture, discourse is frequently produced using humor, satire, irony, and contextual references. Meme audiences actively interpret and replicate meanings based on common internet culture and experiences. Thus, digital discourse theory contributes to a better understanding of how meme communication works socially and contextually among students in online groups.

2.5 Previous Studies and Research Gap

Previous research has revealed that memes and digital communication contain a variety of communicative meanings that can be investigated using pragmatic methodologies. Meme communication is used in online communities to convey criticism, opinions, feelings, and social interaction, as well as for fun. In this regard, Abdu Dan'Azumi et al. (2025) discovered that memes serve as communicative instruments with persuasive, critical, inspirational, and hilarious implications. The study also stressed that meme interpretation is largely dependent on context, visual components, and audience comprehension, implying that memes function as forms of digital communication and social discourse.

Furthermore, digital communication on social media frequently has an emotional and social impact on viewers through the use of contextual language and indirect expression.

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This hypothesis is backed by Kesi (2025), who discovered that perlocutionary speech acts in online communication have communicative impacts on audiences via comedy, persuasion, and contextual interaction. The study also found that audience interpretation is critical for comprehending meaning and communicative impacts in digital media.

Furthermore, online speech frequently reflects social and emotional responses through comments and interactions on social media platforms. Hidayati et al. (2021) discovered that forceful, directive, and expressive illocutionary acts were commonly used in social media interactions, particularly in comments comprising criticism, insults, and emotional expressions. The study concluded that digital discourse on social media has a considerable impact on audience participation and communicative responses in online environments.

Although previous research has focused on speech acts and digital communication, little has been done to specifically analyze locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts in absurd Instagram meme discourse, as well as students' interpretations and the social functions of brainrot meme culture. As a result, this study seeks to fill the vacuum by evaluating speech acts, students' comprehension, and the social consequences of the Tahilalats meme episode "Sederhana Tapi Boomers Ga Suka," which leads to the study's conceptual framework.

2.6 Conceptual Framework

This study uses pragmatic theory, specifically Searle's Speech Act Theory, to examine locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts in Tahilalats memes on Instagram. This study, using a mixed-methods approach, also looks into students' perceptions and the social uses of brainrot meme culture in digital communication to explain how memes function as digital discourse among students.

3. METHODS**3.1 Types and Research Approaches**

This study employs a mixed-method. This study employed a mixed-method research design to investigate students' pragmatic communication in meme culture, particularly in interpreting digital discourse represented through internet memes. Mixed-method research combines quantitative and qualitative approaches in one study to obtain a broader and more comprehensive understanding of a research problem. According to John W. Creswell (2015), mixed-method research allows researchers to combine quantitative results and qualitative understanding inside one study. Similarly, Burke Johnson and Larry Christensen (2019) argue that mixed-method design is acceptable when the researcher aims to explore a phenomenon using numerical trends and contextual meaning at the same time.

The present study used a convergent mixed-method approach. This approach was selected because the study aimed to examine students' pragmatic understanding of meme discourse through measurable responses and contextual interpretation. The quantitative approach was intended to identify students' responses toward pragmatic communication in meme culture, while the qualitative approach was used to support deeper interpretation related to meaning construction, contextual understanding, and communicative intention. This research focused on how students interpret pragmatic meaning through digital humor and internet language presented in meme discourse.

3.2. Research Subject and Location

This research was conducted in the English Language Education Study Program at Private University, Indonesia. The subjects of this study were undergraduate students of the English Department. The questionnaire was distributed to all English Department students as the primary participants of the study. The participants were selected because they are actively engaged in digital communication and

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are familiar with English language use in both academic and online communication contexts.

The object of this study was meme content taken from the Instagram account @tahilalats, particularly the episode entitled *Simple but Boomer Don't Like It*. The selected meme was chosen because it represents contemporary meme culture and digital humor frequently shared among young internet users. According to Limor Shifman (2014), internet memes are part of digital culture that circulate through online communities and communicate meaning through humor, repetition, and shared references. In pragmatic communication, meaning is strongly influenced by context and interpretation. Francisco Yus (2019) explains that digital communication requires contextual understanding because meaning in online interaction often depends on shared assumptions and pragmatic interpretation. Therefore, English Department students and the selected meme content were considered relevant to investigate pragmatic communication in meme culture.

3.3 Data Collection Techniques

Data in this study were collected through a Likert-scale questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and a test. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree and was distributed to English Department students. The interview and test were conducted with selected participants to support the findings obtained from the questionnaire. These instruments were used to collect quantitative and qualitative data regarding students' pragmatic communication in interpreting meme discourse.

3.4 Data Analysis Techniques

The data obtained from the questionnaire, interviews, and test were analyzed using quantitative and qualitative procedures. Quantitative data were interpreted descriptively

to identify students' responses toward pragmatic communication in meme culture. Meanwhile, qualitative data from interviews and tests were interpreted based on pragmatic meaning, contextual understanding, and communicative intention related to the selected meme. The results from both approaches were then interpreted comprehensively to provide a broader understanding of students' pragmatic communication in meme culture.

3.5 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in mixed methods research is a complex phrase that applies the strength of qualitative and quantitative approaches to improve the credibility and dependability of research outcomes. The quality of scientific study depends on the validity. In mixed methods research, the term "trustworthiness" refers to the degree to which a study yields results that are believable, consistent, and relevant. Combining qualitative and quantitative data allows researchers to acquire a more complete knowledge of the phenomena of interest, and to overcome limitations of a single-method approach. To ensure the credibility, reliability, and validity of the results, numerous data sources, triangulation, and systematic instrument development were used (Deniz & Erdener, 2023; Gowda et al., 2019; Perkins, 2025; Shannon-Baker & Hunt-Anderson, 2025; Yanti et al., 2025). Thus, quantitative and qualitative evidence were combined to provide a more stronger and reliable interpretation of data.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Result

Table 1. Involvement of Students in Brainrot and Meme Culture

Indicator	Dominant Response	Percentage
Student often see brainrot or meme content on social media	Strongly Agree	34.8%

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Indicator	Dominant Response	Percentage	Indicator	Dominant Response	Percentage
Student often share memes or brainrot content with my friends	Neutral	37.0%	Use of memes in daily digital communication	Agree	32.6%
Understand the meaning of popular brainrot or meme trends	Neutral	34.8%	Preference for meme-based expressions	Neutral	37.0%
Student follow meme trends that are popular among students	Neutral	43.5%	Use of memes to enhance interaction	Mostly	28.3%
Using meme references in digital conversations	Agree	37.0%	Comfort in using meme language	Agree	34.8%
Student feels familiar with words, phrases, or expressions from brainrot content	Mostly	37.0%	Using memes to avoid saying something directly	Agree	32.6%
Student usually respond to messages using memes, stickers, or reaction images	Strongly Agree	37.0%	Using memes to respond to situations that are difficult to explain with words	Agree	32.6%
Student spend a lot of time on social media	Agree	32.6%	Understand sarcastic or implied meanings in memes	Neutral	39.1%
			Dependence on memes for expressing	Strongly Agree	50.0%

The data suggest that students are highly exposed to brainrot and meme culture in their everyday digital interactions. The poll indicated that 34.8% of pupils (A1) often come across meme content and 32.6% (A8) acknowledged strong exposure to internet slang and digital humor.

This is corroborated by interview data where social media emerged as the primary exposure pathway for participants: “I see memes and internet slang on social media every day, especially on TikTok and Instagram”

Students also used meme-based communication tools such as stickers and reaction photos often (A5–A7). This speaks to the fact that memes have become part of their normal communication practices.

Table 2. Meme Pragmatic Functions in Student Communication

The results suggest that memes fulfil a variety of pragmatic purposes in students’ communication. first, memes are indirect expressions of sentiments and thoughts. Memes assist pupils to communicate their feelings and respond to situations that are difficult to convey orally.

Approximately 32.6% of students (B1 & B6) agreed with this. we see this in reactions to interviews: “Sometimes it’s easier to send a meme than say what I feel”

Second, memes are helpful for social bonding and interpersonal connections. About 37.0% (B2) of the respondents provided neutral replies and 32.6% (B5) believed that memes are useful in creating a sense of closeness with peers. students said: “When you send memes, it makes conversations more relaxed and closer with friends”

Third, memes are utilized extensively to produce comedy and to decrease the

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seriousness of communication. About 34.8% (B4) of the participants agreed that memes help to avoid overly serious communication and 28.3% (B3) stated that they use memes to communicate criticism in a lighter style.

Fourth, memes also include sarcasm and indirect meaning, yet 39.1% (B7) of the replies were neutral, indicating different levels of understanding.

Finally, the strongest conclusion is about pragmatic awareness, where 50.0% (B8) strongly agreed that memes are not always appropriate for all circumstances. This is supported by interview data: “We are looking at the situation first. Not all memes are okay to transmit”

The data indicate that pupils understand the context, audience and appropriateness of memes in communication.

Table 3. How meme culture shapes style of digital communication

Indicator	Dominant Response	Percentage
Use of memes in daily communication	Agree	34.8%
Use of internet expressions & meme language	Agree	43.5%
Increased use of informal language	Neutral	32.6%
Use of visual responses (stickers/reactions)	Agree	34.8%
Creativity in digital communication	Agree	39.1%
Influence on communication style	Neutral	41.3%
Changes in interaction habits	Agree	41.3%
Awareness of context before using memes	Strongly Agree	32.6%
Miscommunication due to meme misunderstanding	Agree	37.0%

The findings suggest that meme culture affects students' communication habits in a number of ways. First, meme culture stimulates linguistic invention, notably in the form of stickers, reaction graphics, and internet-based expressions. This is also shown in the students' responses, revealing that these elements are often used in their everyday communication.

Secondly, meme culture impacts the formality of language. About 32.6% of replies (C3) suggest that students are more likely to employ informal language, including meme-related words. This is corroborated by the following interview excerpt: “I use a lot of meme language when I'm chatting with friends, so it feels more casual”

Third, the use of memes may also create communication problems. Students said unfamiliarity with some memes or internet terminology can lead to misinterpretations. One participant described: “Sometimes people don't get the meme and the message doesn't come across well.

Also, the growth of students' pragmatic awareness is promoted by meme culture. 32.6% of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement that they consider context before employing memes in communication (C8). We have interview data to back that up: “First I consider about who I'm sending memes to”

Importantly, the results of the pragmatic test provide additional support to the findings. The average score of 80.26 % was classified as “Good”. The results suggest that students generally have adequate pragmatic competence, especially in the areas of interpreting implied meanings, humor and contextual language in digital communication. The relatively high test scores reflect a positive effect of regular exposure to meme culture on the students' capacity to grasp and apply context-sensitive language.

The results overall indicate that meme culture influences students' communication in ways that make it more expressive, creative, and context-aware, but also creates possible communication hurdles stemming from varied cultural and digital literacy.

4.2 Discussion

The findings reveal that university students are highly engaged with social media platforms and demonstrate substantial exposure to brain rot and meme culture. Frequent interaction with memes, internet slang, and digital humor suggests that meme culture has become deeply embedded within contemporary digital communication practices. This finding supports Shifman's (2014) conceptualization of memes as cultural artifacts that are continuously created, modified, and circulated across online communities. Similarly, Castells (2015) argues that digital networks facilitate the exchange of cultural meanings and social practices among internet users. The present findings also corroborate the work of Nur Aysi et al. (2025), who emphasize the increasing prevalence of brain rot culture and short-form digital content in students' everyday online experiences.

The study further demonstrates that memes perform diverse pragmatic functions within students' communication practices. Participants reported using memes to express humor, sarcasm, emotions, social affiliation, and indirect messages. These findings reinforce the perspectives advanced by Yule (1996) and Levinson (1983), who argue that meaning is often derived from contextual interpretation rather than solely from linguistic form. Furthermore, the results are consistent with Searle's (1969) Speech Act Theory, which conceptualizes communication as the performance of actions through language. Within this framework, memes function as communicative acts that convey intentions, emotions, evaluations, and social meanings beyond their entertainment value. Comparable findings were reported by Dan'Azumi et al. (2025), who identified memes as effective vehicles for communicating intentions and facilitating interaction within digital environments.

Another noteworthy finding concerns students' pragmatic awareness in online communication. Although participants generally perceived memes positively, many acknowledged that certain memes may be

inappropriate in specific contexts. Interview data further highlighted the importance of audience considerations, contextual factors, and communicative formality in determining the appropriateness of meme usage. These findings suggest that students possess a considerable degree of contextual sensitivity when engaging in digital interactions. This interpretation is supported by the studies of Hidayati et al. (2021) and Oktaviani et al. (2022), which emphasize that successful online communication depends on users' awareness of communicative intentions, contextual constraints, and audience interpretation.

While questionnaire responses regarding the influence of meme culture on communication practices were relatively moderate, evidence from interviews and pragmatic assessments indicates that engagement with meme culture contributes positively to the development of students' pragmatic competence. Participants reported that familiarity with digital trends enhanced their ability to recognize humor, sarcasm, implied meanings, and contextual references in online discourse. This interpretation is further substantiated by the pragmatic test results, which yielded an overall average score of 80.26%, categorized as Good. These findings align with Jones's (2015) argument that digital practices play a significant role in shaping discourse and communicative behavior. Likewise, Kesi (2025) contends that active participation in digital communication environments promotes the development of pragmatic understanding and communicative effectiveness.

Taken together, the findings suggest that meme culture extends far beyond its conventional role as a source of entertainment and functions as a meaningful communicative resource within contemporary digital environments. Through repeated engagement with memes and digital trends, students appear to develop stronger pragmatic competence, heightened contextual awareness, and more sophisticated digital discourse practices. The study therefore demonstrates that individuals who are actively immersed in meme culture tend to exhibit greater sensitivity to contextual meanings, audience expectations, and

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communicative appropriateness, all of which are essential components of effective communication in the digital age.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that students are actively engaged with brain rot and meme culture in their daily digital interactions, with memes occupying a significant role in shaping their online communication practices. The findings indicate that students not only frequently encounter and interact with meme content on social media but also demonstrate an adequate level of pragmatic competence, as reflected in the average pragmatic test score of 80.26%, categorized as good. Furthermore, students show awareness of audience, context, and communicative appropriateness when using memes in online discourse, suggesting that meme culture contributes positively to the development of contextual understanding and pragmatic awareness. These results imply that memes function not merely as entertainment but also as meaningful pedagogical and communicative tools that can enhance students' digital literacy and pragmatic skills in EFL contexts. Therefore, educators are encouraged to integrate meme-based and digital culture-oriented materials into language learning to foster more engaging and contextually relevant instruction. For future research, it is recommended that studies explore larger and more diverse populations, longitudinal effects of meme exposure on pragmatic development, and comparative analyses between different cultural or educational contexts to further validate and expand the findings of this study.

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