The Role of Memes on Emotional Contagion

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Abstract - Cyberspace, centered on social media, has dominated the majority of media consumption in the present age. An overview of users’ communication patterns in social media shows that Internet memes have been used as a form of online rhetoric. In addition to global memes, each country and culture has its own memes that appear in the form of image, text, videos or their combination on online social networks and express social, political, cultural, and economic issues as well as global events. This study builds on reviewing various research to argue that internet memes play an important role in emotional contagion (fear, anger, happiness, etc.). The repetition, sharing and trendiness of a meme among users indicate the transmission of a special emotion and feeling. Also, the degree of virality of the meme depends on the popularity, acceptability and importance of the meme’s message. To create a meme, users must pay attention to different factors such as time, character, attractiveness, desensitization, image and audience demand. Memes can be used in various fields such as political, economic (marketing) and other.

Keywords: Meme, Emotional Contagion, Social media, Social network

I. INTRODUCTION:

Emotions often appear in response to important stimuli and life events which allow individuals to adapt to their environment and internal conditions. Contrary to mood, emotions are relatively unstable and usually transient and appear in response to current situations. Inability to regulate emotional states may lead to psychological damage or even mental disorders. One of the important things about emotions is that they are contagious. In fact, emotional contagion refers to the unconscious transmission of emotions between communicators. This means that by observing the emotions of those around us, we can be influenced by their emotional states. Psychologists believe that communicating with cheerful and positive people can help improve one's emotional states and feelings satisfaction, as opposed to, being in situations and associating with people with low mood, affects depression and boredom [1]. Various factors can affect the transmission of emotions. Emotional contagion affects people's lives like a double-edged sword. This emotional ability, on the one hand, contributes to the emergence of more compassionate relations, the development of empathy and the creation of support networks, and on the other hand, can impose an additional emotional burden on the person. Today, media and commercial services are influenced by this perspective and with the help of mood induction techniques try to use them to their advantage. Internet memes is one of these methods due to its position and popularity among users.

Meme is a symbolic cultural artifact, derived from beliefs, traditions, social, cultural, and political events. Which evokes a common message in the minds of its users. Memes represent parts of ideas, habits, skills, moral and aesthetic values, practices, or general attitudes that can be transmitted to others. The concept of meme is defined as an information pattern in someone’s mind that can be copied into another person’s mind. Memetics is defined as a theoretical and experimental science that studies the replication, expansion, and evolution of memes. Memes differ in their degree of adaptation, that is, their ability to adapt to the socio-cultural environment in which they are spread. More compatible memes with high adaptability will be rather successful in transmitting and reaching to more people, thus spreading in a larger population. This biological similarity of memes to genes allows us to apply evolutionary concepts and theories of biological evolution to conceptualize memes corresponding to genes. Richard Dawkins were the forefront of developing this concept. A truly successful meme is one that spreads like a pandemic to an entire population, eventually becoming a fixed and indigenous part of that population’s culture. Memes can be seen as mind viruses, viral ideas, or contagious concept that propagate from one mind to another by imitation or transmission. Internet is a tool for spreading memes. Due to the diversity, multiplicity and viral transmitting of meme via the internet, internet memes have become cultural symbols in netizens’ culture [2].

Internet memes are popular images, texts, or videos that, while entertaining, often convey a particular message with humor. Internet memes have replaced the traditional formations of participation, expression, and emotion with new formulations of social participation. Memes as a tool for the integration and synergy of social forces affect the social and political participation. Memes have the ability to change everything quickly if it became epidemic.
Internet memes create a short common feeling and are a good way to vent emotions and express the feelings and opinions of users, which humorous feature make them acceptable and accelerates message transmission in the shortest possible time. The important thing is that memes should convey positive social-individual's values, and avoid spreading contaminated memes that infect users' minds with disruptive emotions. Internet memes that do not have a strong cultural support, character or message, lose their usage after a short time, even due to followers' haste. Investigating behavior of Iranian social media users, we well realized that some internet memes which originate from Iranian culture and characters to express a special situation, status or emotion, have turned users' best means to convey their desired message. Also, broad diffuse of some memes and public acceptance has caused internet user to follow images and characters in those memes, and find a common emotion by seeing those global memes and use them to convey their desired emotion. In this case, Internet memes, similar to emojis, after internalization and express and convey a common emotion, could have the same usage in different cultures. In this study, by reviewing other researches about internet memes, we are looking for the role of internet memes on emotional contagion.

**Meme and Iranian Memes:**

Meme is a cultural abstract that, like all forms of communication, evolves with those who use them. No one can claim to know or understand existing memes. They are very simple and can often be too personal for the people who create and share them. There are still some common elements that can help to understand them. Internet meme often is an image or video that depicts a particular concept or idea by humor and is disseminated through social media. Meme spreads through social media, forums, online messengers and even news websites. Images and videos that convey a message are modified, turning the original idea into something completely different, or simply sent with a new title to illustrate the altered form. Whatever the message, a meme con significantly convey more information that plain text alone cannot. In the same way that emoticons are used to convey complex ideas, mood and emotion, memes can convey a complex idea, state of mind, or shared understanding much faster than typing and reading in plain text [3]. In 1976, Richard Dawkins used the word meme in his book Selfish Gene as a basis for explaining the spread of cultural ideas and phenomena based on evolutionary principles. Songs, beliefs (especially religious beliefs), and fashionate some of examples that he mentions in his book. Meme theorists believe that meme evolves by natural selection (similar to what happens in biological evolution) through the processes of diversity, mutation, competition, and inheritance that contribute to the success of recreation. Memes that cannot spread widely become extinct while others remain, expand and mutate (for better or worse). Theorists in this field believe that memes with best replication, will show the greatest spread, though they are harmful to the well-being of their host. In the 90's, to evaluate the principles and conditions of meme that derivation from evolutionary theory, a new field of study called mimetic was established. Compared to genetics, which has strong evidence based on the discovery of the biological effects of DNA, memetic lacks any explanation for a known means of transmission for meme [4]. Memes are units of information that flow through social interaction in the collective mind. This collective mentality is copied and formed the internalized ways of thinking. Memes contain information and codes that translate into norms and behaviors. In fact, memes are common perceptual, normative and behavioral codes in a society. perceptual and normative codes are formed in culture. They are in the form of information which memes are inside them. A culture with violent memes, is based on a kind of information, assumptions and concepts, which translates and repeats itself in the form of norms and behaviors. Information is stored through memes; Then they are translated and become the norm. In fact, memes contain codes and information that transmit, repeat, and copy the internalized ways of thinking and acting in a culture. Memes, or informational codes, actually represent our attitude and behavioral patterns and contain norms and rules. For example, if it has become a common practice to lie in order to make a living, this internalized norm develops or changes through a kind of meme [5]. Internet memes have many different forms. They can appear as videos, images, texts, or remix of them. They could be ideas, based on an interesting or exciting keyword that are either made with the intention of becoming a meme, or simply become popular and spread throughout the internet communities and find their way to others. Internet videomemes usually spread very quickly, but varies from case to case. Meme is an idea that is advertised through the networks. The idea may be in the form of a hyperlink, video, image, website, hashtag, or just a word or phrase. Memes may be transmitted from person to person through social networks, blogs, direct emails, news sources or other network services [6].

When a culture contains an informational code for instability, it actually contains a meme that says living conditions are unstable, so the opportunity must be seized. In this case, a kind of negative opportunism and self-control is instilled. In Iranian culture, the phrase, "گلیم خود را از آب بیرون بکش" pull your rug out of the
water” refers to unstable social and political conditions in which there is no confidence in the future. This phrase is an informational code for recipients of the message in order to use every opportunity to achieve stability and maintain the situation [5].

Memes contain basic assumptions and tactical knowledge for each culture in which, a kind of hidden knowledge is accumulated in the micro-units of culture, people’s minds and views. Through memes, the process of culture formation and evolution is expressed. Culture has memetic micro-units that contain data and information. Human agents are constantly copying these data in different ways. They formulate, produce, and promote new memes. As a result, new copies and new versions of memetic information codes are created and new experiences are formed. The process of memetic evolution can be described as roughly equivalent to genetic evolution. Human evolution has taken place not spontaneously, but in the midst of praxis, through the four factors of ecological adaptation, social experience, evolution in the genetic system, and brain evolution.

Some images have become memes, which contain a common meaning among Iranians. The character of each image represents a specific condition and situation. For example, “شهاپ حسینی” Shahab Hosseini” meme expresses a fed-up situation especially for vulnerable classes, who loses his temper and complaining. Iranian use this meme for complaining and to convey messages of discrimination, social injustice and the lack of attention of officials to the events and issues of vulnerable class.

"رضامارمولک” Reza Marmoulak” is a main character in a movie called the lizard. This character is an escapee thief who changed his clothes to impersonated himself as a clergy. He tries to express his words, which will not be acceptable to a villain, by imitating the admirable way of expression and speech of clergy, in the guise of a positive character. His popular sentence is “There are as many ways to reach God as there are people in the world.”. This meme is used to express that everything is possible.

Third meme is an animated character called "Parviz”. A taciturn,indifference and dispassionate boyfriend. His main phrase is "سیز شدیم" that expresses uncertainty and compulsion. This meme is used to express their compulsion from a current situation or their concern.

Sanchez (2020) examined role of Instagram, Facebook and Twitter as social media on internet behavioral patterns. According to him, online slogans or internet memes determine the behavioral patterns and spreading emotions of users. Repetition, creativity in images, use of people’s sensitivity, desensitization of images, using special characters and humor in memes play a very important role in emotional contagion. The researcher believes that Internet memes can be used to formulate behavioral patterns on the Internet. With the help of desensitization, Internet memes can be used to actually republish ideas or spread...
behaviors other than violence. According to him, today, Internet memes are used more for provocation and violent behavior, and understanding how to use Internet memes plays a decisive role in correcting behavioral patterns [7].

Eldo Novan (2019) examined role of Twitter’s memes on student demonstrations in September 2019 and user behavioral patterns by emphasizing Shiffman theory. Based on his study, many Twitter’s memes were released and formed, during the protests. The memes uploaded during the demonstrations have easily caught the attention of Twitter users due to the atmosphere and emotional state of the users. The number of followers that the uploader has, had a significant impact on the dissemination and distribution of memes, evoking emotion and changing behavioral patterns. The researcher also believes that in addition to content, text simplicity, attractiveness, humor of memes, location and time of release in the virality and propagation of memes play a very important role [8].

Pryahina and Vasilyeva (2019) examined role of Internet memes on communication patterns by examining seven popular news pages published from 2018 to 2019 in Russia. By examining memes’ visual design styles (photos and texts), they found that the audience of online memes is a specific group, and memes can be used as language of editorial team to convey their desired message. Also, in Journalistic pages, memes make the message clearer and more understandable. They believe that modern communication services and social media help users to manage the flow of information and make it very predictable. Memes are a special type of visual presentation on social media. Understanding these visual expressions (e.g., memes) can provide a broad view of all modern mass media. The use of memes in online journalism is a good way to spread a fast and clear message, without sensitivity, and by taking advantage of specific interests and characters, it can convey the desired emotions [9].

Kulkarni (2017) examined role of memes in Indian elections and finds that memes are an important tool against oppression. Memes are intermediaries through which information is transmitted, which in the past was mostly humorous and entertaining, by changes in Internet behavioral patterns towards political struggles, Internet memes have also found political application. Memes are tools for political discourse, not a change of political paradigm and political parties usually use memes to oppose or criticize [10].

Jensen (2016) investigated role of social media and online interactions on emotional contagion. She surveyed 250 virtual users (135 females and 115 males) emphasizing the five-factor model of personality (extraversion, neuroticism, openness to experience, consent, and conscientiousness), and the results suggest that using social media play an important role in transmission of emotions and emotional contagion, also, there is a significant relationship between the personality traits of Facebook users and emotional contagion. The results also show that users’ perceptions of posts are similar to their reactions to real events, and people react and share posts and videos based on personal characteristics. User personality traits determine how users interact online. People with higher self-esteem are less prone to emotional contagion and extroverts are less influenced by social networks but are more influential and less involved with websites and online games, but neurotic people are more affected by social media. Due to their negative experience, these people are more vulnerable to emotional contagion, and stressors and uncertainty in cyberspace cause them to negatively analyze and upload negative messages and republish their opinions in cyberspace. [11].

Kumar (2015) investigated role of memes in changing Indian culture by examining text and video memes on websites. According to him, meme is a cultural phenomenon and memetic culture is spreading all over the world. Turning a message or video into a meme requires acceptance, repetition, duplication, and social media which allow users to produce the desired meme by sharing their message. Memes are contagious and can bring users together to share a common subject, such as political or social criticism, by creating a form of satire. Memes also allow users to create new meanings. Referring to Habermas, he believes that memes are a tool for expressing hidden criticisms of users. Memes have emerged in various forms in Indian digital culture, but what they all have in common is the imitation and ridiculous repetition of economic and social policies. Due to its humorous nature, video memes have become a prominent cultural phenomenon in the world today, and it can be easily said that all Indian users have got contaminated to this contagious social memes in India are mostly made in the areas of women’s safety, religion, sex education and sexual and class deprivation. Finally, new media, technology and memes are tools to advance the understanding of Indian and represent mindset and characteristics of Indian society, which due to its old and traditional structures, it is not possible to challenge and protest against the sexual and class deprivations of Indian society in the real world, but the digital culture and humorous way of memes have made it possible for users to express the facts [12].

Guadagno and et al (2013) examined factors affecting spreading an Internet video and what makes a video to be a meme. In this article by measuring the emotional response to an Internet video and validating the video emotions, they found that people who give a strong emotional response to a video actually intend to share that video, and mostly violent video become viral which means anger is more contagious. A review of
III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Paul Jill (2011), a meme is actually a perception of a cultural symbol or social idea that is transmitted. A meme acts like a virus and spreads quickly from person to person; But instead of catching a flu, it conveys a particular thought or way of life. According to Jenkins (2006), digital media products are deliberately transferred to social actors [15]. Emotions are social phenomena and facilitate our communication with others. Emotions allow us to convey our feelings to others and regulate our social interactions, in other words, emotions produce distinct nonverbal states that convey our inner emotional experiences to others. When we get excited, we send recognizable facial expressions, gestures, etc. that convey the quality of our feeling, social emotion of users that focuses on their social actions. Six major emotions identified by neuropsychologists (fear, hate, surprise, sadness, joy, anger). Theory of emotional intelligence in political communication argues that anger is a provocative emotion, and fear is a deterrent emotion. Searching the internet and online networks is a kind of sensation seeking behavior, individuals do to escape repetition, monotony and restlessness due to human diversityism. Sensation seeking can affect the behavior, characteristics and priorities of individuals. Sensation seekers engage in activities that are associated with great mobility and motivation [16]. Emotions of people who interact with each other can be transmitted among them which is called emotional contagion. In digital interactions, emotions transmit. According to Hemsley, size, interest and communication networks play role in spreading and accepting the message. Dependency and attachment to digital space is an effective factor in internalizing meme’s messages and regulation of energy and emotions. The degree of popularity and trust in memes in online relationships leads to the formation of certain behavioral patterns.

As maintained by Ameli, today’s networked society has reconsidered meaning of everything and also has created new concepts. Economics, culture, society and even more general concepts such as place and time have changed or are still changing in this process and have taken on new meanings and definitions. Having appropriate channels for expressing political views and demands plays an effective role in the health and political stability of society, and for any reason, if the sense of belonging to the dominant political system is lost and a sense of alienation is created, it could become a formidable factor for creating instability in society [17].

According to Hatfield and colleagues (1993), emotional contagion is the “tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person’s, and consequently, to converge emotionally.” But what happens to emotional contagion when it does not have a body to mimic and synchronize with, vocalizations to attune to, or postures and movements to reposition one’s self accordingly to? How is emotion caught and spread online [18]?

Pictorial memes exemplify this “logic of contagion and repetition” Parikka, in “idescapes” and “media scapes” that Arjun Appadurai (1990) articulated as the scalar dynamic of cultural globalization. Memes coalesce and globalize threads of culture, conversations, and ideas that would otherwise remain grounded and locally contained. Since replication is also mutation and the iteration cannot share the presence in time and space of the original, mimetic repetition in new sites, through new bodies and in new contexts both disturbs the original and displaces it by being “almost the same but not quite”. Walter Benjamin showed us that evolving media technologies of reproduction transform human sense perceptions and social structures through desacralizing but also democratizing art by destroying its aura, digital memes democratize cultural ideas by making their production and recirculation a participatory process [19]. Castells believes that in a networked society, programmed identities are constructed as a continuation of collective or group resistance. Individuals can overcome their individualistic and selfish tendencies in favor of achieving responsible action within the framework of a moral social order. According to him, the
According to John Suler, cyberspace has distinct features that have different effects on human mind and behavior. Among these, Suler considers less mindfulness, dominant writing space, flexibility in identity, change and adjustment of perceptions, equality of opportunity, spatial equality, temporal flexibility, social pluralism, the ability to record, pause and disconnect media more important. By considering the property of time flexibility, Suler refers to the possibility of delay in responding to the audience in online communications and the ability to stretch time, which can't be found in face-to-face interactions. Walter calls this phenomenon "intensified individual communication" [24].

The Role of Memes on Emotional Contagion

According to Goffman, emotion is defined as a social object that individuals and groups interact with. Referring to the potential of cyberspace as the scene of users' lives, Goffman emphasizes the unique power of human beings to create, manipulate, and modify symbols to direct their own behavior and that of others. As Internet social networks are created, Internet memes are a tool for disseminating ideas, messages and the current situation of the users' society, which due to its popularity and repetition can convey the common emotion of many users and sometimes prepare the ground for a specific behavior and pattern of behavior in the community.

In Habermas's theory of communication action, media play the most important role in the public sphere, and meantime, in the Internet as a global media, all knowledge and ideas are shared, where everyone can freely express their opinion, where no one is superior to another. People can talk and interact about their favorite topics through social media, and through this, public opinion can be formed as the voice of people [23]. Memes are also a universal tool in hands of users to express ideas and spread their message. From Walter's point of view, human beings are guided to interact with each other, and in every communication there is personal exchange and reward. For this simple reason, people use social media to communicate. Communication and information exchange in cyberspace is done in four steps that can be used to understand memes contagion. At the first stage, there are stimuli that encourage people to exchange information with each other and motivate the relationship between people. The second stage is the formation of perceptions between interactors in the computer communication environment through the decoding of verbal messages based on the content. In the next stage, people turn to methods such as self-declaration, self-disclosure, and lie detection to gather psychological information from each other. In this way, users test their hypotheses about each other based on their perceptions over time, and achieve an interpersonal epistemology by refining interpersonal knowledge. Eventually, users learn how to convey their intended message through text and how to decode text-based verbal and non-verbal cues. Time plays an important role in all these stages. With the dissemination, exchange and repetition of messages between users (Internet memes) emotional exchanges occur. Interactors realize the central features of each other's personality and by moving to the deeper layers, finally express their deepest emotion, experiences, and desires and reach a level of intimacy and with two-way self-disclosure they give more depth to messages. From this perspective, in some respects, the emotions that communicators convey in communication through digital space have even surpassed those that occur in face-to-face interactions. Walter calls this phenomenon "intensified individual communication" [24].

Price to pay to enter these virtual communities is to adapt to its logic, language, inputs, and its encryption and decryption system. That is why this system has such an important role in different social influences and instead of a central multimedia system, a horizontal communication network with multiple hubs such as Internet social networks should be created [20]. As stated by Castells, a prominent feature in a world networked by wireless Internet is the viral transmission of images, thoughts and social movements. Social movements create a public space by building a free society in a symbolic place; A space for interlocution that eventually becomes a political space. According to Castells, networks shape the new form of societies, and the expansion of network logic creates dramatic changes in the operations and outcomes of the processes of production, experience, power, and culture. [21] as stated by Zuckerman, sensation-seeking behavior is a kind of need for new, diverse and complex emotion and experiences [22]. A trendy meme conveys a lot of information about its audience. The Internet has changed the status of the audience from read-only to read-write. The duality of cyberspace has taken users out of passivity and users are the producers of content on global web. In such an environment, Internet memes are a tool for disseminating ideas, messages and the current situation of the users' society, which due to its popularity and repetition can convey the common emotion of many users and sometimes prepare the ground for a specific behavior and pattern of behavior in the community.
others. In fact, hatred, anger, grief, etc. are actions that are formed by the actors when defining and interpreting the situation, and this is also true of the Internet meme. Memes produce or evoke a common emotion between users that can motivate users to take emotional actions. Internet memes are an appendage of the creative and social minds of internet users, that, in interpreting the existing situation, evoke the user's emotion about the current situation in the shortest time and without need for a specific text, and orienting his thoughts.

IV. Conclusion

Social media are more than just a simple mechanism of information dissemination. They are, in fact, complex platforms and important social institutions that interact extensively with broad audience of various economic, social, political, social communities. Social media are inevitable companions of our daily life that lend us the ability to adjust our social habits to the reality of their presence, and Internet memes as internet language are a source for raising awareness and challenging social conditions and personal problems. Meme acts like a virus, meaning that if a particular meme is used by older users, the rest will be interested in using it in a short time and will try to participate in this virtual movement, and produce content according to that meme. Memes are able to ride thoughts and ideas on emotional waves and draw people to themselves consciously or unconsciously. Launching a protest movement or campaign, protesting various political, cultural, social issues or even supporting a certain person or a political party and any issue that is related to the current situation and atmosphere of the country, are among factors that create a meme. Memes in social media are basically about creating emotional behaviors. In today's world, internet memes are convenient way for people to react to different events, and it is the least they can do. Meme is a common language of netizen of the global village to express their positive or negative reaction to various issues. Any meme that can attract more imitators is more successful. For example, hashtags and reactions in social media are considered a kind of claim and challenge that shows peopleprotestation and contains a message to the authorities, so they should be taken seriously and public opinion should be enriched. An Internet meme is either connected to the culture of a society or discarded. Meme's success in that society seems to be a determining factor in deciding whether to transfer it to other societies. Internet memes can be successful for a number of reasons, but its attractiveness or appeal seems to be the dominant reason for a meme's success. However, the success of an Internet meme depends on the consensus of its community, whether it is expressed or not. Media use the feelings and emotions of masses to create a flow in order to be able to accompany public opinion with their set goals. Using psychologists to guide public opinion and create a specific stream is one of the important tasks of those media streamers who want to use this trick. Psychologists combine vocabulary value load with the feelings and emotions of public opinion, especially common people, women and children, due to their innate tenderness and pure emotions. These strata are immediately attracted to the messages conveyed by those media. The creators of memes choose from a variety of social, political, cultural, etc. events and reflect those that have a higher news value and have the ability to regenerate and shared quickly. The propagation of internet memes depends on how its messages are represented, and whether people have the same analysis of the memes and are influenced by how they are represented. In the words of postmoderns, the realities that memes create are virtual, meaning that shadows become more important than reality and the audience looks at reality through the glasses of internet memes. Internet memes lead to the globalization and unification of lives, patterns, thoughts and ideas. In fact, memes shape public opinion and their emotions.

Emotion is a resource that can be mobilized and emptied in conflicts. That means, by evoking and arousing emotion of groups' members that are in conflict with each other, can be pitted them against each other and use their emotions to advance the goals of the conflict. Political memes are an objective manifestation of this fact that in political campaigns, politicians and propagandists use it to propagate their political goals. As such, users are suddenly emotionally aroused by watching the disseminated memes, so meme creators could be able to manage and direct public opinion in line with their goals by creating a surreal wave of memes and conditions created in social media. In general, for emotional contagion by memes, meme creators must be equipped with knowledge of digital culture to be able to persuade and propagate the message quickly, while identifying user characteristics and stimuli. As in digital marketing for promoting the desired product, users who have lots of fans are used for conveying their desired message to maximum number of their target in the shortest time.
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