

The Impact of Social Media Memes on Algerian Youth: A Study of Memes as a New Means of Online Communication

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ABSTRACT: *It has become quite apparent that over the last decade, youngsters have displayed an excessive use of and attachment to social media platforms, preeminently driven by a desire for online connection and interaction. Hence, as virtual communication has notably become more and more embedded in youth's daily routine, it has paved the way to the onset of a novel form of interaction that is now commonly referred to as memes. By placing Algerian youth at the center of the study, this latter endeavors to unveil the main reason(s) behind the emergence and swift proliferation among this cohort. It also sets out to discern Algerian youngsters' language preferences when viewing, sharing and/or creating memes online. Additionally, this investigation strives to uncover the linguistic techniques used by digital meme creators, so as to provide us with insights on how they can massively contribute in making these memes become viral among the larger online youth community. The methodological approach chosen for this study, which relied on conducting an online questionnaire and a semi-structured interview, yielded a substantial collection of pertinent data, which ultimately validated the main hypotheses that were postulated at the beginning of this academic inquiry.*

KEYWORDS: Algerian Youth, Memes, Online Communication, Social Media.

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1. Introduction:

In the span of the last ten years, and with the hasty advancement of technology, youngsters have been using social media incessantly, thus allocating a significant portion of their time to digital devices over face-to-face engagement. Akin to the metaphorical duality of a coin, social media display a double-edged nature as they foster interconnectedness among individuals and further implement changes in social interactions. In fact, the utilization of social media and the employment of memes are rather unprecedented phenomena that have risen with the rapid expansion of technology, which consequently denotes that youths may be the primary, if not the only, ones concerned with this epochal shift.

Upon observing how Algerian youngsters employ language on social media through the use of memes, it has become discernible that there is a notable change in linguistic elements. This shift is not only marked by lexical innovation, but also by personal reflection, adaptation and artistry. It is noteworthy to shed light on the fact that relating to these memes requires a certain level of cultural and linguistic competence, for recipients who may be from different cultural and social backgrounds may very much encounter difficulties in deciphering their meaning. Notwithstanding their cultural scope of operation, some memes transcend cultural boundaries, for they happen to be propagated to a global audience, and therefore, their content can be intelligible to others, especially those aiming at eliciting social commentary.

The focus of this study, therefore, is to scrutinize the phenomenon of using memes among youth on social media in order to create and convey meaning in completely fascinating, artistic ways. Additionally, it seeks to elucidate how these memes have rather become a prevailing means of online communication. In this research work, a special emphasis will also be drawn on the role of each person's individual background and cultural knowledge in understanding and relating to different memes. In accordance with what has been stated, the following research questions have been formed:

1. What is the predominant language employed by youth in the creation and dissemination of memes on social media?
2. Why are youth utterly motivated to create and share memes when interacting online?
3. What linguistic techniques do youngsters utilize in meme crafting and sharing so as to entice others and help convey nuanced thoughts and meanings?

In pursuit of answering the aforementioned queries, some hypotheses have been postulated as follows:

1. Algerian Arabic might be the most utilized language by youth in the digital creation and dissemination of memes. Yet, due to its global use and widespread dominance worldwide, English may also be more commonly employed nowadays by a certain youth category, if not the majority.
2. Youngsters may be remarkably drawn to the creation and sharing of memes on online spaces because they perceive them as a means for self-expression, which provides a sense of community, belonging and entertainment.
3. There might be a variety of language techniques utilized by youth in meme creation and sharing such as implementing wordplay and hyperbole, incorporating slang terms and expressions, implementing abbreviations and acronyms as well as integrating intertextuality.

2. Literature Review:

2.1. Origin of Meme:

The term meme is of a Greek origin, specifically derived from the word 'mimeme' signifying imitation. Its earliest records of academic use date back to the 1976 book "The Selfish Gene" written by the English author and biologist Richard Dawkins. The latter proposed to abbreviate the Greek word to 'meme' so as

to somehow forge a resemblance between it and the DNA molecule, the gene (Dawkins, 2006). Despite his Darwinian approach to scientific research, Dawkins's analogy of meme and gene sparked major interest, thus paved the path for the emergence of a novel form of evolution, which he termed as 'cultural transmission'. In connection therewith, he strongly advocated that in the same way genes, being the primary replicators of genetic information, transit from one living organism to the other, so do memes propagate themselves as they are passed down from one human brain to another across successive generations (Atran, 2001).

In spite of what preceded, the term in fact had made an appearance long before it was mentioned in Dawkins' book, and of which the latter had utterly not been aware. According to Hull (2000), the terminology was, indeed, originally encountered in its Greek form as the phrase 'Die Mneme' (meaning my memory) laid by the Australian sociologist Ewald Hering in 1870, which was then used by the German biologist Richard Wolfgang Sermon as a heading in two of his books "Die Mneme" in 1904 and "Die Mnemischen Empfindungen" in 1909. Nevertheless, Dawkins' conceptualization of the meme was far more explained, illustrated, and thus impactful. Interpreted as such, his accurate definition of meme was formed on how ideas, both abstract and concrete, can proliferate through a process of imitation.

Besides being a unit of cultural transmission somewhat similar in its characteristics to those of a gene, memes are also commonly associated with another concept developed later on by Dawkins in his 1993 book "Viruses of the Mind". One inevitable fact notoriously known about viruses is the speed of diffusion, which was purposely made analogous to memes' speed of transmission, and what Heylighen and Chielens (2009), in a more cultural perspective, alluded to as 'thought contagions' (p. 02). Such characteristic is exceedingly ever expanding due to the constant and swift progress of technology leading to the formulation of a virtual space and most importantly a digital community where individuals can connect easily and their ideas spread instantaneously. This virtual space, therefore, is mostly formed by social networks commonly referred to as social media.

2.2. Memes and Social Media:

Living in an era of constant digital growth, internet users are consistently presented with diverse, innovative ways for the exchange of ideas and maintenance of socialization. Social media are thereby some of the many inventions devised for the sake of facilitating human interaction in a pure virtual manner. According to Bercovici (2010), the term social media appears to have originated in the early 1990s, with the advent of "web-based communication tools" that sought to ease "online interaction" (as cited in Treem et al., 2016, p. 03). In the same light, it is also known as 'Web 2.0', which pertains to a number of web-based applications where users are given complete access to create and post content (Davis, 2016). Such applications include Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Youtube, to mention a few.

Apart from the conventional linguistic forms used for interaction on social media, there has been a remarkable shift in the language use of youth, spurred by the creation and dissemination of memes. The original meaning of the latter includes "fashion trends, catchy tunes, slang, and other seemingly fleeting elements of popular culture, as well as religious belief systems and social ideologies" and anything of cultural value to any society (Johnson, 2007, p. 29). The contemporary one, on the other hand, defines memes as "images or short videos – often times accompanied with written text – created and shared among social media users for a comedic purpose" (Ali, 2019, p.02). Although the most widely accepted form of meme is a picture or a video associated with a caption, Milosavljevic (2020) argues, there are other cases where it may take the shape of a picture, video or text only. To wrap up, the relationship between the two is marked by the emergence of memes as an outcome of digital change, with regards to youths' sustained involvement in social media.

The diffusion of memes on social media, however, is contingent upon internet users' receptiveness and imitation of it (Johann and Bülow, 2019). Their popularity, thus spread on online spaces, increases or decreases on the basis of users' creativity and consumers' receptivity. User-generated content is adeptly crafted to survive and thrive within the virtual sphere of consumers. Participating, copying and sharing constitute a fundamental facet of digital culture, in the sense that users actively engage in designing memes, or copying others' works and adjusting them to suit a specific audience and/or gain the desired attention (as in the marketing world), and finally sharing them with the wider digital community on social media (Yang, 2020). This process constitutes the lifecycle of a meme dissemination on online platforms.

3. Methodology:

The present research study adopted the mixed methods approach (Creswell and Creswell, 2018), thus employed two distinct research instruments, namely the online questionnaire and the semi-structured interview. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods ensured a comprehensive collection of data, thereby enhancing the reliability and rigorousness of the study's findings.

The sample for this inquiry was purposefully meant to encompass a diverse range of demographics, and as such, respondents were selected randomly. Accordingly, the questionnaire was provided in two languages (English and Arabic), hence distributed online to young Algerians through various platforms; primarily on Facebook groups, notably those dedicated to meme creation and sharing, as well as through WhatsApp and Email.

The online questionnaire amassed a total of 91 responses; however, only 75 were deemed fit for analysis, while the remaining 16 were excluded as per age criteria. In alignment with the definitions provided by the United Nations and World Health Organization, youth are individuals whose age falls within the range of 15 to 24 years, and thus, responses falling out of this age category were automatically excluded. Likewise, the semi-structured interview's informants also fall under the said age group, and it was conducted with 10 youngsters.

4. Findings and Discussion:

4.1. Online Questionnaire Analysis:

This research instrument consists of 12 questions in total. However, emphasis is placed solely upon the ones pertinent to the research questions and hypotheses hence are analyzed and interpreted as follows:

Question n° 01: What is your gender?

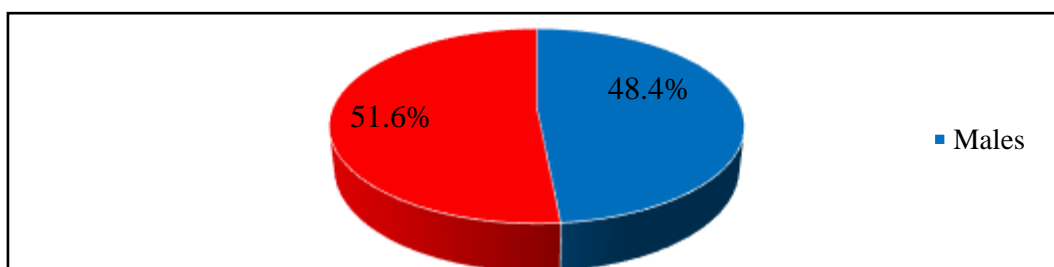


Figure 4.1: Percentage of Respondents Population

This question seeks to measure the gender distribution among participants engaging in this inquiry. While respondents were selected randomly, it is discernible that female participation comprising 51.6 % of

the total with 47 individuals slightly outnumbered male involvement having 44 individuals, thus representing 48.4% of the remaining sample, as illustrated in the pie chart above.

Question n°02: How old are you?

Age	Females		Males	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
17	4	4%	5	5%
18	5	5%	5	5%
19	7	7%	6	6%
20	5	5%	7	7%
21	8	8%	5	5%
22	10	10%	5	5%
23	6	6%	8	8%
24	3	3%	2	2%

Table 4.1: The Questionnaire’s Sample Population

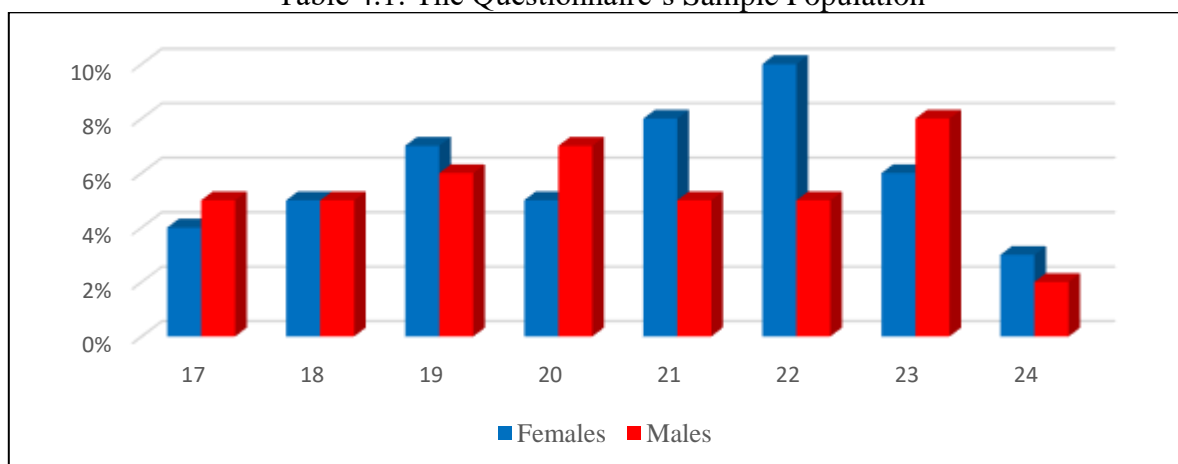


Figure 4.2: The Questionnaire’s Sample Population

Question number two was a pivotal one upon which youth age category was selected. Initially, the questionnaire received 107 responses, 16 of which were excluded from analysis as they fell outside the specified youth age range. Albeit the loss of some data which could have added some substantial info to the investigation, a considerable corpus of 91 responses, encompassing diverse ages groups, was scored in the questionnaire.

Question n°03: What is the highest level of school you have completed or you are currently enrolled in?

Educational Level	Number of Participants	Percentage
Secondary School	11	12%
University	78	85%
Institute	2	2%

Table 4.2: Respondents’ Educational Background

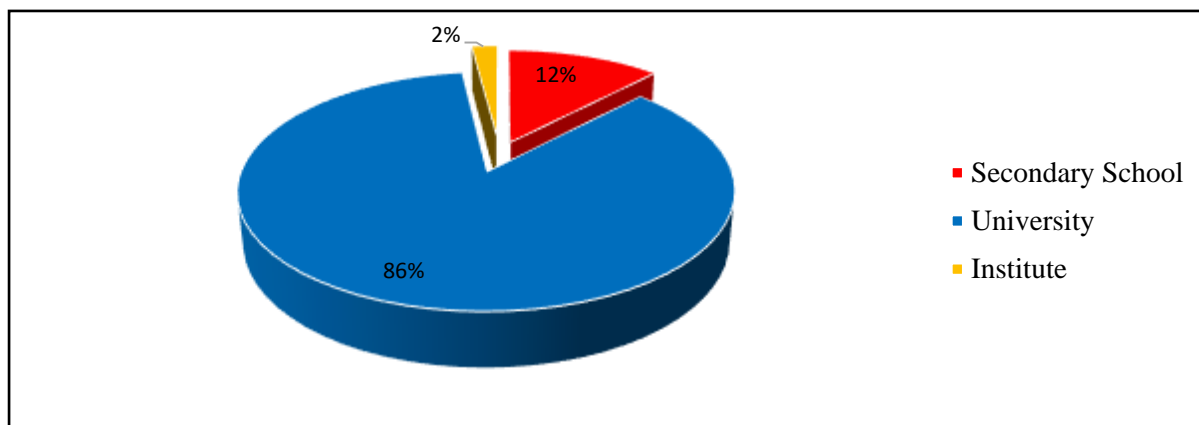


Figure 4.3: Respondents' Educational Backgrounds

The rationale behind the educational background question was to check whether or not a lack of educational knowledge could impact the comprehension and further production of social media memes. It should be emphasized that a significant proportion of the respondents are either enrolled in secondary school or are pursuing a higher educational training at the university. Only a minority, comprising 2% of the respondents, have furthered their studies in specialized institutes.

Question n°07: In which language(s) do you typically engage when consuming and/or creating memes?

Language Preference	Number of Participants	Percentage
Arabic/ Algerian Dialect	86	94.5%
English	75	82.4%
French	2	2.2%
Other:	0	0%

Table 4.3: Respondents' Language Preference.

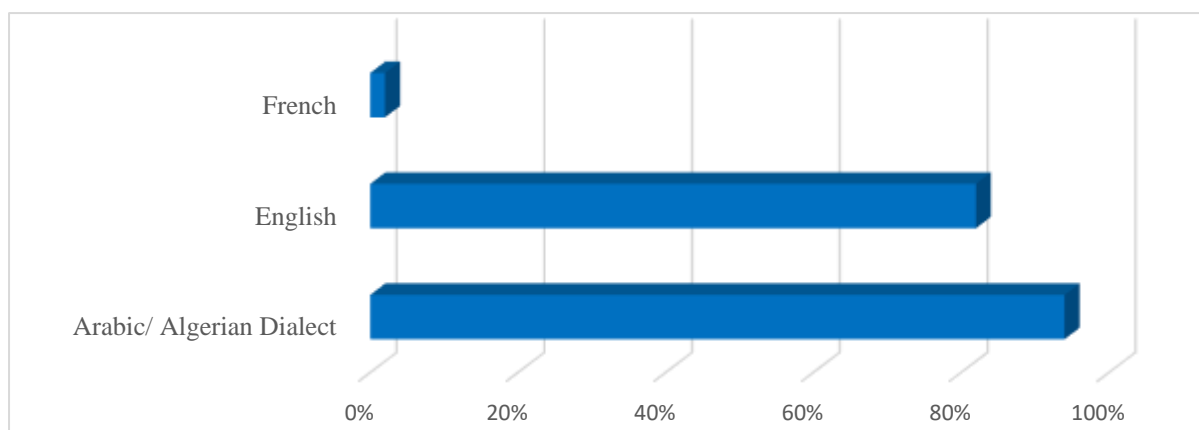


Figure 4.4: Respondents' Language Preference

When asked in which language they preferred to read their captioned memes, the majority, representing 94.5% of informants, expressed a preference for their native tongue, which in this case was either Arabic or the Algerian dialect. Another significant ratio of 82.4% was scored by English language

enthusiasts. Conversely, French obtained the lowest preference rate with only 2.2%. The questionnaire provided respondents with the option to include an additional language preference, if desired, yet none of them chose to do so.

Furthermore, it is crucial to note that the majority of secondary school pupils preferred their mother language over English. Whereas most University and Institute students displayed a tendency towards both Arabic/Algerian dialect and English, with some even opting solely for the latter. This observation demonstrates that the educational attainment can influence individuals' understanding and production of, hence preference for social media memes.

Question n°08: Why do you indulge in meme viewing, sharing and/or creating? (You may choose more than one answer).

Reason	N° of Participants	Percentage
Facilitation of self-expression.	83	91%
A source for joy and entertainment.	91	100%
Social bonding.	85	93%
Active engagement with current popular culture and social trends.	81	89%

Table 4.4: Respondents' Reason for Meme Viewing, Sharing and/or Creating.

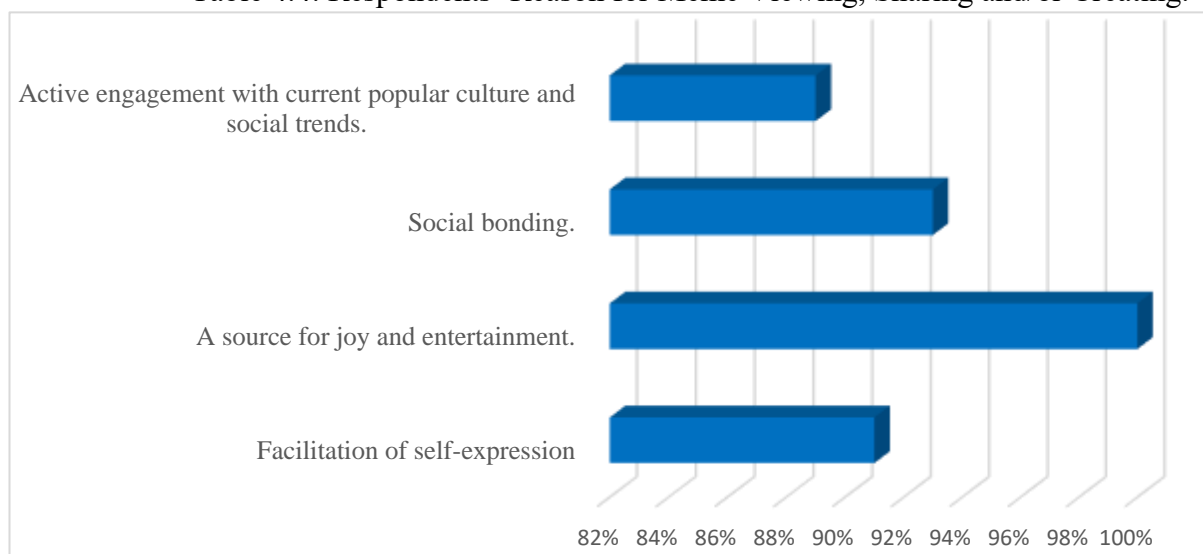


Figure 4.5: Respondents' Reason for Meme Viewing, Sharing and/or Creating

Diverse motivations for engaging in meme viewing, sharing or and/or creating were perceived among youngsters. Nevertheless, we note a complete consensus of opinion whereby all participants agreed on regarding social media memes as a source for joy and entertainment. Additionally, around 90% of respondents identified them as a facilitating means for social bonding and self-expression, while approximately 88% of them acknowledged it to allow for an active engagement with current popular culture and social trends.

Questions n° 09, 10 & 11: Are you familiar with these memes?



Figure 4.6: Image n°01



Figure 4.7: Image n°02



Figure 4.8: Image n°03

Respondents were presented with three uncaptioned memes, which are depicted above, that have gained massive popularity on social media platforms. Thus, they were asked to choose whether the images evoked complete, partial or no recognition at all. Astonishingly, all participants positively affirmed the recognition of the three images, which, therefore, indicates a significant widespread familiarity of these foreign memes among Algerian youth.

Question n°12: Please share with us some of your favorite social media memes. The language in which it is written does not matter.

This particular query aimed at verifying the language preference of each respondent and the linguistic techniques employed in their memes. It is noteworthy that a substantial proportion of participants who expressed their preference exclusively for Arabic/Algerian Dialect shared a meme that is written in the corresponding language, and vice versa. Whereas those who chose both languages provided us with multiple memes overlaid with text in both linguistic codes.

Moreover, there are plenty of linguistic techniques employed in most, if not all, of the memes, which feature varying degrees of wordplay, hyperbole, abbreviations and acronyms, slang expressions and intertextuality. Although the quantity of social media memes received was indeed quite numerous, only relevant ones are shared as follows:





Figure 4.9: Social Media Memes Collected from the Questionnaire's Respondents

4.2. Semi-Structured Interview Analysis:

The semi-structured interview comprised 10 informants, five males and five females, all of which were selected based on non-probability sampling, so as to fit the age criteria. It consists of 5 questions in total that are quite similar to those of the questionnaire, and which are analyzed as follows:

In the first question, participants were required to provide information about their age. Seven of them reported being 21 years of age, while the remaining three (two males and one female) indicated an age of 22 years, both of which fall within the youth age range.

The second question of the survey aimed at assessing their educational level. It is noteworthy that all ten informants are students currently pursuing a higher degree at Belhadj Bochaib University, Ain Temouchent, Algeria.

The third question was related to participants' language preference. As a response, the majority of them have a fair command of the English language, and indicated a preference for virtual meme consumption, dissemination and/or creation in both languages (English and their native tongue). Notably, none of the interviewees expressed a preference for any other language.

The fourth question sought to explore the reason(s) underlying the huge popularity of and interest in social media memes among nowadays' youth. Most interviewees shared a common point of view being that social media have become an indispensable part of their daily routine. Thus, memes consumed and shared on these platforms are rather a vehicle for them to express their thoughts and cultural references, a source for entertainment and amusement as well as way for them to form and further maintain social connections.

The fifth question was oriented toward eliciting the factors contributing to the widespread virality and consistent shareability of memes on social media. Responses varied between informants, who strongly highlighted the necessity for memes to be culturally relevant among the Algerian youth community, in addition to being posted and reposted by famous pages and influencers on social media as well as having to align with popular news and trends from all around the globe.

5. Conclusion:

This research study was undertaken with the objective of exploring how social media memes have risen to serve as a novel means of online communication. In the pursuit of obtaining data for investigation, two research instruments, namely the online questionnaire and the semi-structured interview, were employed. This methodological approach was chosen to ensure the collection of both quantitative and qualitative information that would enhance the inquiry's depth and reliability.

As a summary to the results of the study, it is of paramount importance to state that a connection was found between the educational level and the language employed by Algerian youth in the process of online meme viewing, sharing and/or creating. While a subset of secondary school pupils prefer memes that are captioned in both Arabic and English, most of them feel more comfortable around their native tongue, which suggests areas for improvement in their mastery of the English language. On the other hand, all university students rather showcased a preference for both Arabic/Algerian dialect and English, with some even being partial to latter instead.

When considering the genuine interest in and motivation for online meme consumption, dissemination and/or design, we are met with a set of reasons. Youngsters are inclined to such engagement because it affords them a virtual space through which they can freely and easily express themselves, create and foster social bonds by sharing their personal experiences, point of views and conveying nuanced ideas in a humorous style, as well as to keep up with contemporary cultural and social trends that resonate with their interests.

Social media memes are predominantly visually textual in nature. The prevalent memes circulating the internet nowadays, thus going viral in a matter of seconds generally comprise an image associated with an apposite text. The language used in the latter often tends to be informal, for the majority of youngsters feel more at ease when expressing themselves in their native tongue and deem it more fit to integrate slang terms and expressions that are relevant to their peers. Nevertheless, the findings show that even though youth exhibit a preference for their own native language when creating or sharing memes online, it is not always the case. This is due to the high status of English as the global language, and the popularity it has attained among the young generation.

Whether in English, Arabic/Algerian dialect or any other language, meme creators are inclined to using certain linguistic technique that would add a flavor to the overall meaning, thereby rendering them easily consumed and highly shareable. An effective and successful interaction, be it online or offline, is contingent upon possessing the ability to communicate complex ideas, thoughts and feeling. The results of the study have greatly supported the third hypothesis and emphasized the employment of wordplay, hyperbole, slang expressions, abbreviations and intertextuality as linguistic strategies that would attract the younger population. Consequently, by engaging with such memes, the latter would feel intellectually and emotionally connected as they participate in an online shared youth community.

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