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Jessica Probst

## **The Role of Memes in an Online Community Created by College Students: A Content**

### **Analysis**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to explore how a community is formed in the Facebook group *The M in UMW Stands for Memes* and what role memes play in shaping a sense of community and sharing information. The paper aims to understand how memes play a role in creating a sustainable online community and what knowledge is required to understand the discussions in this group. This topic was chosen because it is important to analyze how certain spaces on the internet and how people communicate with each other online, specifically with memes, create a sense of community and, ultimately, how they are used to communicate information. Additionally, examining this group will allow a thorough understanding of how using memes communicates information to its members. While there is a great deal of research that has been conducted on analyzing online communities and the function they serve in creating virtual relationships, this paper hopes to fill a gap in previous literature by focusing on a space created by college students who use memes to discuss their experiences and create cultural capital, specific to University of Mary Washington culture. Furthermore, this paper hopes to add to previous literature that discusses the purposes of memes and how they are used to communicate ideas and information.

#### **Literature Review**

The following review will examine common themes and conclusions found within prior research relevant to the present study. This review will cover themes found from previous research that will be included in the categories for the coding sheet such as the presence of

humor, the need for cultural capital, and whether emotional support is being relayed in the posts given the group's norms and values.

### ***Characteristics of Online Communities***

The research conducted to analyze the formation and development of a sustained contemporary mothers' group on Facebook revealed that a shared repertoire of information containing the group's norms, rules, and shared understandings is key to maintaining a successful online community (Mansour, 2020, p. 641). Mansour (2020) noted that these requirements are necessary to create an online community because it communicates to members what, when, and how information should be shared based on the shared values and understandings of the group and its members (p. 640). Additionally, research focused on whether online communities offer support to cancer patients found that the communities were mainly used for communicating information and exchanging personal experiences (Leimeister et al., 2008, p. 367). Leimeister et al. (2008) discovered that these online communities formed relationships in the group while also noting that the respondents of the study named emotional support (i.e., using phrases such as "encouraging" and "cheering up") to describe the importance of these relationships (p. 367). When conducting research for the present study, both Mansour's (2020) and Leimeister et al.'s (2008) conclusions will be vital to the themes that will be included in the coding sheet. By doing so, I will be extending the research presented above in a variety of ways: (1) focusing on an online community that was created by college students, (2) on how memes create a sense of community, and (3) exploring the cultural capital needed to participate within the group.

### ***Memes and Their Use on The Internet***

In addition, memes have a code of conduct. Both the creators and receivers of memes require a shared understanding of what counts as a meme and knowledge of the type of humor that is used in this mode to communicate information (Jenkins, 2014, p. 452). In certain spaces on the internet, memes that include graphic images such as people being killed would not be accepted and would not produce any positive response from its audience (Jenkins, 2014, p. 450). The type of language that is used in a meme is also important to acknowledge when discussing the influence it has on communicating information. A study analyzing Greenpeace's 2012 Let's Go! Arctic campaign found that user and Greenpeace-generated-memes incorporated humor, irony, and mocking corporate speak. Davis et al. (2016) noted that the success of Greenpeace's campaign is because the meme generator allowed an opportunity where Greenpeace's supporters could express their beliefs by creating memes that mimicked Shell's advertisements which, ultimately, delegitimized Shell's drilling efforts and halted their 2013 plans (pp. 80-81). The findings from Davis et al.'s (2016) research are significant to this study. The themes that were found in the user-generated memes, i.e., humor, irony, and mocking corporate-speak, could also be common for the language used in the Facebook group. Therefore, I will be analyzing how memes serve to communicate information to the members of the group and what the language used in this mode says about the group's norms and values.

### ***Memes in Online Communities***

This review also explores the impact of memes in online communities. A study conducted in multiple online communities on the influence of intragroup status and the consistency of the spread of a meme proved that memes containing content that aligned with the group's norms were shared more often than memes that were inconsistent with the group's shared understandings (Mazambani et al., 2015, p. 156). Therefore, memes that included group-

consistent information spread quicker to other group members because of their inclusion with the in-group norms. The researchers noted that memes can provide background information on a topic. Mazambani et al. (2015) defined background information as assumptions or facts that allow other members quick access to members' shared assumptions and knowledge which can help avoid misunderstandings and promote a more positive social interaction in the online community (p.157). In the present study, I will be examining meme content and whether it helps foster a sense of community. Based on the research presented above, I believe that it is important to include in the coding sheet if the meme is consistent with the group's norms and values. Doing so, will allow me to analyze what cultural capital is needed in this group to participate in discussions and create community, and also if the meme content includes background information on a topic related to the group.

### **Research Question**

**RQ 1:** What is the shared language and cultural capital needed to understand the discussions in the group?

**RQ 2:** How are memes used to create community and communicate to the group members?

Based on previous research, there was a common theme found within the results of the studies; memes can be used to communicate information and a shared understanding is needed to have a sustainable online community. The research questions were formed around these themes to ensure that close attention was being made to the findings shared in previous research.

Therefore, when considering whether to account for the shared language in RQ 1, the research completed by Mansour (2020) and Mazambani et al. (2015) assisted me in that decision proving that these characteristics are necessary to have a sustainable online community and needed for participants to understand the discussions. When looking at the research conducted by Davis et

al. (2016), their work served as a strong starting point for what type of language is used in memes and how it communicates information to its audience. In the previous research, I found that many of the studies showed how memes can effectively communicate information and the language used in this mode is necessary to understand to process the information being relayed which, ultimately, helped shape my thinking when considering RQ 2 (Davis et al., 2016; Jenkins, 2014; Mazambani et al., 2015). Overall, the previous research further reinforced what questions I am proposing and will allow this study to fill gaps within this subject or add more for future research to be done.

## **Method**

To complete the present study, a content analysis was conducted on the memes in the Facebook group *The M in UMW Stands for Memes*, specifically examining how the language used in the memes creates a sense of community and what shared understandings are necessary for the discussions in the group. I was able to establish the presence of certain words and phrases woven into the memes to analyze how the language and practices used to communicate can inform the cultural capital needed to participate in this group. This method was selected because of its advantage to collect a qualitative analysis of the group and its contents. Overall, a content analysis allowed for an evaluation of the type of language used in the posts revealing how this mode of communication creates a sustainable online community created by college students.

The memes that were collected were from the Facebook group starting from March 15th to April 11th. The unit of analysis for this study was each Facebook post containing a meme. Thus, the sample size for all the memes collected was  $n=15$ . To conduct this research, a coding sheet was created with nine categories. The coding sheet was created using a deductive approach; thus, the category terms were created based on the themes presented from prior

research. The categories used to classify the memes were examining the type of humor used such as irony, sarcasm, or mocking administrative speech, and the presence of emotional support language to create a sense of togetherness (“we” and “us”). For further descriptions of the categories, the final coding sheet is attached to Table 1 in the appendix.

For my qualitative categories, I was examining how the memes used humor to communicate information and whether that humor created a negative connotation associated with the University. For humor, I coded each post for whether they included irony, sarcasm, or other similar types of humor, as well as if they included images of the campus or direct mention of the University in the post. When coding for emotional support, I examined memes for their use of “we,” “us,” and other encouraging languages. In examining memes for positive or negative connotations, I observed how the post described the content in it and whether they used language with a positive or negative connotation to describe the University. Additionally, I coded for whether cultural capital was needed to understand the discussion, thus examining if someone outside of this group would be able to understand the content. I define cultural capital as the cultural knowledge one has that promotes social mobility and confers social status within a group. For instance, if one has no cultural knowledge of the experiences of UMW students, then they would not have the cultural capital needed to understand the discussions in the group.

## **Findings**

### ***The Facebook Group: Background***

The Facebook group *The M in UMW Stands for Memes* was created in 2018 and contains over 3,000 members and has four moderators. This analysis found that the Facebook group is private, so to join the page one would have to be affiliated with the UMW. Once granted access to the page, there are rules set by the moderators that must be followed to participate in the

group; these are the group's norms. Thus, when a new member enters the group, the rules are the first component of the page they view. The rules are paraphrased for the sake of this paper and are stated as the following: (1) Don't be hateful or rude, (2) keep the posts UMW related, (3) memes only, (4) there are administrators and professors on the page, so post smart, and (5) don't start arguments with people on the page (The M in UMW Stands for Memes, 2018). This analysis shows that there are group norms and values set in place and if these rules are not followed, then a member would be removed from the group.

### ***Shared Language and Cultural Capital***

When coding for cultural capital, the research proved that cultural capital was required to understand the discussions taking place. All posts included references to a specific UMW topic or area such as "construction," "Westmoreland," and "Banner" (The M in UMW Stands for Memes, 2022a, b, c, d, e, f, h, i, j, k, l, m, n, o). However, all but one meme revealed that cultural capital was not needed (The M in UMW Stands for Memes, 2022g). This post was counted as a meme that any college student could relate to, not specific to UMW culture. These findings reveal that there is a shared language present in the group which informs the cultural capital specific to UMW culture. This analysis also shows that even when a post does not contain a meme that requires the use of cultural capital, it is still accepted in the group and posted on the page.

### ***Humor in Memes***

This analysis proved that there was a strong use of humor in all of the posts, i.e., irony, sarcasm, and mocking administrative speech. In two cases, there was a combination of irony and mocking administrative speech (The M in UMW Stands for Memes, 2022i & l). It was noted that when humor was used, it carried a negative connotation with it in both the caption and meme



about the University. I defined a negative connotation as any instance where UMW is being critiqued in the post and whether it was related to the humor being used. For instance, in one post, a student shared their opinion of the University dining hall's choice to play loud music which negatively impacts the experiences of students who are autistic or have hearing issues. They accompanied this post with a well-known meme of a child blaring a trumpet in another's ear to reinforce the issue of playing music in the dining hall (The M in UMW Stands for Memes, 2022n). In all posts, the group's norms, values, and rules were being upheld.

### ***Emotional Support***

This analysis found that only one post included the word “we” which was used to describe the excitement that soon-to-be recent graduates are feeling (The M in UMW Stands for Memes, 2022h). This post included humor and brought awareness to the group about students' who leave confetti on the ground after taking graduation pictures. No other posts incorporated any emotional support language or encouraging words that created a sense of togetherness or used terms such as “we” or “us”. However, it was noted that pathos was present in each post which can draw out types of emotional support in the comments, but the comment section was not analyzed in the present study. I defined pathos as a means of persuasion that has the ability to evoke the emotions of the author onto the audience. For instance, in one post, a student was expressing their frustration towards an error they came across in Banner which showed that they would not be eligible to graduate that semester, even though they had enough credits and completed the requirements to do so (The M in UMW Stands for Memes, 2022i). This analysis shows that even with little to no presence of emotional support being used, pathos was still consistent across all posts which can evoke emotional support from members if the comment section was examined in this study.

## Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to examine how a community is formed in a Facebook group and what role memes play in shaping the community and sharing information. This study found that cultural capital played a crucial role in understanding the content of the group which was formed by the shared language found in the posts. When looking at the questions posed on the coding sheet, I found that all posts were consistent with the group's norms and rules, humor was present throughout all posts, and there was only one post that contained a word related to emotional support. The research found that all the posts not only included background information but carried negative connotations with it when describing UMW. I also coded for pathos which I found was present in all posts. I chose to include pathos in the coding sheet because I believe it is relevant when examining how a sustainable online community is formed by college students.

Since this research focused on an online space created by college students, earlier studies that I reviewed were not directly related to this particular demographic, but still gave me inspiration for how I conducted my research. The research conducted by Mansour (2020), which studied the formation of sustainable online communities, gave me a foundation for the present study. The biggest takeaway from their research revealed the necessity for online communities to have group norms and shared understandings to maintain a sustainable online community which allowed me to examine if there was a similarity in my study (Mansour, 2020). Additionally, the research done by Mazambani et al. (2015) proved that memes consistent with the group norms aided in sustaining an online community which showed similarities to my research. I believe that this finding is an indicator that community is formed through the consistent application of group norms found in the memes. Another similarity found in past research was Davis et al. 's (2016)

conclusion of the effect that the shared language of humor creates when communicating through memes. In my research, all the posts proved to include the use of humor which all carried the same negative connotations towards the University. Overall, considering the topic that I chose to research focuses on a different demographic from previous research, there are many opportunities to continue expanding this research using both my findings and the preliminary research I have provided.

The biggest theme that I found when analyzing how a community is formed in this group using memes is the necessity for cultural capital. I defined cultural capital as the cultural knowledge one has that furthers social mobility and grants social status within a specific group. Therefore, my research proved that all memes required cultural capital to understand the discussions taking place within the group, i.e., understand the use of humor in memes and have experience as a UMW student. While there was not a large presence of emotional support, I found that common understandings and experiences that the group members shared are what defined their community created through memes. This research proved that consistent use of shared language and all posts carrying sentiments of negative connotations created the cultural capital or, ultimately, bond needed to maintain this sustainable online community.

The role of memes in this Facebook group shows ways that they create a stable online community. The effect of the group's norms and values, consistent use of humor in posts, and creation of cultural capital through the shared language revealed how this community was formed and maintained. Using memes as a mode of communication to give background information about the content being shared and the use of pathos woven between them, shows how a Facebook group created by college students can create a sustainable online community.

Additionally, I believe that this space can provide an outlet for members to gain and become aware of information relating to UMW and connect with their peers to form relationships.

### **Conclusion**

This study aimed at examining the role of memes in a Facebook group created by college students and how memes create a sense of community and share information. The findings show that memes serve as the main communicator in the group when members share information. To that end, the findings proved that there is a strong continuity of maintaining the group's norms and values and cultural capital within the posts which, ultimately, aids in sustaining this online community. This research reinforces previous studies conducted on the overall topic of sustainable online communities, but more research needs to be completed on memes and their function in online communities, specifically in the demographic of college students.

The limitations faced in this study I found were due to the small sample selection. My decision to only examine 15 posts limited my overall results because I found that due to the longevity of the Facebook page and the number of members within it, it had the potential of drawing more conclusions about how the community is formed in this group. With a larger sample selection, more could have been drawn about how this community has been able to maintain itself for this amount of time and find if any posts include emotional support, specifically near midterms and finals. Additionally, it would be beneficial to examine the comment section of the posts. Thus, if the comment section was examined, then there could be a presence of emotional support since all posts contained a caption and text in the meme which provided background information for the poster's feelings and thoughts on the content being published. For future research, I suggest a larger sample size should be included to examine how this demographic communicates through memes which can add to previous research discussing

computer-mediated communication and what that means for creating a sense of community.

Overall, I believe that this research expands on previous research done in this field, but the need for future research to be done is critical as we move further into a society that is heavily populated with digital natives and recognize the impact that memes have on creating community and sharing information in online spaces.

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The M in UMW Stands for Memes. (2022e, March 18). [Image attached] [Status update].  
Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/321724185083917/>

The M in UMW Stands for Memes. (2022f, March 24). @ anyone who still lives in the dorms  
[Image attached] [Status update]. Facebook.  
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/321724185083917/>

The M in UMW Stands for Memes. (2022g, March 28). [Image attached] [Status update].  
Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/321724185083917/>

The M in UMW Stands for Memes. (2022h, March 29). *I know we're all excited but please  
PICK UP YOUR TRASH <3* [Image attached] [Status update]. Facebook.  
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/321724185083917/>

The M in UMW Stands for Memes. (2022i, March 29). *No because, there's always something up  
EVERY semester* [Image attached] [Status update]. Facebook.  
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/321724185083917/>

The M in UMW Stands for Memes. (2022j, March 30). *When you're trying to register for  
classes, but the page fails so you have to log in again:* [Image attached] [Status update].  
Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/321724185083917/>

The M in UMW Stands for Memes. (2022k, March 30). *It's not a left turn ya goobers. There's  
literally a sign that says no left turn 🙄* [Image attached] [Status update]. Facebook.  
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/321724185083917/>

The M in UMW Stands for Memes. (2022l, March 30). *This happened the same day as the big  
Banner outage for registration. Basically, after getting the diploma email from the*  
[Image attached] [Status update]. Facebook.  
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/321724185083917/>

The M in UMW Stands for Memes. (2022m, April 2). *almost got hit by a car twice last weekend  
while skateboarding but it's fine 😊* [Image attached] [Status update]. Facebook.  
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/321724185083917/>

The M in UMW Stands for Memes. (2022n, April 5). *I have OPINIONS when the UC dining hall  
plays music! Do you? I'm writing an article for the school paper* [Image attached] [Status  
update]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/321724185083917/>

The M in UMW Stands for Memes. (2022o, April 11). *When I'm trying to do sound editing in the DuPont music lab and the printer won't shut the hell up* [Image attached] [Status update]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/321724185083917/>



**Appendix**

Table 1

Post number	Is there a meme? (Y/N)	Are the group's norms and values being held?	Is there background information being given?	Is irony or sarcasm, or mocking admin. speech present?	Positive or negative connotation	Mention or image of University or campus?	Pathos	Is cultural capital needed to understand?	Is there emotional support messaging? Elaborate

Coding Sheet: [Coding Sheet FINAL](#)

I pledge, Jessica Probst