

THE SEMIOTICS OF DIGITAL HUMOR: MEMES, CONTEXT, AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE COMIC SIGN IN SOCIAL MEDIA

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Received: 2025-12-11

Accepted: 2026-01-11

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21103638>

Abstract. The article is devoted to the study of the semiotics of digital humor, the role of memes and context in changing the comic sign in social networks. The purpose of the article is to investigate the semiotic nature of digital humor and the patterns of transformation of the comic sign in the environment of social networks through the prism of memes and context. In the course of the scientific research, general scientific methods of cognition were used, in particular, analysis, synthesis, comparison, generalization, systematization and interpretation. The results of the study show that semiotics is an important tool for explaining digital humor, but is not identified with it, since it studies a wider range of signs and sign systems. It is shown that digital humor is realized through Internet communication, is characterized by multimodality, the ability to transform and dependence on the cultural, social and platform context. It is studied that the meme is the central genre of digital humor, as it combines verbal and non-verbal stimuli, is created taking into account other memes, spreads through imitation and acquires new meanings in the process of remixing. It is concluded that the transformation of the comic sign in social networks occurs through recontextualization, intertextuality, multimodal combination of image, text, font, color and cultural codes. The study highlights the features of the formation of memes as key entertainment content in social networks. Using a semiotic approach, the perception of this information occurs differently depending on the worldview, cultural environment, circumstances, mood and general information flow. The features of the formation of a new specific black humor in the context of the coronavirus crisis are shown, where black humor, sarcasm, satire and semiotics are of particular importance in the formation of memes. All this forms the practical significance of this study, which consists in the possibility of predicting the possible perception of memes by information consumers and the formation of a toolkit of information influence on the audience by marketing agencies.

Keywords: semiotics, digital humor, memes, context, recontextualization.

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Introduction

Today, social networks are not just a platform for exchanging information – they have turned into a space where entertainment becomes one of the key senses of presence. Billions of users scroll through their feeds every day in search not so much of news as of emotions: laughter, wit, recognizable situations. According to research, more than 3.8 billion active users of social networks in the world spend an average of more than two hours a day viewing content, a significant share of which is memes, jokes and humorous videos [10]. This scale shows that humor in the digital environment is not a peripheral phenomenon, but a central element of communicative culture.

It is in this context that the issue of semiotics takes on a new dimension. If semiotics traditionally studied signs in literary texts, advertising or language, today the object of its research is increasingly becoming Internet memes - phenomena that combine the visual, verbal and cultural into one dense symbolic package. As S. Cannizzaro notes, memes function as signs of digital culture that convey meaning through established images, texts and their mutual recoding [2]. That is, memes are not just entertainment, but a semiotic system with its own grammar. The importance of semiotics in the space of social networks is significant precisely because humor here does not exist in a vacuum. It depends on the context, on cultural codes, on how well the audience “reads” the sign. O. Gorbatyi emphasizes: meaning is not contained within the sign, it arises at the intersection of the sign and the context, and it is this interaction that underlies any humorous effect [5]. Thus, the study of the semiotics of digital humor is relevant both for academic theory and for understanding modern communication practices.

Literature Review

The issue of the semiotics of digital humor, memes and their symbolic nature in social networks remains insufficiently systematized in the scientific literature. Despite the existence of individual studies, a comprehensive analysis of the transformation of the comic sign in the digital environment is absent. However, individual components of this topic are actively being developed by scientists. The issue of the semiotic nature of Internet memes was studied by S. Cannizzaro [2] and G. Marino [9]. The former considered memes as symbolic units of digital culture, demonstrating their connection with classical semiotic theories; the latter developed the concept of “spreadability” as a new paradigm for analyzing the circulation of memes in the media space.

Regarding the nature of digital humor and its specifics, this issue is the focus of attention of several authors. Among them, it is worth highlighting W. Chłopicki [3], who analyzed art in digital humor from an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural perspective, in particular the role of recontextualization in meme culture; C. Vásquez and E. Aslan [12], who investigated multimodal humor and creativity in Internet memes, focusing on the interaction of verbal and visual elements. A. T. Hussein and L. N. Aljamili [7] applied a socio-semiotic approach to the analysis of COVID-memes in Jordanian social networks.

The role of context in shaping the meaning of memes was studied by M. Kirner-Ludwig [8] and L. Bülow and M. Johann [1]. Kirner-Ludwig considered memes as multi-layered means of recontextualization in online political discourse; Bülow and Johann empirically tested the impact of multimodal recontextualization on the audience’s perception of memes.

Memes as a special form of digital communication were analyzed by L. Shifman [11] and L. Grundlingh [6]. Shifman, in her anatomy of YouTube memes, identified six common features of viral videos; Grundlingh argued that image macro memes function as speech acts, realizing communicative intentions in social networks.

A separate dimension of the study is the methodology of “semiotic comedy” by O. Gorbatyi [4, 5]. The author considers humor as a system of signs and narrative codes that adapts to different cultural and media formats: from theater to digital platforms. Phillips-

Kumaga et al. [10] document the practice of digital humor in Ghanaian social networks during the pandemic, showing how dark and sardonic humor performs a social function of coping with stress.

The scientific novelty of this study lies in the comprehensive approach that combines semiotics with pragmatism in the study of digital humor, which is manifested in the study of semiotic approaches to the construction of memes, as well as the mechanism of transformation of signs, hidden meanings into new meanings within social networks.

Problem statement

The purpose of the article is to investigate the semiotic nature of digital humor and the patterns of transformation of a comic sign in the environment of social networks through the prism of memes and context. To achieve the goal, the following tasks will be performed during the study: to characterize theoretical approaches to semiotics and outline its role in digital communication; to determine the specifics of digital humor and establish its difference from semiotics as a discipline; to analyze the features of the functioning of semiotic mechanisms in social networks using specific examples. Methods and materials

The study is based on the theoretical analysis of scientific publications in the field of semiotics, linguistics and media communications. The method of systematic literature review, semiotic analysis and comparative method were used to process the sources. The empirical basis was made up of examples of Internet memes documented in scientific articles by the authors under study, in particular, samples of COVID-19 pandemic memes, image macro memes and video memes. The theoretical basis is the classical semiotic concepts of Saussure and Peirce, as well as the modern approaches to social semiotics of Kress and van Leeuwen.

Results and discussions

Semiotics as a scientific discipline arose at the intersection of linguistics and philosophy. In its classical definition, it appears as the “study of signs” and their meaning in society [7]. Ferdinand de Saussure in his “Course in General Linguistics” proposed a two-term model of a sign, consisting of a signifier (sound image) and a signified (concept). According to Saussure, a sign acquires meaning only in the interaction of both elements. Charles Sanders Peirce, in turn, introduced the term “semiotics” into scientific circulation and substantiated the three-term structure of a sign, emphasizing that “nothing is a sign if it is not interpreted as a sign” [7]. Both concepts formed the basis of modern approaches to the analysis of digital texts.

Social semiotics, proposed by Michael Halliday and developed by Hodge, Kress and van Leeuwen, took a step from a sign in language to a sign in social practice. According to the author of this study, it is the social-semiotic approach that is the most productive for the study of memes, since it encompasses not only verbal, but also visual, auditory and gestural resources of meaning creation. Social semiotics analyzes the semantic practices of a person in specific social and cultural conditions [7]. Therefore, it is able to explain why the same meme is perceived as funny in one environment and remains unrecognized in another.

The significance of semiotics for digital communication is diverse and goes beyond the limits of purely theoretical understanding. The key functions of semiotics in this context are systematized below (see Table 1).

Table 1 – The importance of semiotics in digital communication

Function of semiotics	Content	Example in the digital environment
Decoding signs [2]	Helps explain how users recognize the meaning of images, texts, and symbols	Reading an image macro as a combination of a template image and text
Analysis of	Examines the interaction of different	Cartoons in Jordanian

multimodality [7]	semiotic resources (word, image, color, font)	social media during COVID-19
Explanation of recontextualization [8]	Reveals the mechanism by which signs are transferred from one context to another with a change in meaning	Memes with politicians' quotes transferred into a humorous context
Cultural interpretation [5]	Shows how cultural codes influence an audience's perception of a sign	The "thumbs up" gesture as approval or an insult, depending on the culture
Analysis of spreadability [9]	Explains why certain signs go viral and are easily replicated	"Spreadable media" as content adapted for remixing

Note: compiled by the author based on sources [2; 5; 7; 8; 9]

It is worth emphasizing: semiotics is a somewhat narrower concept than digital humor.

Digital humor is a form of the comic, realized through the means of Internet communication and differs from traditional genres of humor primarily in its multimodality and ability to transform. W. Chłopicki defines humor as a broad concept that encompasses everything from a witty joke to the grotesque and parody and requires a stimulus (verbal or non-verbal) that causes laughter or a feeling of incongruity [3]. In the digital environment, such a stimulus most often becomes a meme.

The Internet meme as the central genre of digital humor is characterized by three key features: first, it is a group product created with the awareness of other memes; second, it is distributed, imitated and transformed by numerous users; third, transformation is an essential genre feature that distinguishes memes from ordinary "viral" materials [3]. It is thanks to this that memes are open to remixing, recontextualization, and new meaning. C. Vásquez and E. Aslan identify three drivers of dissemination in memes: humor, intertextuality, and incongruence [12] - that is, the discrepancy between the expected and real meaning.

To understand the specifics of digital humor, it is important to distinguish it from semiotics as a scientific discipline. Below is a comparative table of the two concepts (see Table 2).

Table 2 – Comparative characteristics of semiotics and digital humor

Comparison criterion	Semiotics	Digital humor
Subject	Signs and sign systems in general	Comic effect in digital communication
Purpose	Analysis and explanation of the mechanisms of meaning-making	Entertainment, social commentary, emotional response
Scope	Any signs (language, gestures, images, colors)	Mostly memes, videos, emoji, meme formats
Role of context	Context is an essential condition for interpreting a sign	Context determines whether something is perceived as funny
Transformation	Studies changes in meaning when signs are transferred	A core genre feature (remixing, recontextualization)
Key authors	Saussure, Peirce, Halliday, Kress	Shifman, Grundlingh, Vásquez, Gorbatiy

Note: compiled by the author based on sources [2; 3; 6; 9; 11; 12]

Thus, semiotics is an instrumental discipline for the study of digital humor, but it is not reduced to it. Humor is a specific communicative result, and semiotics provides a language for

its description. Understanding this distinction allows us to proceed to the analysis of how semiotics functions in the conditions of social networks.

Social networks create a unique environment for the functioning of signs. Here, a sign does not exist in isolation - it is immersed in the flow of content, reactions, reposts and comments. According to O. Gorbatiy, the meaning of a sign arises not within the sign itself, but at its intersection with the context [5]. That is why the same meme can be perceived as witty, offensive or incomprehensible depending on the platform, audience and moment of publication.

The specificity of semiotics in social networks can be considered through several key mechanisms:

- *Recontextualization.* Memes move between contexts, acquiring new meanings. M. Kirner-Ludwig shows that in political memes on Reddit, users use direct and indirect quotes, allusions, and pop culture references, creating multi-level intertextual connections [8]. For example, a fragment from a TV series is reinterpreted as a commentary on a current political event;

- *Multimodal combination of signs.* In a typical image macro, images, text at the top and bottom, font (Impact, capital letters), and background color interact. C. Vásquez and E. Aslan demonstrate that the meaning of a meme arises only from the combination of all these levels, and not from each one separately [12]. The meme "Cash me ousside" became viral precisely due to its non-standard pronunciation and combination with a specific image;

- *Cultural codes as a condition for decoding.* O. Gorbatiy describes the cultural code as an "operational system of consciousness" - a common set of rules, associations, and stereotypes that allows us to understand a joke [5]. A joke about "fake" borscht will be funny only to someone who "wears" the corresponding cultural code;

- *Dark and crisis humor as a semiotic adaptation.* During the COVID-19 pandemic, a specific category of memes appeared on social networks that implemented the function of psychological protection. Phillips-Kumaga et al. document Ghanaian memes with "dancing coffin bearers," which spread in dozens of countries as a signal: "stay home or dance with us" [10]. This is a classic example where a sign acquires a pragmatic warning function through a humorous form;

- *Memes as speech acts.* L. Grundlingh argues that image macros are not just images, but full-fledged speech acts: they can invite, condemn, express irony. That is, memes function in social networks as pragmatic signs with intention [6];

- *Virality as a semiotic property.* G. Marino proposes the concept of "spreadability": a meme becomes viral not through the mechanism of "infection", but because it is ergodic - it requires the user's active participation: sampling, remixing, adaptation [9]. An example is templates like the "Drake meme", where anyone can substitute their own content while preserving the structure of the sign.

The study by L. Bülow and M. Johann confirms that various semiotic parameters - linguistic variability, modality and the presence of sarcasm - significantly affect the user's intention to spread a meme [1]. This means that semiotics in social networks has not only descriptive, but also predicative potential: knowing the semiotic structure of a meme, one can predict its spread. L. Shifman, in her "anatomy of YouTube memes," identified six common features of viral video content: a focus on ordinary people, broken masculinity, humor, simplicity, repetition, and whimsical content [11]. Each of these features is, in essence, a semiotic parameter that "invites" to creative dialogue.

Conclusions

Semiotics is a scientific discipline that offers a concept of understanding humor and communication between people both in a live format and in the digital world. The main concept of this concept is to highlight specific signs that are products of the interaction of the

context and the reader, the form and worldview of perception. In practice, in the digital space this means that the same image or text can be perceived differently: someone will perceive such humor as a neutral text, someone as a joke, and someone as a challenge or message with a special subtext.

Digital humor and semiotics are in a certain relationship to each other, but these concepts are different: semiotics studies sign systems, and humor is the information environment where these signs are located. A specific type of humor in the digital environment is a meme, which, unlike ordinary jokes, videos, texts, or funny pictures, has a fundamentally different task, which generally includes semiotic subtext. And the social environment, in turn, works as a space for the dissemination of such a context with particular intensity, while the different orientations of such an information environment allow us to distinguish different semiotic approaches to the formation of memes: Recontextualization, multimodal coding, cultural codes, dark humor as a psychological adaptation, meme as a speech act, and virality as a semiotic property. All these phenomena together confirm that digital humor is not a simplified form of communication, but a complex symbolic practice.

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