Name A More Iconic Duo, I'll Wait: Exploring the Role of Humour in Bangladeshi Internet Meme Culture

A Graduate Thesis

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Abstract

Internet meme culture represents one of the most prevalent facets in contemporary popular culture. In this study, I explore the role of humour in Bangladeshi memes. The purpose of this study is twofold: to explore the typology and frequency of humour in Bangladeshi Internet memes and to examine the application of humour among successful memes. This study engages a mixed methods approach, consisting of quantitative content analysis and thematic analysis. Through an analysis of 1,008 memes produced and shared among users in a famous Bangladeshi meme group on Facebook (Rantages Goatposting), I explore the application of humour in both successful and unsuccessful memes in Bangladeshi meme culture. Primary findings suggest that silliness is the most dominant type of humour in Bangladeshi meme culture, followed by sentimental humour, exaggeration, and sarcasm. Successful memes applied contextual humour with relatable references, balanced incongruity, mediated superiority, and positive sentiments. Unsuccessful memes failed to apply contextual humour with relatable references, used overly sophisticated or over-simplified humour, and produced forced or contrived forms of humour. This study is a preliminary contribution to the scholarship on Bangladeshi humour and Internet meme research.

Keywords: Digital humour, Internet meme culture, meme success, Bangladeshi memes

Dedication

I am dedicating my thesis to my mother, who always believed in me even when nobody else would. There were moments when I lost all faith in myself, but she never did. I have many stories to share, but everything begins with her. I love you, Mom. Nothing feels better than making you proud!

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1.0 Introduction & Theoretical Framework

Social media has become an integral part of the post-millennial era that aims to keep people connected in a virtual reality. Platforms like social networking sites, social bookmarking or blogging platforms have emerged as the content creation centres of digital media culture (Coscia, 2013). Many websites on these platforms are dedicated exclusively to generating and circulating humorous digital content in cyberspace (Shifman, 2007). Enjoying and sharing funny content with friends has become a universal norm among social media users (Ding, 2015). For example, Dutton et al. (2005) revealed that over one-third of users in the U.K. surf the Internet to find jokes, cartoons and other humorous materials. Humour has always been a critical instrument in promoting dialogue in cyberspace, especially in the realm of civic discourse: for example, the rampant distribution of electoral jokes (Moody-Ramirez & Church, 2005) or empowering debates regarding social/political movements (Harlow, 2013; Denisova, 2016). Social media encourages interactions among users through user-generated content (Kilian, Hennigs & Langner, 2012) and initiates conversations among individuals, groups, and organizations (Mills, 2012). Such affordances offered by social media have stimulated the paradigm shift of turning content consumers into content creators (Harlow, 2013), a feat that resulted in the rise of the Internet meme, one of the most sensational channels through which to disseminate humour in the digital realm (Shifman, 2014; Milner, 2016; Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015).

Viewing Internet memes has become a daily activity for many, especially the youth population (Ding, 2015). Dawkins (1976) defined the term "meme" as the simplest

cultural unit that can spread from one mind to another. Following Dawkins' concept of the *meme*, *Internet memes* are generally understood as a group of viral, humorous media artefacts such as images, videos or texts (Brodie, 2009), or as combinations of visual and verbal elements (Dynel, 2016). According to Laineste and Voolaid (2016), "a meme is a relatively complex, multi-layered, and intertextual combination of (moving) image and text that is disseminated by the active agency of Internet users, becoming popular among them" (p.27). Another core aspect of Internet memes is that they evolve as they proliferate in the digital realm (Milner, 2016). Indeed, successful examples of the form spread rapidly in the digital sphere, reaching millions of users within hours. Meme makers in social media generally choose a popular issue or trending topic and start manufacturing hundreds of unique texts by manipulating the original content. This user-generated content is then converted into a group of homogeneous items, and together, they turn into Internet memes (Blackmore, 1996, 2000; Brodie, 2009; Díaz, & Mauricio, 2011; Milner, 2012, 2016; Davison, 2012; Chen, 2012; Shifman, 2011, 2014). Scholars have investigated and explored the various characteristics of memes, such as their viral nature (Burgess, 2008; Brody, 2012; Shifman, 2011), the distribution and sharing process in social media (Bauckhage, 2011; Shifman, 2014), and the use of memes to facilitate public discourse in the digital sphere (Phillips, 2012; Milner, 2013). Internet memes offer users diverse opportunities to divulge their views, ideas, thoughts or concepts via social media; as a result, Internet meme culture is becoming more prevalent and more users are joining meme communities as meme viewers and producers.

Users view Internet memes that are shared by individuals and social media platforms, or they join groups/communities that specialize exclusively in memes.

Although memes are notorious for their short lifespans (Díaz & Mauricio, 2013), some memes live on for years, even for decades. For instance, the classic image macros that feature facial expressions or funny animals remain favourites among meme makers. Multiple factors may influence a given meme's success or popularity; therefore, defining meme success in participatory digital culture is a difficult undertaking. For example, memes are often original ideas that undergo a process of variation, competition, selection and retention in social media (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015), and they survive by first, appealing to people and second, ensuring broader circulation/adaptation (Heylighen, 1995; Shifman, 2014). For these reasons, measuring memetic success is a complex, subjective phenomenon. So far, no universal framework to measure meme success has been proposed; however, meme scholars have presented several frameworks designed to measure meme success. For instance, the success of an Internet meme can be measured by the number of interpellated people (Coscia, 2013), the number of minds infected (Brody, 2012) or by the quantity of engagement a meme produces (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015). Shifman (2014) proposes both the viral nature and memetic replication of content in weighing meme success. According to these indicators, a successful meme is admired by both makers and viewers alike.

Throughout history, as the eras progressed and technology developed, people have changed their joke-sharing forms and practices. In recent decades, comedians used to craft jokes primarily via textual elements, cartoons, images, and videos. The modern digital/online landscape has since enabled humourists to experiment with new forms, such as Internet memes. Interest in studying humour under the larger umbrella of Internet memes has grown quickly because the latter are strongly associated with humour (Ding,

2015). In a study on the role of humour in viral memes, Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015) revealed that global meme pages on Facebook use humorous elements in 65.1% of Internet memes. Such funny content materializes in recurring images, texts, and videos with variations made by users to redefine the original jokes in creative fashion (Ramoz-Leslie, 2011). Creating and sharing jokes has always been a central activity on the Internet. With the addition of digital tools, content manipulation has become a relatively easy undertaking, with the replication of memes becoming a natural activity for everyday users (Ramoz-Leslie, 2011). Hence, many online joke tellers have transitioned into becoming meme makers who display their humour through visual elements; in doing so, humour has proven to be a foundational feature of Internet memes (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Milner, 2012; Shifman, 2012, 2014; Bayerl, 2016; Dynel, 2016). As a type of comical effort to induce joyous stimulation in others or the end-product of those efforts, humour makes Internet memes more enjoyable and more emotionally positive (Shifman, 2014). Humour, therefore, plays a vital role in the success of Internet memes.

This study is based on Internet meme culture in Bangladesh, a country in South Asia where among 143,106 mobile phone users, 74.736 million people use the Internet and most of these Internet users spend their time in social media (Tarik, 2018, April). According to Tarik (2018), there are approximately 25-30 million Facebook users in Bangladesh, and a plethora of these users are youth. An astonishing 86% of Bangladeshi Facebook users access the platform via mobile phones. The mobile phone usage in the country suggests that access to information and technology is now easier than ever and that more users are joining social media communities. Browsing memes is currently one

of the most popular activities on social media for Bangladeshi users. There are plenty of

Bangladeshi Internet meme pages such as Lame Jokes Association[1], Rantages[2], and Khati

Bangla Mimiz[3] that create and share original meme content, along with pages like 14

Again and Bengali Things that share collected memes from various users. Users also

browse content in Facebook groups dedicated to Internet memes such as Rantages

Goatposting, Lame Jokes Association, and The Woah Army, among many others. These

groups are famous for initiating socio-political discussions and sharing humour through

Internet memes. Internet meme culture has spread rapidly across Bangladeshi social

media, with more and more Bangladeshi users joining these groups to enjoy Internet

memes. Studies on Internet meme culture in non-Western countries is sparse; therefore,

this study on Bangladeshi Internet memes will offer much-needed insight into the

existing scholarship on Internet meme culture.

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[1] Lame Jokes Association is a Bangladeshi Internet meme page that shares the finest memes from the memes shared in Facebook meme group Lame Jokes Association. For more information regarding the group, visit here: https://www.facebook.com/keepitlame/

[2] Similar to the Lame Jokes Association page, Rantages is a Bangladeshi meme page which shares the best memes shared in Rantages Goatposting group by the users. Rantages is considered as the largest Facebook based Bangladeshi meme platform. More information can be found here: https://www.facebook.com/Rantages/ & www.facebook.com/groups/1685062184888011/

[3] Khati Bangla Mimiz is another famous Bangladeshi meme page. Link to the page: https://www.facebook.com/KhatiBanglaMimiz/

2.0 Research Statement & Questions

The core objective of this research is to explore a phenomenon that incorporates humour as a core communicative process to explain Internet meme culture. In a broader sense, the goal of this study is to explore the association between humour and Internet memes. Other distinct objectives of this research are to categorize the different types of humour and their application in Bangladeshi Internet memes, to establish a framework to identify successful Internet memes, and to explore the extent to which humour functions in successful and unsuccessful Bangladeshi memes.

In short, this study moves in two directions: exploring the taxonomy of humour most apparent in Bangladeshi Internet memes and investigating the application of humour in successful and unsuccessful memes in Bangladeshi meme communities. To achieve these ends, I have formulated three research questions that I will explore throughout this study:

1. What are the dominant categories of humour in Bangladeshi Internet memes?

2. To what extent is humour applied in successful Bangladeshi Internet memes?

3. To what extent is humour applied in unsuccessful Bangladeshi Internet memes?

3.0 Study Purposes and Implications

Internet meme culture has emerged as a growing area of research in communication and media studies, and due to its striking popularity/visibility in the digital world, scholars are slowly building (or contributing to) greater knowledge and understanding of this phenomenon. Recent developments in Internet meme culture and the increased engagement of youth has heightened the need for research in this area. Even though scholars have been studying memes across different disciplines (Bennett, 2003; Burgess, 2008; Johnson, 2007; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Milner, 2013; Shifman, 2007, 2012, 2013, 2014; Vickery, 2014; Wiggins & Bowers, 2014; Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015; Dynel, 2016), the multidimensional characteristics of Internet memes demand further academic exploration, especially in relation to one particular area of study: humour research. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to meme research by exploring the synergistic relationship between humour and Internet meme culture.

Memes represent a small pocket of activity on the Internet, but their standing is growing steadily, becoming more intense and distinctive. As a distinct user base, meme makers are constructing a visual-verbal popular culture with the potential to transform memes into a Lingua Franca for Internet users worldwide. This construction of Internet meme culture is a global spectacle that is highly influenced by the contribution of meme makers from different geopolitical areas. Nevertheless, despite the worldwide visibility, scholars have limited the focus to Western meme cultures. Fortunately, scholars are now showing interest in non-Western meme cultures and presenting valuable insights (Tomlinson, 2004; Harlow, 2013; Ekdale & Tully, 2014; Pearce & Hajizada, 2014; Mina,

2014; Cahya, 2017; Komesu et al., 2018). Following this line of scholarly inquiry, my study will explore this phenomenon through an examination of Bangladeshi Internet meme culture. This study will undertake the first scholarly analysis of Bangladeshi Internet meme production; hence, this project provides a foundational contribution to understanding localized South Asian Internet meme cultures.

This study also offers some valuable insights into the function of humour in Internet meme culture. Scholars have been investigating humour for centuries; however, the study of humour as an integral part of an Internet meme production is still underdeveloped/theorized, and there is plenty of room to contribute in this area. This study provides an exciting prospect to advance our knowledge of Bangladeshi humour. A large number of studies on humour focus on theoretical perspectives but not many aim to discover different senses of humour in different regions. People in different geopolitical locations cultivate unique taste in humour (Putri, 2016). Therefore, the significance of undertaking studies to illuminate localized humour is essential. This study emphasizes South Asian humour, more specifically, Bangladeshi humour. My study not only attempts to make a contribution to the emergent scholarship on South Asian humour, but it also seeks to unveil the divergent characteristics of humour among Bangladeshi people.

In the previous sections, I have presented a theoretical framework related to the key features of my research, introduced my research statement, formulated three primary research questions, and argued for the scholarly significance of this study. In what follows, I present a systematic overview of previously conducted studies on humour and

Internet memes. The literature review section that follows also covers different aspects of

meme success, as well as the centrality of humour to Internet meme culture.

4.0 Literature Review

4.1 A Brief Introduction to Humour

Researchers have been investigating theories and applications of humour for centuries. Given the complexity of humour, which is like an emotion or a sophisticated communication channel, a universal definition that explains every aspect of humour has yet to be formulated. Defining humour is akin to the experience of blind men touching an elephant. In one specific South Asian folklore tale, various blind men were asked to explain an elephant by touching it, with each one of them describing the animal differently based on their experience of touching different parts. Likewise, current definitions of humour, despite their accuracy or usefulness, cannot explain every facet of humour (Scheel & Gockel, 2017). For instance, the ancient Greek philosopher Plato considered humour as a mixed feeling of souls while Aristotle viewed humour as imitations of men who live below an accepted social standard (Mahadian & Sugandi, 2017). Martineau (1972) characterizes humour as a communication method and as a vehicle for amusing people. Crawford (1994) asserts that humour is a communication channel, comprised of nonverbal and verbal components that allure audiences in a positive way. Martin (2003) defines the sense of humour as a combination of the abilities to comprehend funny stimuli, to manifest cheerfulness, to express humorous insights, to appreciate diverse humorous content, to seek sources of laughter, to memorize humour, and to have an aptness for using humour as a coping mechanism.

In the following sections, I explain the major theories of humour, the applications of humour in different socio-cultural contexts, the communicative aspects of humour in the digital realm, and a brief introduction to South Asian humour.

4.2 Theories of Humour

Theoretically, the idea that humour is multifaceted is well established according to the range of perspectives produced by humour scholars. While Aillaud and Piolat (2012) propose theories of humour characterized as surprise, incongruity, comprehension, and funniness, Martin (2007) distinguishes four components that explain the humour process: a social context, a cognitive-perceptual process, an emotional response, and the vocal-behavioural expression of laughter. For centuries, scholars have been investigating what exactly generates laughter. Among many of the theories, three concepts of humour have become the most prevailing ones to explain the cognitive processes of humour: superiority, relief, and incongruity (Berger, 1987; Critchley, 2002; Billig, 2005; Morreall, 2012).

According to the *superiority theory*, humour stems from the perception of being superior to others (Critchley, 2002) or of triumphing over others (Meyer, 2000; Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004). From the perspective of superiority theory, humour mainly functions emotionally, helping the joke tellers to shape their sense of self-assurance and/or self-esteem. Laughter and hilarity derive from viewing oneself as superior, righteous, or triumphant, in contrast to seeing others as inferior, wrong, or defeated (Berger, 1993). The superiority theory accentuates how humour is applied to express negativities and to display hostile attitudes by belittling individuals (Martin, 1998). Meyer (2000) argues that becoming objects of laughter endangers our identities; therefore, superiority humour is often an unpleasant experience for many people (Meyer, 2000). According to Tafoya (2009), superiority humour works in three ways. First, joke tellers make fun of powerful individuals or entities to make the joke tellers feel superior.

Examples of such superior humour are *Trump jokes*. In these categories of jokes, people make fun of US President Donald Trump, and by mocking Trump, people who are less powerful than Trump feel superior and experience humour (or laughter). Second, joke tellers mock people who are less powerful than they are to exhibit their superiority. An example of such problematic humour is trolling blond women and people with disabilities. Third, joke tellers ridicule themselves, which makes the audience feel more powerful than the joke tellers. An example of such type of superior humour is the self-deprecating attitude of standup comedians (Tafoya, 2009).

From the perspective of *the incongruity theory*, people find an event humorous if it deviates from anticipated outcomes or turns out to be surprising (Berger, 1976, 1993; McGhee, 1979). Veale (2004) says, "humour and incongruity appear to be constant bedfellows, for at the heart of every joke one can point to some degree of absurdity, illogicality or violation of expectation" (p.419). According to incongruity theory, violating an expected pattern induces humour in the mind of the observer; therefore, absurdity, nonsense, and surprise are critical elements in incongruity humour (Berger, 1993). The incongruity theory of humour also underlines the cognitive process of individuals, that is, that a degree of cognitive aptitude to identify and recognize bizarre incidents is essential to stimulating laughter (Forabosco, 1992; Berger, 1993; McGhee & Pistolesi, 1979). Forabosco (1992) asserts that the core of the incongruity theory lies in comprehending humour rather than appreciating humour. An incongruous joke may not be funny in isolation, but the process of understanding the joke may make it funny or

pleasurable. Classic examples of incongruity humour are *Knock Knock*[4] or *Bad Science*[5] jokes. These types of jokes usually feature absurd yet surprising notions. For instance, the science joke in Figure 1 is a joke that falls under the incongruity theory because it gives rise to a surprising element. In this verbal joke, the prominent scientist Gregor Mendel is awarded the *Noble Peas Prize* because he is admired worldwide for the scientific theories that he developed through his experiments on the genome of pea trees. Hence, the Nobel Peace Prize is replaced as *Noble Peas Prize*, which is a deviation from a general expectation of him being awarded the highest honour for his contributions to the biological sciences.
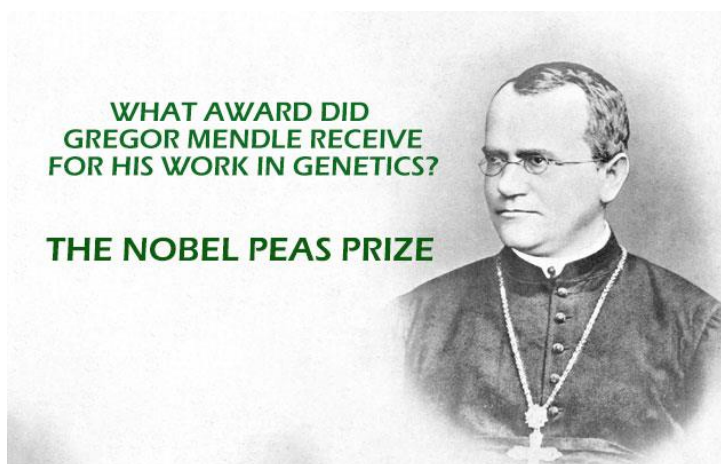
Figure 1: Example of incongruity humour.

Retrieved from: https://www.calpaclab.com/science-jokes

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[4] The knock-knock jokes are verbal humour which typically end with a pun. The scenario is of a person knocking on the front door to a house. The joke-teller says, "Knock, knock!" The recipient responds, "Who's there?" The surprising elements come after the response. To know more about knock-knock jokes and view some examples, visit: https://www.rd.com/jokes/knock-knock/

[5] Bad Science jokes typically involve humour related to scientific issues. These can be visual, verbal or a combination of visual and verbal elements. A popular hub of Bad Science jokes can be found here: https://www.facebook.com/pg/badsciencejokes/about/?ref=page_internal

According to the theory of relief, laughter is understood as the manifestation of a constant desire to lessen physiological strain (Berlyne, 1972; Meyer, 2000). The relief theory assumes that laughter is a consequence of releasing nervous energy from our bodies (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2014). It also assumes that humour is a channel to express suppressed impulses and to cope with sociocultural discomforts, which typically involve sexual and aggressive self-consciousness (Freud, 1905; Schaeffer, 1981). One of the first scholars to introduce relief theory was Herbert Spencer. In his book, *The Physiology of Laughter*, Spencer (1860) argued that excitement and mental agitation produce energy, which needs to be channelled out of the body. Spencer (1860) further stated that nervous exhilaration are likely to produce muscular movement. Under this formulation, laughter becomes the essential physical movement to release bodily excitement. However, Spencer (1860) also stated that relief theory does not compete with the incongruity theory. The basic idea of relief theory, according to Spencer, is that laughter serves to release clogged emotions. In the book, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud (1905) further developed the relief theory by revisiting Spencer's theory. Freud (1905) described three different sources of laughter: joking, the comic, and humour. These three sources are involved in the process of saving psychic energy that discharges from the body through laughter. In the case of making jokes, people restrain the energy that is likely to contain sexual and hostile feelings, only to release it through laughter. Similarly, in the case of the comic, comedians lead the audience to save energy to solve an intellectual puzzle and then to release it through laughter (Freud, 1905). In the case of humour, Freud argued that saving and releasing emotional energy helps us to treat a severe incident as an ordinary incident, which functions as a coping mechanism.

Although superiority, incongruity, and relief theory explain humour from different points of view, there is no consensus among humour theorists to determine the most applicable theory (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2014). While scholars continue to debate the relevance that each respective theory holds to sufficiently explain the complicated mechanisms attached to humour (Meyer, 2000), many humour researchers claim that superiority, incongruity, and relief theories complement each other to explain humour from different points of view (Berger, 1993). Berger asserts that every humour theory has its unique way to explain humour, and it is possible to explain humorous elements by combining multiple theories. One of many ways to explain humour is the through categorization of humour into types. In the next section, I explore prominent typologies of humour formulated by the leading humour studies scholars.

4.3 Classification of Humour

Scholars have attempted to categorize humour across a wide range of works. For instance, Scheel and Gockel (2017) proposed four types of humour: self-enhancing, affiliative, aggressive and self-defeating. Self-enhancing humour involves surprising behaviour in relation to unexpected occurrences of life (e.g., adversity), and aids people to distance themselves from stressful situations. Affiliative humour describes a person's tendency to establish a relationship by engaging in humorous talk and funny mockery (Scheel & Gockel, 2017). According to Scheel and Gockel (2017), both self-enhancing and affiliative humour work as adaptive mechanisms. Thus, both are categorized as positive humour. On the other hand, aggressive humour denotes irony, sarcasm, teasing, and mockery, as well as sexist and racist jokes, which has the capacity to manipulate or

belittle others (Martin et al., 2003). Finally, jokes that comedians use to belittle themselves to gain people's appreciation are categorized as self-defeating humour (Martin et al., 2003). Martin et al. also contend that aggressive humour and self-defeating humour styles are maladaptive because they function to belittle people, which often endangers social bonding and self-confidence. Hence, these latter two types are cast as negative humour. Due to the ubiquitous nature of these types of humour, many alternative categorizations exist: self-directed (self-enhancing/-defeating) humour and other-directed (affiliative/aggressive) humour (Martin et al., 2003). Similarly, many scholars have proposed different typologies of humour based on different sociocultural contexts. Here is a summary of the categorizations of humour by various scholars:

Scholar(s)	Typology of humour
Freud (1905)	Sexual or aggressive wit, and non-sexual or non-aggressive wit.
Goldstein and McGhee (1972)	Aggressive, sexual, and nonsensical humour.
Kelly and Solomon (1975)	Pun, understatement, joke, ludicrous, satire, and irony.
Brooker (1981)	Limericks and one-liners.
Speck (1987)	Comic wit, sentimental humour, satire, sentimental wit, and comedy.
McCullough (1993)	Warm, aggressive, sexual, and nonsensical humour.

Catanescu and Tom (2001)   Comparison, personification, exaggeration, pun,

sarcasm, silliness, surprise, black (or dark) humour,

and blue humour (also known as sexual humour).

Table 1: Different typologies of humour

Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015) assert that studying typologies of

humour can help researchers to understand the impacts of varying types of humour on the

effectiveness of different types of communication media. However, only a handful of

studies have concentrated on classifying humour across audio-visual media despite its

importance to/for communication media. According to Buijzen and Valkenburg (2014),

among the limited studies exploring humour in audio-visual media, Berger (1976, 1993)

has developed the most extensive typology. Berger's proposed typology of humour is one

of the most detailed categorizations of humour in the field, and it is the only typology that

is crafted through the integration of multiple humour theories (Buijzen & Valkenburg,

2014). Berger's typology assumes that humour can be divided into various parts or

techniques. Berger's typology is unique because it focuses on the contents that cause

humour in audio-visual media rather than the outcome of the contents alone. For

example, clownish behaviour can be humorous because it makes the audience feel

superior in terms of maturity and it is a deviation from standard behaviour. Buijzen and

Valkenburg (2014) further contend that many of these humour types are not funny if

applied alone, and in order to be amusing, two or more types of humour must

complement one another.

4.4 Humour in the Digital Realm

The presence of humour in digital culture is extensively connected to the functions of humour in our lives. Humour is omnipresent, and it is one of the most researched communication tools (Warren & McGraw, 2016). People are likely to avoid incidents that induce pain, and embrace situations that give rise to humour; hence, humorous elements are appreciated in TV shows, magazines, advertisements, websites, and blogs. As media consumers widely appreciate humour, media content makers have gradually leaned towards funny adverts and fun-themed products in order to win consumers' attention by entertaining them (Warren & McGraw, 2016). Similarly, digital media content creators utilize humour to attract viewers and keep them engaged. Hence, the Internet has not only become a primary vehicle to convey traditional jokes but also a breeding ground to promote a plethora of new customs regarding visual-verbal humour (Dynel, 2016). It is now common for Internet users to promote audio-visual humour that is comprised of pictures (photographs or drawings) or very short films and texts (Dynel, 2016). As Shifman (2007) puts it, "the visual seems to triumph over the verbal: most of the texts are image-based, and the new types of Internet humour tend to be visual" (p.204). In addition, Shifman (2014) strongly asserts that audio-visual humour is gradually taking over the verbal humour in the digital realm. For example, websites that promote audio-visual humour such as *9GAG* or *4CHAN* are becoming fertile grounds for content makers to cultivate humorous content. This user-generated content is informed by content makers' senses of humour and is influencing the humour sensibilities of users who view the content (Dynel, 2016). This content functions largely as entertainment, and also plays a substantial role in shaping digital media discourse.

According to Shifman (2007), humour is a key to understanding the socio-cultural dynamics at work in digital media. The nexus of humour and the Internet symbolizes the complex co-existence of status-quo and reformation in digital media (Shifman, 2014). Popular hubs for online humour work like carriers of classic humour. However, with the advent of wide-ranging technological, social, and cultural change, these hubs are now performing as generators of new styles and trends of humour in the digital realm. Shifman (2014) propounds three meta-characteristics of digital media that play vital roles in generating digital humour: interactivity, multimedia, and global reach. The interactive feature of humour enables users to participate in the joke-telling process, the multimedia feature assists already-existing (or extant) humour to regenerate through various media channels, and the global reach feature offers users opportunities to create and browse globally distributed content, which has the capacity to gain recognition (or win visibility) across diverse humour cultures in digital realm (Shifman, 2007).

Humour is also a useful tool for storytellers to connect to digital media spectators because it works as an icebreaker that relaxes the audience and makes them comfortable enough to receive messages from various narrators (Tellis, 1998). Humour, as an essential component of human interaction, can facilitate civic conversations and promote activism in digital media (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Humour is uniquely equipped with the essential elements to express political opinions that blend rage, fear, hostility, and/or self-defence, especially when freedom of speech is limited (Brandes, 1977). In totalitarian states, people are likely to veil their hostile political opinions through humour to create temporary relief from the omnipresent environment of suppression (Brandes, 1977). Hart (2007) advocates that while puns, punch lines, and tricks can express the

public's disgruntlement, cartoons can convey narratives of injustice in visual form. In addition, humour is often exploited to claim justice against political oppression (Tsakona & Popa, 2011). Tsakona and Popa (2011) argue that people also use humour to question the effectiveness of political governance; more specifically, humour is used to initiate public discourse to reveal the incompetence, recklessness, and corruption in the political system.

Another notable aspect of humour is its power to initiate and continue conversations regarding social issues in digital media. Since any social movement has the capacity to respond to or incite conflict, activists often use different tools to minimize conflict (Hiller, 1983). According to Hiller (1983), "some forms of conflict are the result of a planned and sponsored strategy, but other expressions of conflict emerge spontaneously among the followers or at the margins of the organized movement" (p.257). Hiller (1983) postulates that humour often nullifies the intensity of activism and allows people to join the movements. Contemporary social movements are no longer solely dependent upon the demonstrations on the street. Digital media presence is now one of the vital indicators to measure the intensity of social movements. Humour, as an interpersonal communication tool, can inspire deeper engagement across digital media. A historical example of using humour to facilitate social movement struggle is the use of *black humour or dark humour*. Black humour is featured in discourse that often breaches socially accepted boundaries through subtle conflict; therefore, black humour covertly brings the unspeakable into light (Burma, 1946). Humour regarding mental illness or suicide falls under the category of black humour because these topics are considered as taboo. Gallows humour represents another example of humour that facilitates discourse

on difficult or dark issues. Gallows humour addresses topics such as oppression and hopelessness in a funny way to lessen the intensity of the situations described. For examples, the spirit of resistance of the Czechs against the aggression of the Nazis in Czechoslovakia was demonstrated through gallows humour, which made fun of their hopeless situation against the Nazis (Obrdlik, 1942). *Satirical humour* is another kind of humour that has the power to make an impact on social movements; particularly, for movements that challenge orthodox social norms (Winnick, 1962). For instance, feminist activists have deployed satire to mock the subordinate position of women upheld by a male-dominated society that marginalizes women (Kaufman & Blakely, 1980). By mocking their inferior positions in feminist jokes, they attack the orthodox society to point out broader discrimination against women.

A rising concern attached to the use of humour in the digital realm is the compatibility of humour for different groups of users. Digital users emerge from different cultures; diversity among digital media consumers is potentially higher than traditional media consumers. Thus, to be effective, humour in digital media must be contextual, interactional, and tailored to the target audience (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014). Kutz-Flamenbaum (2014) suggests that humour is a tool that heavily depends upon shared norms and ideas. Therefore, a joke must contain familiar cultural signs and concepts that are common between the joke teller and the audience. Failure to achieve such symbiosis (or harmony) can turn the humour into an offensive, boring or misleading joke (Kutz-Flamenbaum. 2014). Therefore, a high level of cultural sensitivity and nuance is required to connect the jokes (and the joke-teller) with the target audience. A joke is effective only if the audience finds humorous means in a joke and connects with the elements of joy in

the joke without sacrificing the balance between flippancy and seriousness (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014).

Another volatile feature of humour in digital media is its potential to offend rather than entertain (Lockyer & Pickering, 2005). For instance, Castella (2011) argues that humorous advertisements often upset the audience despite its power to abate controversy (Fugate, 1998) or overcome the embargo we form in our minds (Minsky, 1980). Viewers often feel confronted by violent/sexist/racist/homophobic/religious content, sexually inappropriate features, misleading messages, displays of animal cruelty, offensive content towards people with disabilities, and so on (Castella, 2011). Interestingly, this controversial content is frequently used as elements of humour in contemporary digital media, and especially in millennial jokes about black people, including words like *Negro* or *Nigga,* which deliberately offend the African communities. In *Beyond the Joke: The Limit of Humour*, Lockyer and Pickering (2005) argue that some jokes cross the limit of humour for some people, which unsettles the values or contexts of the accepted level of misdemeanour through humour. For example, mocking someone's intellectual inferiority was once perceived to be acceptable, but these days, stereotyping a group of people by assuming their intellectual abilities to be inferior is deemed offensive. An example of such humour is blond jokes that attack and humiliate girls with golden hair by stereotyping them as brainless.

Nevertheless, the debate is ongoing regarding how to determine if humour is offensive or not because of the grey areas between appropriate and offensive humour. It is difficult to measure the offensiveness of humour because the notion of what offends

varies from person to person. The degree to which humour is deemed offensive also depends on many factors, such as cultural orientation, timing, context, and gender (Billig, 2005). For example, Cruthirds et al. (2012) contend that advertisements in the U.S. use affiliative, aggressive and self-defeating humour more frequently than advertisements in Mexico. Swani, Weinberger and Gulas (2013) insist that American women can closely relate to violent humour in American advertisements with real-world violence, and they feel offended by those examples of humour. Contrarily, men are better able to relate violence in advertisements, as they perceive it to be humorous, not offensive (Swani, Weinberger & Gulas, 2013). Therefore, joke tellers often deliberately include offensive elements in humorous content, so that they may be perceived as both funny and offensive, thereby generating potential engagement with two different groups.

4.5 Humour in South Asia

Understanding Bangladeshi humour is crucial for this study. Unfortunately, scholarship on Bangladeshi humour is sparse; as a result, I have broadened the context to include South Asian humour. South Asian countries boast similarities in terms of socio-cultural characteristics; an overview of humour across different South Asian cultures such as India is likely to produce some resonances with Bangladeshi humour. South Asia boasts a rich humour tradition that dates back thousands of years (Siegel, 1987). That said, no dedicated theories about South Asian humour exist (Greow, 2011). Greow (2001) asserts that psychological or aesthetic theories related to Indian humour are yet to be formulated that can compare with the humour theories of Freud, Bergson, or even Aristotle. In addition, most of the scholarship on South Asian humour does not explain

the common types and applications of humour in South Asian culture. More recently, comedians have shed light on this seemingly unchartered area of humour studies.

Many of the comedians and critics weighing in on the topic claim that South Asians have a poor sense of humour, and that humour is not widely used in South Asian culture. For instance, Fernandes (n.d.) argues that South Asians hardly (learn to) laugh or lighten up, making it difficult for them to comprehend and respond to jokes. Mainstream South Asian humour rarely features intellectual content, but rather makes use of dull and plain material as the favourite register of humour. For instance, Mamidi (2018) argues that Indian advertisers expect the audience to have a better understanding of current events in order to understand advertisements that use incongruity to produce humour. Mamidi (2018) further contends that there is a passive correlation between the popularity of Indian advertisements and the complexities of processing the advertisements' messages. Contextual knowledge is required to resolve the incongruity in the advertisements and to comprehend the humour. According to Satyal (2015), Indian people's comprehension of humour depends on the contextual knowledge related to the jokes. Indian people are likely to laugh loudly when they hear a plain joke about them, but they laugh casually when the joke is sophisticated. However, if the plain jokes are about non-Indians, they will smile, and if the joke is complex and about non-Indians then they will fail to comprehend the humour. This statement suggests that the lack of contextual or background knowledge among the audience leads to a failure in deciphering the humour. Das (2011), a famous Indian comedian, also argues that context is relevant: if the message is conveyed in the right way, even sensitive topics such as gods and sacred

cows can be humorous. For Das, real-life relevance, connection, and context enhance the likelihood that people will recognize and/or appreciate the humour.

A common scenario in South Asian culture is when humour backfires, that is, when the humour isn't culturally compatible or doesn't trigger affect/emotion in the audience. As a traditionally conservative region, many topics are deemed sensitive, and people are likely to be offended if jokes tackle topics such as religion, tradition, and orthodox socio-cultural trends. Therefore, despite humour being appreciated in South Asian culture, making jokes publicly on such topics is often discouraged in South Asia as one risks offending individuals, groups, or entities. Ideally, this characteristic of South Asian humour creates a breeding zone of "triggered people" that makes it difficult for comedians (and joke-tellers) to produce humour because virtually any topic can be perceived as offensive.

Globalization and the Internet are having a substantive impact on the South Asian sense of humour, as South Asians are gradually coming to embrace/accept/appreciate different types of humour. Sensitive topics are now more regularly featured in civic discourse, especially in the digital realm. For instance, in 2017, a famous Indian trolling site, All India Bakchod (AIB), faced legal action for making fun of Indian politicians (they later emerged unscathed) (Joshi, 2017). Joshi (2017) claims that Indian spoof-makers and stand-up comedians are importing Western notions of television comedy and satire by blending humour with the Indian tradition, a formula they use to make fun of the rich and powerful. Joshi (2017) also asserts that humour is practised covertly across India to mock and troll the system, bringing humour steadily closer to being a part of

mainstream culture. Elsewhere Bajaj (2017) points to the ways sexual humour is changing in the region. He tells a joke that depicts the level of intimacy in South Asia across different decades. In the 1990s, women wanted to be touched but not to be kissed; in 2000, they had asked for everything, but men have to keep it a secret; and in 2010, women are indirectly intimating men to engage in sexual activities in order to prove their sexual capabilities. This joke points to emerging changes to the South Asian sense humour, which is progressively accepting of diverse types of humour by discarding the conservative attitude towards any laughing matter.

Based on this limited overview of scholarship and discourse, South Asians appear to have sufficient experiences to joke about, but due to the conservative nature of the region, many refrain from expressing humour. Here, an important question arises: will the people explicitly engage in humour in safe environments that provide the space to create or tell jokes? It is essential to consider that South Asian youth are more liberal-minded than their previous generations (Harikrishnan, 2017), which allows a significant portion of the youth to accept humour on sensitive topics.

Given the notion that this liberal mindset can be expressed on platforms where users are free to share their opinions without fear of consequences, Internet meme culture has become one of the popular vehicles for today's youth to share humour. Internet meme groups and pages enable various users to anonymously express their unfiltered humour. In the next few sections, I discuss notable scholarship to explain the Internet meme culture, the interrelationship between Internet memes and digital media, and how humour is associated with Internet meme culture.

4.6 The Origin of Meme

A common misconception regarding Internet memes is assuming they are the brainchild of modern Internet users. The concept of the meme was introduced long before digital media scholars popularized the term. Meme, as a term, originates from an ancient Greek word "mīmēma," which means "to imitate" or "to copy" (Hiskey, 2012). Meme was not a frequently used term until the prominent evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins first used the word in his famous book, *The Selfish Gene*. Dawkins (1976) coined the term to explain attributes of a specific gene that spreads rapidly, and which is responsible for human cultural evolution across generations (Hiskey, 2012; Milner 2012; Shifman, 2014; Davidson, 2009, Díaz & Mauricio, 2013; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). These cultural units are basically human attributes such as ideas, catch-phrases, clothing, and fashion, things that are imitated across generations (Bjarneskans, Grønnevik & Sandberg, 1999).

The imitation, however, does not have to be accurate all the time because different situations, moments, or environments may warrant either completely or partially inaccurate imitations (Blackmore, 1996). The core distinctions between memes and genes can be described thus: while a gene transmits the physical aspects of an organism, a meme transmits the behavioural and/or cultural aspects of an organism (Davidson, 2012). For instance, a singer can be appealing due to his/her physical appearance, melodious voice, and a sophisticated sense of music. The offspring of that singer may enjoy similar physical beauty or melodious voice because of the genes; however, memes are

responsible for the inheritance of a sophisticated sense of music. Different scholars have related memes with diverse areas of subjects by following the biological example. For instance, Brodie (2009) compared memes with a virus of the mind, a unit of information in one's mind that creates events to copy the information and produce further concepts. In the next few sections, I discuss the origins of Internet memes, the dynamic relationship between Internet memes and digital media, what constitutes meme success, and how humour influences Internet meme culture.

4.7 What is an Internet Meme?

The meme we know in the digital world is quite familiar to modern Internet users, but it has yet to be ascribed a universal definition. Memes do not merely represent static content; rather, they are continuously evolving cultural artefacts in digital media (Chen, 2012). In their rudimentary formation, memes are mimicked and propagated by users through email, instant messaging, forums, blogs or social networking sites (Bauckhage, 2011). Focusing on the notion of cultural media, scholars have introduced manifold definitions of Internet memes. Wiggins and Bowers (2015) define memes as "remixed, iterated messages which are rapidly spread by members of participatory digital culture to continue a conversation" (p.1). Davidson (2012) claims that an Internet meme can be a piece of culture, such as a joke, that is influenced during its transmission online. According to Milner (2012), Internet memes are amateur media artefacts in forms of texts, images, and audio-visuals, which can be extensively twisted and recirculated by users in social media. For instance, these artefacts can vary widely: a picture captioned on *Reddit*, a hashtag pun on *Twitter*, an auto-tuned song, a manipulated stock photo, or a

mashup video on *YouTube* (Milner, 2012). Yoon (2016) argues that "the current definition of memes within Internet culture is generally associated with user-generated online contents in the form of image macro, video, GIF, etc." (p.95).

Plotkin (1995) acknowledges memes as units of cultural heredity that are analogous to the gene. Comparing human thought mechanisms to a computer system, Plotkin describes memes as the software part of the human mind, while the brain and central nervous system are compared to the hardware parts. From the cognitive aspect, a meme can be characterized as a manifestation of a complex idea built through certain units of memory, which can spread through the material manifestation of the meme (Dennett, 1995). Dennett presents the idea of an Internet meme as a spoked wagon wheel where someone creates the wagon through the memory of seeing a circular object. Later, if someone sees that same wagon, it might spark the idea of a spoked wheel and fashion another similar wagon, and this process can continue indefinitely (Dennett, 1995). Here, the wagon is the vehicle of the memory of the spoked wagon that is transmitting the wagon meme from brain to brain. Dennett (1995) also urges that a meme must have the following traits: variation, heredity, and fitness. "Variation" is a continuous development of diverse content; "heredity" (or "replication") stands for the ability of content to be mimicked; and "fitness" is measured by the number of copies made within a period, contingent on the overall makeup and environment in which the meme lives.

Shifman (2014) attempted to label Internet memes as groups of media content that survive on extensive and rapid mutation. In her book, *Memes in Digital Culture*, she describes the essential attributes of Internet memes as follows: "(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were

created with awareness of each other, and (c) circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users" (Shifman, 2014, p.41). Shifman's definition of Internet memes not only provides insight into Internet meme culture, but it also works to distinguish between Internet memes and ordinary, everyday content. For example, Shifman (2014) examines the *Leave Britney Alone* [6] video (released in 2007), where YouTuber Chris Croker passionately defends famous pop singer Britney Spears when Internet users were publicly humiliating the star for her lacklustre performance on an awards show. In the video, Croker was crying, shouting, and imploring his viewers to "leave Britney alone" because, according to him, people were expecting way too much from the singer. This video drew a lot of attention and turned into an instant hit: YouTubers far and wide started imitating this video in their own ways. Through this example, Shifman (2014) identified multiple overlapping characteristics among all of the Croker imitation videos on YouTube. Although users produced their imitations for different reasons, they copied the original video while maintaining a high level of accuracy. Even a video named *Leave Croker Alone* was released by Kumquatwins (2007), a YouTube content creator that framed his work as a "response to Chris Croker's response to Perez Hilton's response over Britney Spears performance at the VMAs." This video description denotes yet another important aspect tied to memes: the ability to retain a common idea or theme among all imitations. The *Leave Britany Alone* meme is thus comprised of the original video, its imitators, and the chain of imitations that followed.

To survive online, Internet memes are subject to the process of evolution; Internet memes must constantly adapt to the evolving nature and structure of dynamic web

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[6] Full "Leave Britney Alone" video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WqSTXuJeTks

cultures and platforms. The adaptability of memes produces complexity in identifying their constituent components. Shifman (2014) asserts that memes have three imitable dimensions: content, form, and stance. A meme's content is the idea or thought within a meme, form is the physical manifestation of ideas that users can perceive through their senses, and stance is the information embedded in the memes (Shifman, 2014). Davidson (2012) proposes three similar features of Internet memes: the manifestation, the behaviour, and the ideal. *The manifestation* of a meme is the visible phenomena of physical appearances. *The behaviour* denotes the action of an individual to produce and serve the meme, which also acts to shape the manifestation of memes. The *Reaction Photoshop* memes offer a sound example of the interrelationship between manifestation and behaviour. In this version of the meme, photo manipulation techniques are performed by a user (the behaviour), with the result of the photo manipulation being the manifestation. *The ideal* refers to the idea or concept conveyed by a meme. In the previous example, a user manipulates the photo; hence, the manifestation of the end-product depends on the user. Users have the liberty to convey information in whatever sense or tone they see fit. To imitate memes, content creators either modify one or more of the dimensions of a given meme to produce similar content, which may, in turn, materialize into a group of Internet memes.

4.8 Success and Failure of Internet Memes

In *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins (1976) claimed that the amount of reproduction or imitation informs the success of genes. Although Dawkins emphasized the reproduction of memes as a key indicator of meme success, recent studies propose more sophisticated

parameters to measure the effectiveness of memes. For instance, Aunger (2002) proposes that the success of Internet memes can be scaled according to the rate of meme reproduction; that is, the level of meme dissemination over a certain time period. Aunger's conception of Internet meme success is similar to that of Brodie (2009), who compared the Internet meme to a virus. According to Brodie, just as viruses multiply in a host, disseminating and infecting others, Internet memes also reproduce themselves in digital media. The continuous reproduction process of memes involves integrating into people's minds who carry the meme and transmit into more minds. For Brodie, Internet meme success largely depends on two parameters: the number of people drawn to the meme and the span of its appeal. We can measure this kind of success through the number of memes shared or reposted within a specific period. Shifman (2014) proposes two different, more complex parameters to measure meme success: virality and memetic qualities. Virality is the combination of the parameters set by Aunger (2002) that focus on a given meme's rate of dissemination in digital media, and memetic qualities denote users' involvement in remixing, re-making, or imitating memes. For example, imagine someone uploading a meme to a meme-themed Facebook page. According to the virality, the number of shares and reactions to the meme within a specified period indicates the level of success of that given meme. Nevertheless, if memetic qualities are considered, the number of times the meme is imitated will be the indicator of the success of the given meme. It is difficult to measure the success of hybrid memes (also known as crossover memes) because they represent combinations of multiple meme templates. However, a hybrid meme can be traced back to its origin by detecting the dominant template, and

success of that meme can be measured by calculating the number of times the meme is imitated based on the dominant template.

Coscia (2013) compares the parameter proposed by Shifman (2014) with the attributes of successful genes. According to Coscia (2013), successful genes are more likely to be transmitted to the next generation and tend to have mutated during the process. Similarly, the success of Internet memes can be measured by the rate of transmission and level of mutation. The process of mutation involves four stages: 1) assimilation by an individual, turning the individual into the host of the meme; 2) remaining in the memory of the host; 3) being expressed by the host via behaviour, language, or any other action that can be perceived by others; and 4) transmitting the message to other users (Heylighen, 1998). The final stage, according to Heylighen (1998), re-initiates stage 1 where individuals repeat the cycle and become the hosts of the new memes.

Wu and Ardley (2007) termed memes as replicators, self-replicating and self-propagating entities that survive by competing with other memes such as tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothing, and fashion, which can propagate themselves and get passed on through imitation. Blackmore (1996) asserts that a meme needs to survive through all possible means, which suggests that memes adapt and evolve in digital media to ensure their survival. Through a process of elimination in different stages of the mutation process, successful memes compete with other memes to move on to the next cycle. A suitable example of this theory is the transformation of a few ordinary tunes into classic tunes placed in pop-charts recognized by millions of people worldwide (Blackmore, 2000). Blackmore contends that only a select few of famous tunes remain in the minds of

people and only a handful of those tunes appear in the charts; what's more, even fewer songs make it to the all-time classics list. Another example of meme success survival is the groundbreaking unofficial FIFA 2010 World Cup theme song, "Waving Flag." To date, "Waving Flag (Coca-Cola Celebration Mix)" has been viewed 125 million times (Knaan, 2010, March 05), "Wavin' Flag ft. will.i.am, David Guetta" 22 million times (knaan, 2010, April 27), and "Young Artists for Haiti - Wavin' Flag" 24 million times (YoungArtistHaitiVEVO, 2010). Surprisingly, hardly any reference to the original song from K'naan's 2009 *Troubadour* album can be found on YouTube. Original versions of "Waving Flag" (original pre-release version - LIVE) have earned comparatively far less views (166,000) (Titaniummike, 2009). The vast popularity behind the remixed version was mainly due to viewers' appreciation for the modified remixes and tunes. According to Churchill (2010), the original version speaks of darkness, politics, and struggle while the remixed version presents a playful tone to the audience. The mutated versions cemented the song's place across digital platforms, while the original version, despite its greatness, was not highly recognized. Blackmore (2000) explains the phenomenon with her replication theory, which says that the survival of digital content depends on levels of inaccuracy. Blackmore contends that mildly inaccurate copies of memes are likely to survive in the digital ocean of content. The imitation of memes is a continuous process that facilitates repeated mimicking of content in different forms and enables social media dissemination through interactions among millions of interconnected users from various demographics. Coscia (2014) asserts that "memes with higher similarity to other memes have a significant disadvantage in their potential popularity" (p.1). Uniquely crafted memes have a greater chance of being successful (Coscia, 2014).

4.9 Internet Memes in Digital Media

Internet memes and digital culture are practically inseparable. Modern digital culture functions as a mutation pod for content makers. This digital mutation pod establishes necessary environments, which enables the transformation of generic content into Internet memes (Shifman, 2014). Digital culture has increased opportunities for idea sharing and the easy transfer or replication of web content, which has, in turn, influenced the production and dissemination of Internet memes (Shifman, 2014). In the early digital era, Internet users were isolated across different demographic groups. However, as Web 2.0 and social networking sites emerged, scattered zones in digital realm were connected bringing together isolated groups of users to interact in generative networks. Quoting Zittrain (2008), Davidson (2012) argues that a generative network influences meme production and also provides network users with opportunities to be creative in an adaptive, user-friendly cyberspace. Billions of users have since been plugged into these networks, creating digital media content by using the super accessible features offered by user-friendly websites (Milner, 2012; Davidson, 2012; Shifman, 2014). Many of the content-based websites provide users with ample options to modify content that creates the perfect environment to produce Internet memes. These websites range from ordinary meme generation websites such as Knowyourmeme.com or 4chan.com to online image editing-focused websites such as Adobe Creative Cloud. Shifman (2011) asserts that with the augment in the Internet's flexibility, ubiquity, and accessibility, creating memes and transforming existing memes into new ones has become easier than ever before. Anyone

with a basic idea can now produce memes; hence, digital culture has morphed into a cyber-facility that has accelerated the dissemination of visual expressions worldwide.

Internet memes also function as referential, emotive, conative, phatic, meta-lingual, and phatic communication media (Shifman, 2014). Referential communication denotes the connection between meme content and its respective contexts; emotive communication features a meme producer's emotion in the content; conative communication signifies the comprehensiveness of the content; and phatic communication establishes a rough communication channel between the meme producers and audience that hints the audience about the context of a given meme to ease the comprehension process. Memes that are produced using codes and symbols retain a meta-lingual dimension, and finally, poetic function is used when meme producers intend to establish an artistic or aesthetic communication channel with the viewers (Shifman, 2014). Shifman has shown that current web resources allow Internet memes to be reproduced through two distinct mechanisms: mimicry and remixing. Mimicry involves the recreation of specific content by different people, like when comedians tell already well known jokes. Through mimicry, the core content is kept intact but the words are repeated by different users, which in turn initiates a cycle of mimicry (Shifman, 2014). Remixing, however, is a new strategy that requires techno-based manipulation such as *Photoshopping* or the addition of sound to an image (Shifman, 2014). Current social networking sites highly encourage these two specific mechanisms. For instance, in the early years, Facebook users enjoyed the copy-paste function of texts and downloaded content to facilitate re-posting to their Facebook walls. Later, the *share* option brought a sweeping change to social networking site practices as it reduced the steps to reproducing

content. The share option also provides users with the freedom to add their thoughts in textual form when they share the image. This feature constitutes the most basic level of remixing (requiring minimal effort), unlike the complex process of editing an image, adding text or sound to an image or converting multiple photos into moving media content. Davidson (2009) argues that our restricted, familiar network is only a small portion of a much larger unrestricted network. For instance, hundreds of templates can be sourced from thousands of available examples to produce memes on a certain issue by using the numerous tools offered by content-editing focused websites. Later, those produced memes will be shared on familiar social media spaces.

According to Wiggins and Bowers (2015), Internet memes exist in participatory digital culture as media artefacts. Participatory digital culture, according to Jenkins (2006), offers easy access for users to share artistic expressions and to initiate civic discourse. Jenkins et al. (2009) suggest that participatory digital culture supports and facilitates the sharing of user-generated content, and offers informal mentorships that allow experienced users to pass information to novice users. Wiggins and Bowers (2015) claim that Internet memes should be viewed as media artefacts for three primary reasons. First, memes hold a virtual physicality, which being a self-contradictory term, suggests that memes can exist in digital media as both forms and physical incarnations of ideas. The virtual physicality facilitates production, consumption, and reproduction of Internet memes across participatory digital culture. Second, Internet memes highlight their contributions to new media as social and cultural artefacts. As socio-cultural artefacts in the digital realm, Internet memes provide cultural information about meme producers; as social artefacts, memes narrate the social behaviour of specific individuals or groups of

individuals. Third, seeing memes as artefacts underscores the purposeful production and consumption among various users, like the production and consumption of traditional media artefacts (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015).

According to Coscia (2013), meme producers adopt smart and innovative strategies to make and disseminate memes. For instance, they combine two or more meme templates to create new meme templates, which in turn generates more imitated memes (Coscia, 2014). Another strategy adopted by meme producers is deploying *meme war* online. In meme warfare, users share memes that invalidate, counter, or support other memes in online discussion (Coscia, 2013). For example, the popular *Socially Awkward Penguin* meme template denotes a discomforting circumstance, which is countered, bolstered or invalidated by the *Socially Awesome Penguin*[7], the *Socially Average Penguin*, and dozens of more examples of almost similar user-generated content. Coscia (2013) states: "these dynamics of evolution, competition and collaboration are not much different from the same dynamics observed in the gene pool" (p.102). Similar to human evolution, the memetic success of a given meme is often determined by its cultural footprint in the digital media.

The power of storytelling is yet another important facet of Internet meme culture. According to Boccia (2014), we live in a digital world where stories are not only confined within written formats; instead, they are now integrated into different media

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[7] Socially Awkward Penguin is a meme template from the Advice Animal series that features a penguin lacking both social skills and self-esteem. Socially Awesome Penguin is a counterpart of the meme template that demonstrates a high level of social skills and self-esteem. For more information regarding this meme template, see: https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/socially-awkward-penguin

artefacts such as images, blogs, digital stories, and hashtags. Boccia argues that Internet memes emerge from different cultural phenomena, and they represent different cultural events or concepts. Viewed from multiple vantage points or perspectives, Internet memes tell different stories despite the presence of overlapping similarities. *The Success Kid*, a popular meme template will help explain the storytelling power of memes. This meme template features a little boy clenching his sand-filled fist. The origin of this image was the mother's blog, which later became a viral picture on MySpace in 2008, and gradually materialized as a meme template used to share perceived experiences of success stories (McCoral, 2018). In the picture, the boy positions his fist in a way that signifies celebrating a victory. Users make memes by embedding texts in the image and manifest their life experiences, stories or imaginative creations through the memes (Figure 2). For instance, one of the stories is about unexpectedly finding money: "Put 5 dollars in pocket, pulls out 10." This story can connect with many viewers through the depiction of a relatable experience.

Figure 2: Success Kid Memes in the form of image macros. McCoral (2018).

Retrieved from: https://www.knowyourmeme.com/memes/success-kid-i-hate-sandcastles

4.10 Role of Humour in Internet Memes

Internet memes are fun to browse because humour is one of the constituent parts of Internet meme culture (Blackmore, 2000; Knobel and Lankshear, 2006; Milner, 2012; Shifman, 2012; Shifman, 2014). Blackmore (2000) avers that humour engages users and provides them with easy access to decipher meaning in Internet memes. For a long time, humour has been one of the primary elements for making successful memetic content. For instance, during the First World War, satirical texts, images, and artistic expressions were integrated into memetic media artefacts (Leong, 2015). More recently, Knobel & Lankshear (2006) discovered humour in 17 out of the 19 memes collected from both mainstream and social media (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006). In another study on YouTube

memes, Shifman (2012) found humorous themes in 83.33% of sample memetic videos, which indicates the significance of humour in Internet meme culture.

Mainstream comedy (e.g., parody, satire) is facing fierce competition from Internet meme culture. Due to Internet memes' associations with contemporary humour sensibilities, joke-tellers are now gradually moving towards Internet meme culture to share jokes. According to Penney (2013), the emergence and availability of stock memes (image-based templates) have equipped comedians online with raw materials to make familiar joke-set ups, in what has become a highly effective strategy for engaging audiences. Web-based tools can easily modify stock memes; thus, as soon as jokes are conceptualized, users can transform them into memes. Digital media users—media activists, in particular—are taking advantage of this opportunity. Media activists now produce Internet memes to articulate their political views and fire comedic shots at their political opponents (Penney, 2013). The strategic value of using humorous memes to express opinions in online discourse lies in the Internet meme's potential to reach broader audiences (e.g., young people). However, a major problem tied to using Internet memes to facilitate online discussion is the potential difficulties associated with understanding memes (Putri, 2016). Often, people misunderstand memes due to differences between the meme maker and the viewer's level of social, cultural, or political knowledge. Hence, despite the funniness of a given Internet meme, users may not find it relatable because the meme is beyond their level of understanding (Putri, 2016).

Studying humour under the banner of the Internet meme culture is important, especially in terms of how meme producers apply different kinds of humour to memes. Despite the magnitude of the topic, scholars have yet to construct a universal,

comprehensive typology of humour, and the application of humour in Internet memes is still a budding area of inquiry. For instance, Shifman (2012) found three ways in which humour is applied in the YouTube memes: playfulness, incongruity, and superiority. Playfulness is a type of humour that lets people take part in an open-ended activity that gives people a chance to step out of real life and step into a temporary sphere of action that is a world of its own (Huizinga, 2014). The types of users who browse memes just for fun appreciate playfulness. Incongruous elements in the memes introduce an unexpected cognitive encounter for the viewer (Shifman, 2012). For instance, the depiction of humans juxtaposed with animals, and masculine traits mixed with female traits playfully interrupts the viewer's natural way of experiencing the world, thereby inducing humour. Finally, Shifman (2012) claims that superiority humour in the videos can provide a solid explanation for the rising popularity of memetic videos that are made in response to regular user-generated videos. As Shifman (2012) argues, "some people enjoy not only watching videos of others whom they perceive to be inferior, but also take pleasure in scornfully imitating them, thus publicly demonstrating their superiority" (p.196). This statement signifies that memes with superior humour intend to gain popularity online by offending others. In their study, Knobel and Lankshear (2006) found two more types of humour in Internet memes: situational and social commentary. While memes with situational humour live in specific moments or unplanned situations, social commentary memes feature humour tackling social or political problems (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006). Knobel & Lankshear also found incongruity in their sample memes, which emphasized the dissonance of events from normal situations while making social or political statements at the same time. McGraw and Warren (2010) developed the

benign-violation theory of humour to further explain the role of incongruity in digital content. Their theory not only explains the way memes are constructed but also denotes the factors behind the success of different memes within different online communities. According to McGraw and Warren (2010), three criteria help the audience to perceive a meme content as funny: "a) a salient norm suggests something is wrong, but another salient norm suggests that it is acceptable, b) one is only weakly committed to the violated norm, and c) the violation is psychologically distant" (p.1142).

Knobel and Lankshear (2006) also propose three components that are required for a meme to be reproduced: humour, rich intertextuality, and juxtaposition. Internet memes require humour to gain appreciation from users. Intertextuality refers to incorporating ideas or content from personal experience or media artefacts such as movies, cultural events, music, images, and practices. The final component, unusual juxtaposition means, "maximizing the susceptibility of the idea being passed from mind to mind" (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006, p. 215). Juxtaposition creates the incongruous vibe in Internet memes, which is useful to attract users' attention. Shifman (2012) urges that the clever use of humour in memes can convince the audience to become meme producers and create mutated versions of the memes they view (and enjoy). According to Shifman (2012), meme producers use comic playfulness to lure users because it unleashes "user creativity by 'summoning' viewers to take part in a game" (p.196). Shifman also identifies dissonance between audio and visual elements in the YouTube memes. Dissonance here creates incongruity that has the ability to attract people and ask them to explore the puzzles in the contents to clear the confusions between what they hear and what they see. Solving these puzzles offers users the cognitive pleasure of solving puzzles, which can

tempt users to create similar puzzles through memes (Shifman, 2012). Finally, superiority humour involves people mocking ideas, concepts or individuals, and pushes them to display superiority in different ways in the online realm, leading some to reproduce memetic content.

5.0 Methodology

5.1 Philosophical Worldview

A philosophical worldview in research is a philosophical way of thinking (Kuhn, 1962), which influences the practice of research (Creswell, 2013; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Creswell (2013) identifies research worldviews "as a general orientation about the world and the nature of research that a researcher holds" (p.6). A research worldview is an essential element in any study and choosing the right worldview is an arduous task for any researcher (Shah & Al-Bargi, 2013). A philosophical worldview informs the contours of a research study, helps a researcher to form appropriate research methodology, methods, and data gathering techniques for analysis and interpretation (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2007; Creswell, 2013).

This study examines the use of humour in Bangladeshi Internet memes, which is a significant issue in the area of social and cultural study. My research endeavour is to understand assorted perspectives of humour that are expressed through the creation and dissemination of Internet memes. I also strive to make intelligible marginalized perspectives of Bangladeshi meme culture. Therefore, my study has been influenced by two research worldviews: transformative & constructivism (Creswell, 2013).

Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) contend that a "transformative worldview is suited to studies about social justice and giving voice to the voiceless or those less powerful" (p.35), and it considers that research purposes should be interwoven with politics and a political agenda (Mertens, 2010). Therefore, any study that focuses on any specific agenda that aims for change in political, social or cultural realms should adopt a

transformative worldview (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998). Creswell (2013) also denotes that studies using this worldview discuss social issues that focus on empowerment, inequality, oppression, domination, suppression, and alienation. A transformative worldview also works as the voice of participants and empowers them with the ability to establish an agenda for any reformation. Another feature of the transformative worldview is to create a political discourse so people can engage and bring about change (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998). On the other hand, social constructivism has been associated with the post-modern era in qualitative research (Crotty, 1998; Andrews, 2012; Creswell 2013) that is considered as an interpretive framework. In the constructive worldview, the generated insights from data are neither fixed nor inherent within individual artefacts; instead, they are formed by interacting with others (Creswell, 2013). Social constructivists have been claiming that knowledge and perceptions are created through communication among society and its people (Andrews, 2012). Individuals develop general, varied and multiple meanings of their experiences that point at certain objects or things, leading researchers to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing it down (Andrews, 2012; Creswell 2013). Creswell (2013) also contends that the primary intention of researchers is to interpret the meanings others have about any particular event.

Although multiple worldviews can influence researchers to shape their research paths, there is always one dominant worldview. In my scenarios, constructivism worldview dominates the transformative worldview. Fortunately, both of my worldviews support my research approach. Therefore, I can adopt both quantitative and qualitative research methods for my study (Creswell, 2013). For instance, according to Shah and Al-

Bargi (2013), transformative or critical researchers may adopt qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods to design their research studies so they can judge the realities from a cultural, historical, and political viewpoint. On the other hand, constructivism influences researchers to apply qualitative, not quantitative, research methods to explore an issue or event. According to Guba and Lincoln (2004), through the proponents of constructivism, the researchers and participants are both involved in exploring any event and creating observations; that is, the observations and findings emerge from the two-way interactions between researcher and participants.

5.2 Research Approach

As discussed in the previous section, I have adopted a mixed methods research approach due to the nature of my study. The term "mixed methods" refers to "an emergent methodology of research that advances the systematic integration, or "mixing," of quantitative and qualitative data within a single investigation or sustained program of inquiry" (Wisdom & Creswell, 2013, p.1). According to Creswell (2013), a mixed methods research approach involves qualitative (open-ended) and quantitative (closed-ended) data to explore research questions or test hypotheses, including the analysis of both types of data. In mixed methods research, the procedures for both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis are done rigorously. These data are integrated into the research design through merging, connecting, or embedding the data, and these procedures are incorporated into a distinct mixed methods design. Mixed methods studies can be influenced by a philosophical worldview or a theory (Creswell, 2013), which, in my case, is influenced by a transformative and constructivist worldview. There are

multiple advantages to adopting a mixed method research approach, such as the opportunity to compare quantitative and qualitative data, to have methodological flexibility and to collect rich, comprehensive data (Wisdom & Creswell, 2013).

Quantitative research methods work with numbers or parameters that are measurable in a systematic way to examine a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). This process begins with data collection, based on a hypothesis or theory, followed by statistical analysis (Kothari, 2004). Furthermore, qualitative methods are used to understand people's beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behaviours, and interactions through non-numerical data (Pathak, Jena & Kalra, 2013) such as text and image (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative studies deploy unprecedented steps in data analysis and draw on diverse designs. Crotty (1998) claims that we all live in a world of meaning that is conferred through culture. Therefore, qualitative researchers look to establish the study context or setting of the participants through experiencing the research context and gather information personally to ensure the cultural consistency. Next, the interpretation takes place that is shaped by the researcher's own experiences and background (Crotty, 1998).

In this study, I have integrated quantitative and qualitative methods (Creswell, 2013) and the data collection process has involved "collecting data in an iterative process whereby the data collected in one phase contribute to the data collected in the next" (Driscoll et al., 2007, p.21). Through this approach, both quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed separately and then, qualitative follow up was conducted based on the quantitative findings (Creswell, 2013). Two critical areas of explanatory mixed methods research are particularly helpful for my study. First, quantitative findings in a mixed method approach have the abilities to inform the sampling procedure and second,

quantitative findings can direct the qualitative phase of a mixed method study (Creswell, 2013). In this research, the quantitative analysis of Internet memes has influenced the sampling procedure for the qualitative phase; therefore, an explanatory mixed method approach was best suited for this study.

I have emphasized more on the qualitative phase than the quantitative phase, which means the qualitative analysis in the later phase was more rigorous than the initial quantitative phase. I have focused more on the qualitative phase because of a few distinct characteristics of qualitative research that are appropriate for my study. According to Creswell (2013), Hatch (2002), and Marshall and Rossman (2011), qualitative research approaches focus on multiple aspects such as conducting research in a natural setting, allowing researchers to play the role of analytical instruments. Qualitative research methods also rely on multiple sources of data, give the researchers more freedom to do both inductive and deductive analysis and allows them to be flexible regarding design reconstruction and being data interpretation (Hatch 2002, Marshal & Rosmann, 2011; Creswell, 2013). Another reason for emphasizing on the qualitative phase is the opportunity to consider multiple contexts for understanding a phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

5.3 Research Methods

Following a particular method to analyze memes is difficult because Internet memes are constantly evolving media artefacts (Scott & Bill, 2017). Different scholars have adopted different methods to analyze Internet memes. Based on my study goal, I have adopted mixed methods that consist of deductive content analysis and thematic

analysis. I have used deductive content analysis method to answer the RQ 1 that focused on exploring the frequency of different types of humour in Bangladeshi Internet memes. In the second phase, I have derived a corpus of successful and unsuccessful Internet memes from the initial sample. Finally, two separate thematic analyses have been conducted on both the successful and unsuccessful memes to explore the RQ 2 & RQ 3 that focus on exploring the application of humour in the successful and unsuccessful Bangladeshi memes.

5.3.1 Deductive Content Analysis

Communication researchers have been using content analysis methods to examine media artefacts for almost 50 years (Neuendorf, 2016). Content analysis is a widely used research method to examine qualitative media artefacts such as speeches, letters or articles, text-based images, videos, films, and turn the manifest and latent contents into a measurable and verifiable form of information (Ross, 2014). This method can be used both in quantitative and qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Lock & Seele, 2015). Deductive content analysis is one of the prominent methods that is adopted by media researchers to utilize a pre-set framework such as research views, previous research findings, theories, or conceptual frameworks to examine media content (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2014). For the purposes of this study, deductive content analysis begins with establishing a coding scheme and detecting information according to predetermined coding schemes. However, when a portion of the text does not fit within the coding scheme, new codes can be inductively created (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

In this study, I have followed the deductive content analysis method adopted by Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015) in their study on exploring the impact of styles and types of humour on meme virality. The authors customized their method according to the direct content analysis method by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) and deductive content analysis method by Elo and Kyngäs (2008). In their study, Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015) analyzed Internet memes according to a pre-set coding scheme consisting of different types of humour, which were derived from previous literature on the typologies of humour. Similarly, in my study, I have used different types of humour as a pre-set coding scheme. By devising a coding scheme, I have examined the collected Internet memes to explore the frequency of different humour types in Bangladeshi Internet memes.

5.3.2 Thematic Analysis

As one of the prominent qualitative research methods, thematic analysis is defined as "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, p.79). Thematic analysis is the most appropriate method for researchers who aim to discover themes by interpreting a large set of qualitative data (Boyatzis, 1998; Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013; Nowell et al., 2017) and foregrounding the detected themes (Boyatzis, 1998). Similar to the deductive content analysis method, thematic analysis also enables researchers to examine both manifest and latent content in the media artefacts (Boyatzis, 1998). Boyatzis (1998) asserts that thematic analysis offers researchers room to observe seemingly mutually exclusive individuals, interactions,

groups, situations, organizations or cultures within a framework, and provides multiple ways to transform the qualitative data into qualitative information.

Thematic analysis has been a useful method to examine digital media artefacts such as Internet memes. For instance, Shifman (2012) analyzed a corpus of audio-visual memes to find common denominators among both the manifest and latent content. She discovered diverse yet strongly interconnected features in most of the sample YouTube memes. Similarly, Bellar et al. (2013) identified different themes within different sets of memes such as framing Christianity in a pool of religious memes. In another study, Yoon (2016) analyzed both the form and content of racist Internet memes to make thematic groups of manifest and latent content. Yoon observed patterns of racism such as cultural stereotypes, embodied racism, denial of racism, racist media/commercial images, crimes committed by people of colour, immigrants, police brutality, criminal justice, and Black/White binary in the memes.

Another useful attribute of thematic analysis is the opportunity to utilize the findings for future studies. Shifman (2012), Bellar et al. (2013), and Yoon (2016) identified themes among Internet memes that have laid the foundation for future studies. For instance, Bellar et al. (2013) and Yoon (2016) constructed case studies based on the identified themes among Internet memes. Moreover, their deployment of thematic analysis does not require detailed theoretical and technological knowledge of other qualitative approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore, as a novice media researcher, using thematic analysis gives additional flexibility for my study.

The thematic analysis method I have used is constructed on the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Their thematic analysis process consists of six

stages: familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. In this process, despite the sequential mapping of the stages, it is possible to move back and forth between different phases (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore, the borderline between two phases in the process is at times blurred, which was particularly suitable for me in that it allowed me to revisit and redefine themes during the data analysis.

5.4 Data Collection

The research data in this thesis, comprised of a collection of Internet memes, were drawn from a Facebook community of Bangladeshi meme makers named Rantages Goatposting. Rantages Goatposting is dedicated exclusively to creating, sharing, and browsing Internet memes that are generated by more than 23,000 Bangladeshi users in the group. Both Bangladeshi meme producers and meme viewers consider this group as a highly regarded online meme community because of their strict monitoring system to encourage genuine meme makers. Users submit their memes in the group, and after rigorous verification procedures, only high-quality memes are approved for public viewing. For example, admins of Rantages Goatposting do not approve memes that are posted previously, which nullifies the risk of data duplication.

5.4.1 Collection of Internet Memes

According to Creswell (2013), in a sequential explanatory mixed methods approach, the data collection process requires rigorous quantitative sampling during the

first phase (quantitative content analysis) and a purposeful sampling during the second phase (thematic analysis). In this study, a particular challenge was ensuring the use of quantitative findings in the qualitative phase of analysis because the fundamental idea behind sequential explanatory mixed method research is to establish a connection between quantitative and qualitative phases of the study (Creswell, 2013). These quantitative findings can be signifiers of extreme cases, significant predictors, variables, insignificant results, or even demographics; therefore, it is essential for researchers to identify the appropriate findings that can be used in the qualitative phase (Creswell, 2013). Because of these reasons, I have collected not only the Internet memes (primary data) but also the metadata related to the primary data such as numbers of reactions and notable comments in each collected meme.

Establishing a valid meme collection process is difficult because the sampling of digital content is a problematic process due to the chaotic design and complex analytical process related to the content (Wang, 2000). Therefore, narrowing the area of data collection and defining the steps of the data collection process are essential steps in this kind of study. For instance, before collecting Internet memes, Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015) identified popular Facebook pages that are known for disseminating humorous memes. The authors only selected three pages (Memes, 9GAG, and See More) based on the numbers of followers, so the findings are statistically validated. They collected 1,000 image-based memes from the Facebook pages, which is large enough to conduct a statistical analysis (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015). A buffer time of one month before the data collection was given to ensure the consistency of likes and shares in the collected memes (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015).
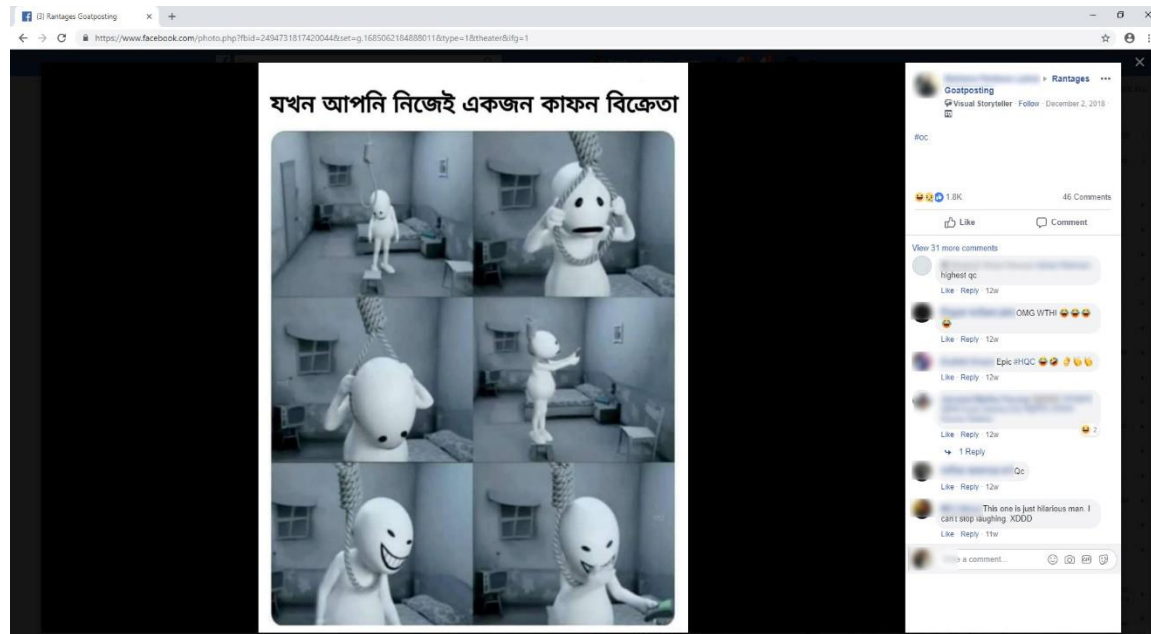
Figure 3: An example of collected Internet memes from Rantages Goatposting.

Following the data collection process by Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong

(2015), I have collected imaged-based Internet memes such as *image macros*[8], *reaction*

Photoshops[9], and *culture jammings*[10] that were published in the Rantages Goatposting

from November 30, 2018 to December 10, 2018. Primarily, I collected all the memes

published within this time, along with the metadata. To refine the collected data, I

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[8] Image macros are memes that have textual elements integrated in a stock photo. This category of memes typically describe captioned images that typically consist of a picture and a witty message or a catchphrase. More information regarding image macros can be found here: https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/image-macros

[9] Reaction Photoshop memes are images that have been modified by using image editing tools such as Adobe Photoshop or Adobe Illustrator. These memes typically manipulate images to give them a funny look, replaces part of image with other image based content or replaces the context/background of an image. Some examples of reaction Photoshop memes can be found here: https://www.memecenter.com/search/photoshop

[10] Culture jamming refers to a special kind of memes that deal with anti-consumerist social movements seeking to disrupt or subvert corporations and institutions. These memes entail transforming/manipulating mass media and advertising to produce ironic or satirical commentary. More information on culture jamming memes can be found here: https://www.mediavillage.com/article/culture-jamming-millennials-and-internet-memes/

eliminated posts such as troll images, verbal jokes or funny images from the data because these are not identified as memes. As per Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015), I also ensured that the number of collected memes is sufficient enough to allow a valid statistical analysis. According to Zamboni (2019), the possibility of outliers is part of what makes large sample sizes important because outliers skew the data in a smaller sample size that can generate invalid statistical reports. For instance, in a survey on political affiliation, one in five individuals will attest to not being interested in politics. According to this logic, findings would suggest that 20% of the population are not interested in politics, which is likely an inaccurate extrapolation. Hence, drawing from a large sample size arguably produces more grounded and reliable insights. A larger sample size is also likely to bring more accurate mean values and reduce the margin of error.

5.4.2 Selection Process of Successful and Unsuccessful Internet Memes

As previously discussed, a universal framework to measure the success of Internet memes has yet to be formulated. I thus created a customized framework flexible enough to detect and distinguish between successful and unsuccessful memes pulled from the samples. To date, the most popular concept attached to measuring meme success is virality (Heylighen, 1995; Shifman, 2014). Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015) liken virality as a measure to identify successful memes based on the number of likes and shares.

Virality is defined as the rate of dissemination of a meme. However, the lack of quantitative studies of memes limits one's understanding of the virality of different types

of memes (Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong, 2015); thus, in this study, I have replaced *virality* with the term *influence* to measure meme success. Although the terms do retain some similarities, influence is more useful in measuring the effectiveness of meme content in a closed environment. Here, the term 'influence' refers to the level of a content's impact. If the content is seen to be influential, the user is likely to engage with that content, resulting in the creation of reactions or comments to that particular content. Open social media spaces such as publicly accessible profiles or pages allow users to share or react to uploaded content. Closed spaces like Facebook groups do not readily enable users to share the posted contents, thereby limiting the means through which to measure impact or influence. Hence, the most credible way to measure influence is, less convincingly, to estimate the number of people impacted by the content (Coscia, 2013; Brody, 2012) or, more convincingly, by the number of reactions a meme produces (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015). According to Shifman (2014), virality and memetic replications are indicators of meme success, meaning that a successful meme is admired by both makers and viewers alike. A successful meme will influence people and generate reactions; therefore, the number of responses to successful memes will be higher. If users are influenced by content within closed spaces, different measures are needed to interpret what constitutes successful and unsuccessful memes.

In a closed meme group, we can measure impact via the number of engagements produced by a given meme. I have omitted the number of shares from my analysis because, in a closed group system, it is difficult to identify the number of shares—even if the meme producer embeds the link to the original post. Therefore, I have measured the level of influence based on the number of reactions to shared memes. The available

reactions on a given Facebook post are, for example, *like, haha, love, wow, cry,* and *angry* reactions. Viewers usually select reactions based on how the content influenced them. If they find it funny, they are likely to react with a *haha* to the content, and if they find it sad, they will include a *sad* reaction. Users are limited to only one reaction per meme, which means that the number of reactions is akin to the degree of influence a meme produces. A higher number of reactions to a meme indicates a higher level of meme influence. Because the data collection process produced one month of buffer time, the question of influence (number of reactions) in terms of time is negligible. In summary, the selection process of successful and unsuccessful memes is best described in three steps:

Step 1: Calculate the number of reactions to each meme.

Step 2: Categorize the successful memes that fall in the 95th percentile based on the number of reactions.

Step 3: Categorize the unsuccessful/failed memes that fall in the 5th percentile based on the number of reactions.

This three-step selection process ensures that the final two sample groups of Internet memes derived from the initially collected memes have sufficiently prepared the way for the qualitative phase of the study.

5.5 Coding Process

Both the quantitative and qualitative phases of this study required coding. I have followed two coding categories: emergent coding and priori coding (Stemler, 2001;

Stuckey, 2015). In the case of emergent coding, code categories are generated through a brief assessment of data, while priori coding emphasizes the creation of a pre-set coding scheme to analyze the data (Stemler, 2001; Stuckey, 2015).

Priori coding was adopted to conduct the deductive content analysis. According to Stuckey (2015), "predetermined coding may be based on a previous coding dictionary from another researcher or key concepts in a theoretical construct" (p.8). My coding procedure is inspired by a method Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015) adopted to identify the frequency of humour categories in Internet memes. I have thus followed the coding scheme formulated by Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015), a model they derived from a typology of humour proposed by Catanescu and Tom (2001). In adapting these models, I have customized the coding scheme to include more representative types of humour (derived from previous studies on the typologies of humour in Table 1). I have applied the customized typology as codes to explore the types and frequency of different types of humour in the corpus of Bangladeshi Internet memes. The coding scheme and guidelines were then modified according to my collected data. The final coding scheme is described in table 2.

Humour Type (Code)	Code Description	Guidelines
Comparison	Putting two or more elements together to produce a humorous situation.	The meme compares two or more objects and the meme is humorous because of the comparison.

Personification	Attributes human characteristics to animals, plants and objects.	The meme has personified animals, plants or objects and personification is a source of humour in the meme.
Exaggeration	Overstating and magnifying something out of proportion.	The meme makes uses of overstatement and the meme is humorous because of the exaggeration of some elements.
Pun	Exploiting different possible meanings of a word or using a different word with similar pronunciation to the intended word.	Linguistic features are important elements in the meme and the use of similar words with different meanings makes it funny.
Sarcasm	Use of remarks that infer the opposite of what is stated, made in order to hurt someone's feelings or to criticize something in a humorous way.	The meme states or exhibits a sarcastic remark and the meme expresses an element that is not the real intention of the sender.
Silliness	Making funny faces or depicting ludicrous instances with a lack of good sense or judgment of the situation.	The meme is humorous because of the silliness of the elements depicted (e.g., a character, person, or situation).

Surprise	Humour arises from unexpected situations or incongruity.	This meme is humorous due to unexpected elements, surprise endings or resolutions.
Dark Humour	A form of humour involving a twist or joke that renders the meme offensive, harsh, or horrid.	The meme contains offensive elements and humour is derived from the offensiveness of the content.
Sexual Humour	The joke contains an explicit or implicit reference to sexual intercourse or objectification of male/female body parts.	The meme contains overt or covert sexual elements/characteristics and the latter contribute to the meme's humour.
Irony	The meme contains strange or funny depictions that hinge on events producing unexpected and surprising situations.	The meme is funny because the situations depicted run counter to expected conventions. The meme does not seek to hurt anyone's feelings, which makes it different from sarcasm.
Sentimental Wit	The joke contains sentimental elements that induce human emotions.	The meme contains emotion-provoking elements. The meme is funny because of the way the sentimental emotion is expressed.
Comic satire	This humour exposes and criticizes people's stupidity or	The meme contains satirical elements, mimics an individual or

	vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues.	group's actions regarding social, political or cultural issues. Such criticism contributes to the meme's humour.
Understatement	Humour that presents someone or something as smaller, worse, or less important than it is.	The meme contains intentionally understated elements. The understatement renders the meme funny.

Table 2: Coding scheme for the deductive content analysis

An emergent coding approach was adopted to conduct the thematic analysis in the qualitative phase, which means this phase did not require a pre-set coding scheme. Stuckey (2015) argues that emergent codes are likely to be concepts, actions, or meanings that evolve from the data. Therefore, in the qualitative phase, successful memes were identified and analyzed, and emerging themes were recorded in memos for further explanation.

Technological development and the digitization of media content have profoundly influenced the coding process; hence, the use of software has gained in popularity (Lock & Seele, 2015). Despite the popularity and sophistication of modern software, I have foregone the use of software suites such as MAXQDA or nVivo and have coded the data manually for this study. Computers and software are limited in detecting the complex linguistic and emotional aspects of data. Observing human emotions in the sample

memes is essential to detecting complex humour; therefore, manual coding was best suited for this study.

I also conducted a pilot study to apply the coding scheme for deductive content analysis. Two coders (including myself) analyzed 50 randomly selected Internet memes based on the coding scheme in Table 2. I performed an inter-coder reliability analysis by using the Kappa statistic to determine the level of agreement between two coders. The result shows that 28 variables demonstrated almost perfect agreement between two raters (Kappa = 1), 16 variables demonstrated near-perfect agreement (Kappa = 0.61 ~ 0.80), one variable demonstrated a moderate agreement (Kappa = 0.41 ~ 0.60), and 4 variables demonstrated substantive disagreements between two coders (Landis & Koch, 1977). Additionally, an overall agreement between two coders was calculated to 0.9165, which denotes a substantial agreement between two coders for the pilot project (Landis & Koch, 1977).

6.0 Findings and Analysis

6.1 Dominant Categories of Humour in Bangladeshi Internet Memes

Based on the deductive content analysis on 1,008 sample memes, I have identified the presence of at least one category of humour in over 99% of the selected memes that indicate a strong connection between humour and Bangladeshi Internet meme culture. To identify the dominant categories of humour, I calculated the total number of times each of the thirteen categories appear in the sample memes and visualized the rank-order of the humour according to their frequencies of appearance.

Figure 4: Rank-order of humour categories in the collected Internet memes
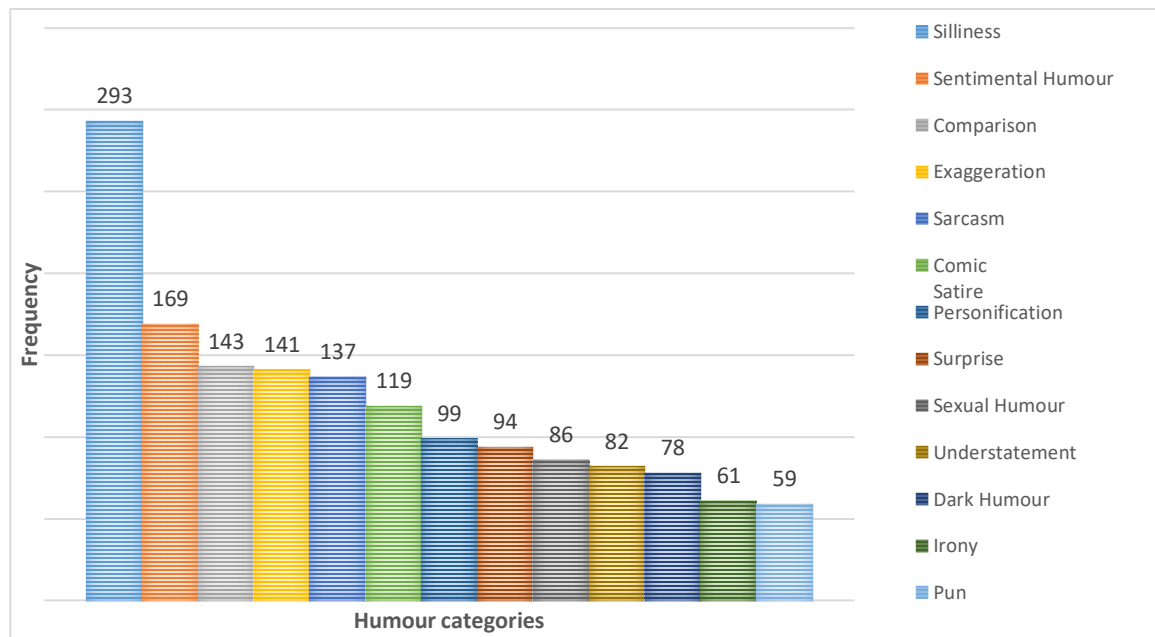
Based on Figure 4, *silliness* tops the list with 293 total appearances, followed by *sentimental* with 169 appearances, and *comparison* with 143 appearances. *Pun* appears in the bottom of the rank-order with 59 appearances, with *irony* featured in 61 instances and *dark humour* in 78 (11th and 12th positions respectively). The pie chart in Figure 4 clearly

conveys that apart from *silliness*, none of the rest of the humour categories has absolute dominance.
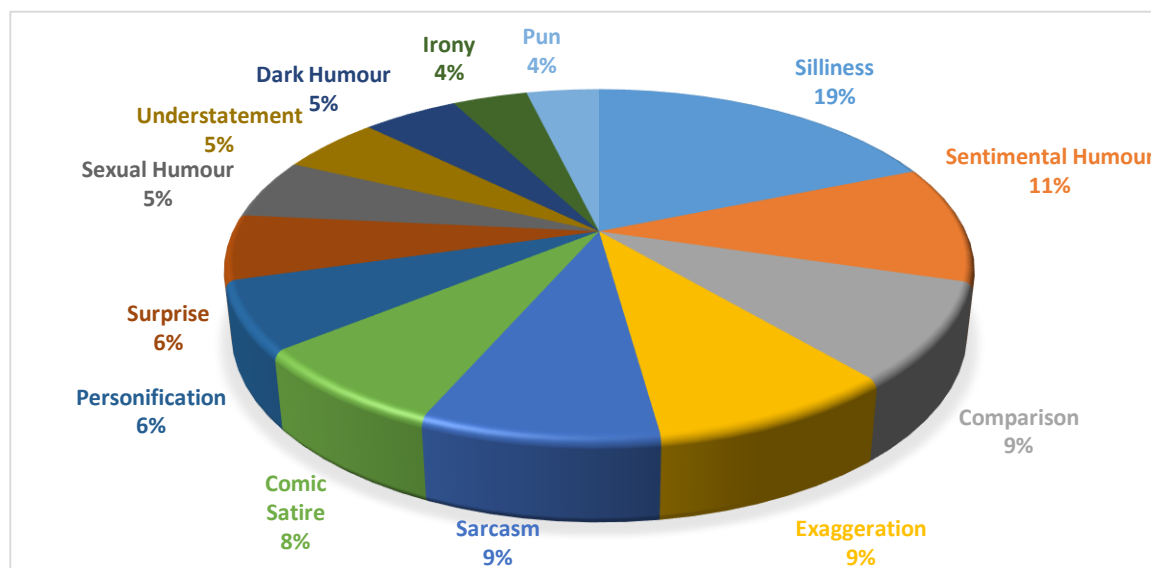
Figure 5: Percentages of humour categories in the collected Internet memes

As per Figure 5, *silliness* appears with considerable frequency with 19% of the total 1,521 instances of humour depicted, followed by *sentimental humour* with 11% and *comparison* with 9%. In terms of frequency of visibility, *sentimental humour* has close competitors: *comparison, exaggeration*, and sarcasm. Despite the slight differences in their total frequencies, *exaggeration* and *sarcasm* are equally present categories of humour (9% respectively). *Irony* and *pun* are the least prevalent categories, each occupying a mere 4% of the pie. Finally, *comic satire, personification, surprise, sexual humour, understatement, dark humour, irony,* and *pun* all occupy similar shares (4%-6% of the total humour).

I have also categorized the memes based on the number of instances of humour used in each of the memes; as Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015) have shown, memes can contain more than one type of humour. The results show that

- a significantly small number of memes feature no humour (10 times);

- among the 1,008 memes, 496 memes featured only one type of humour (49.20%);

- 441 memes featured a combination of two humour types (43.75%);

- only 41 memes featured combinations of three types of humour (4.06%), a

  relatively low number.

In what follows, memes are categorized based on the number of frequencies or instances of humour depicted: single humour memes (containing only one type of humour), double humour memes (containing two types of humour), and triple humour memes (containing three types of humour).
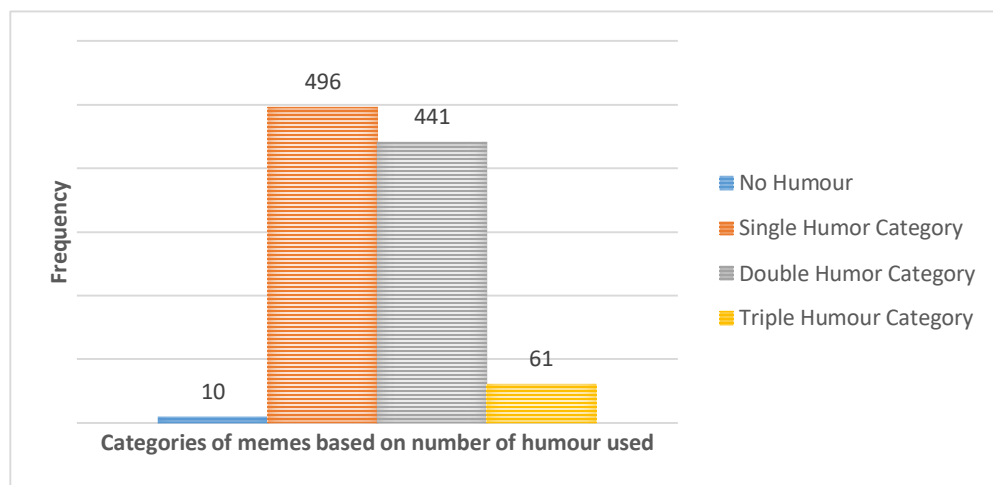
Figure 6: Distribution of humour combinations in the collected Internet memes

The existence of these variations of humour enabled me to explore the dominant categories of humour in relation to their frequency/visibility across the selected memes. The findings are visualized in Figures 7, 8, and 9:
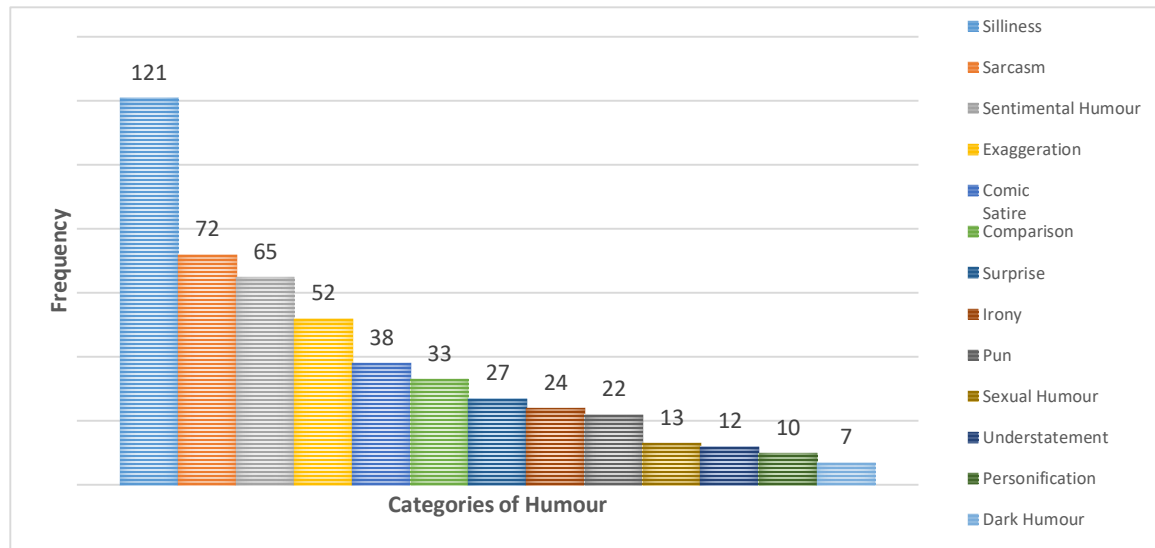
Figure 7: Distribution of Humour categories in the collected Internet memes with single humour type

According to Figure 7, silliness is the dominant category of humour among the single humour memes, followed by sarcasm and sentimental humour. Understatement, personification, and dark humour occupy the bottom end of this rank-order.

Figure 8 visualizes the rank-order of humour types featured in double humour memes, with silliness at the top of the rank-order. However, this time comparison and sentimental humour occupy the 2nd and 3rd positions. Sarcasm, irony, and pun are featured in the bottom of the rank-order (11th, 12th, and 13th positions, respectively).
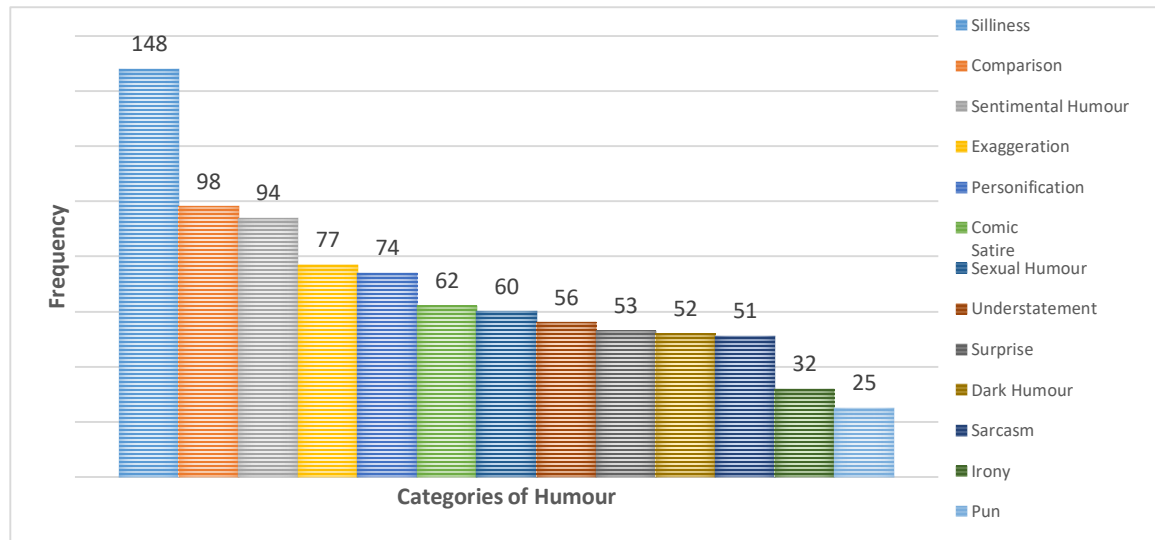
Figure 8: Distribution of Humour categories in the collected Internet memes with double humour type

Silliness is atop the ranking in the triple humour memes (visualized in Figure 9), but it does not hold absolute dominance in the rank-order. Dark humour and comic satire share the 2nd position in the rank-order. Conversely, irony occupies the bottom in triple humour memes.
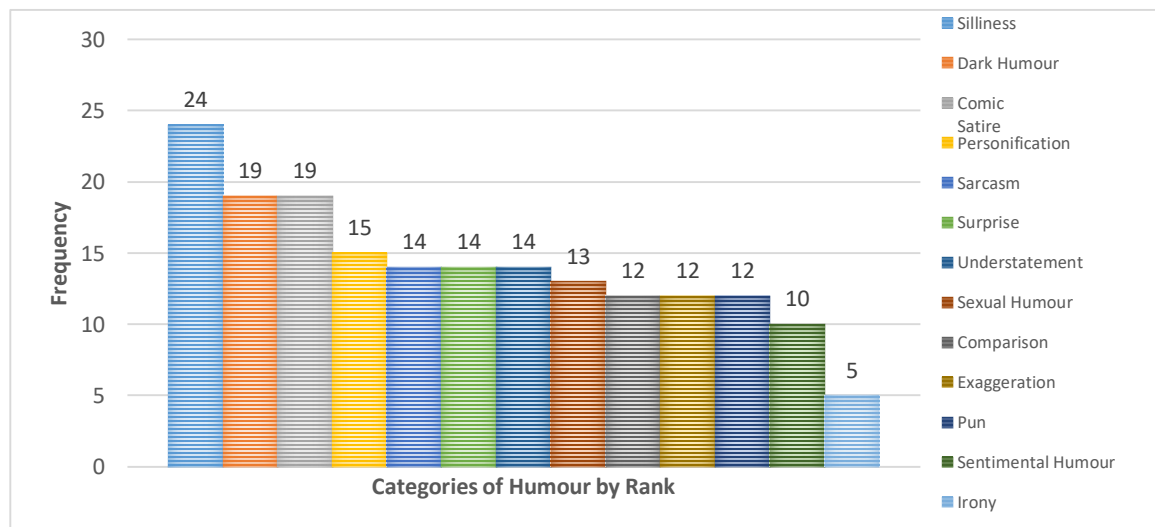
Figure 9: Distribution of Humour categories in the collected Internet memes with triple humour type

Another way of examining the dominance of different humour types in Bangladeshi memes is to explore their influence through an overview of successful and unsuccessful memes. In this study, the number of user reactions determined the success and failure of the collected Internet memes; more specifically, the memes that produced 1,032 reactions or more (95th percentile) are considered to be successful because they were able to inspire the highest number of responses. Similarly, the memes that produced 21 reactions or less (5th percentile) are considered to be unsuccessful memes.

Figures 10 & 11 visualizes the frequency of humour categories appearing in both of the successful and unsuccessful meme groups.
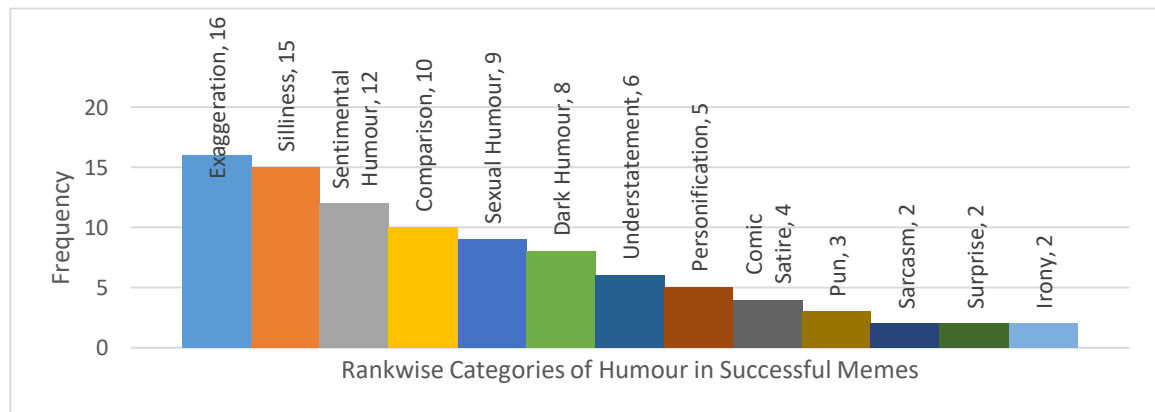
Figure 10: Rank order of humour types in successful memes based on frequencies

Based on Figure 10, the rank-ordering of different types of humour in successful memes deviates to some extent from the previous rank-orders. For instance, exaggeration replaces silliness as the dominant category of humour in successful memes while sentimental humour is positioned 3rd in the rank-order. Sarcasm, surprise, and irony concurrently occupy the bottom layer.
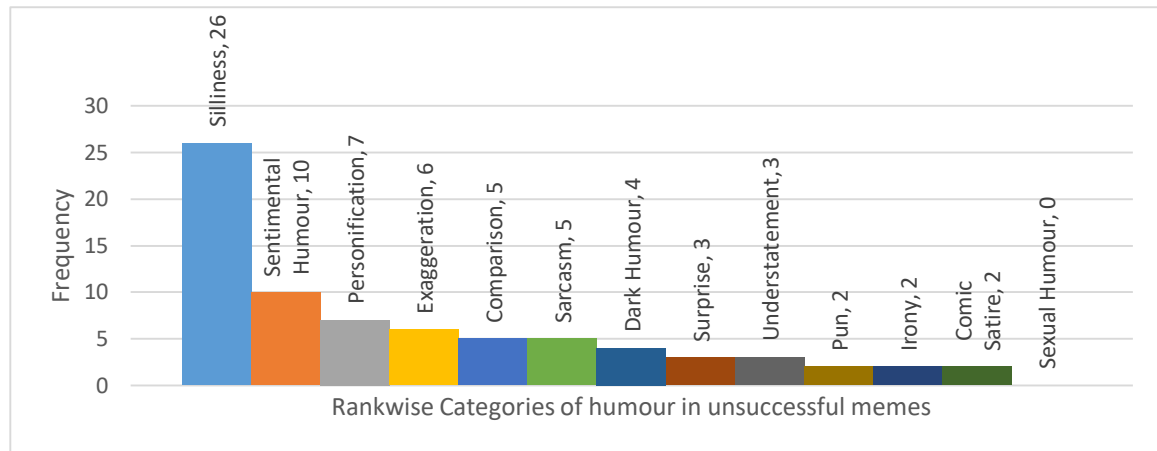
Figure 11: Rank order of humour types in unsuccessful memes based on frequencies

On the other hand, as per Figure 11, silliness appears 26 times, lending the latter the greatest visibility in unsuccessful memes, while sentimental humour and personification occupy 2nd and 3rd positions, respectively. Silliness has absolute dominance in this rank-order; however, the remaining humour categories retain similar percentages in terms of appearances.

The findings in the quantitative phase provide an overview of the dominant categories of humour in the Bangladeshi meme culture and offer some insight into the prevailing types of humour featured in successful and unsuccessful memes. The presence of humour in over 99% of the memes demonstrates the influence of humour in contemporary Bangladeshi meme culture. These findings do not entirely explain the application of humour in successful and unsuccessful memes. Understanding the role of humour in the successful and unsuccessful memes require further examination; hence, a thematic analysis of successful and unsuccessful memes has been conducted. In the following section, I analyze the application of humour in successful and unsuccessful memes through a thematic analysis.

6.2 Application of Humour in Successful and Failed Memes

I conducted two thematic analyses to identify themes expressed through the application of humour in both successful and unsuccessful memes. One of the primary challenges in the initial stage of the analysis was to identify a common application of humour in the memes, as each meme tended to produce a dazzling array of features that makes it problematic to find obvious connections (Shifman, 2011). Through rigorous trial and error and a process of elimination, I have identified four themes in the successful meme group, and three themes in the unsuccessful meme groups that add insight to the ways humour is applied in the memes. In the following sections, I discuss the application of humour in the successful and unsuccessful memes by analyzing the themes and by situating how the themes are relevant to the memes.

6.2.1 Anatomy of Humour in the Successful Bangladeshi Memes

50 successful memes were categorized under the following themes: contextual humour with relatable reference, incongruity, superiority, and arousing sentiments. In many instances a meme fell under more than one theme; however, the primary application of humour was given priority with the memes being characterized according to emerging themes.

6.2.1.1 Contextual Humour with Relatable Reference

Context and reference are two widely used terms across meme culture but they are not universal. Meme-makers commonly use an image as a background template to establish context and to transmit their messages via accompanying texts. In certain cases,

the inverse is also applicable: textual elements establish the context while the images are used as stock references.

Memes that integrate contextual humour do so through relatable references that often mention particular situations used to inspire laughter. According to Zu (2014), contextual or situational comedies are intentionally created to arouse laughter among the audience. This particular application of humour is strongly associated with the context of the humour in which the intended messages are exchanged and understood. Familiarity with the context leads to the increased "funniness" of a meme that, in return produces more engagement. As Marszalek (2012) notes, "certain narrative worlds are constructed in a way that elicits a general impression of humour and thus enhances the humorous effect of certain elements which appear in them" (p.7). As a complex, multi-layered, and intertextual combination of images and texts, a meme can carry multiple narratives. The intended message can be recovered only through a solid comprehension of both the original points of reference and the adaptation of the images or texts (Lin et al. 2014).

Bangladeshi memes that apply situational or context-based humour are mostly based on trending topics highlighted on social media platforms. One such example is the "let me eat it; I am hungry" meme featuring Mehedi Hasan Meraj, a famous young cricket player in Bangladesh. During a press conference in 2018, the player picked a bottle of water from the table, stating "let me eat it, I am hungry." Meraj speaking to himself in public captured a moment of innocently funny behaviour that became the talk of the country as many social media users started uploading the clip to their social media profiles. As a result, meme producers started using this particular scenario to create memes by using contextual humour. For example, one meme producer chose to personify

the template; in this meme (Figure 11), Meraj's face is replaced with a Google Chrome icon and the water bottle is swapped with a computer RAM card. The Google Chrome browser occupies a significant amount of RAM, a phenomenon popularly described as "eating the RAM." Meraj drinking water is here akin to "eating the RAM," which works as a clear reference to a notable and familiar context.

Figure 12: An example of contextual humour with relatable reference in a successful meme. Dec 2, 2018. Retrieved from www.facebook.com/groups/1685062184888011/

Alongside local templates, global contexts are also used to create contextual humour in Bangladeshi memes. These global templates often merge with local references to craft jokes. For example, one successful meme (Figure 12) uses the trailer of a then-trending *Avengers: Endgame* movie trailer that integrated a local reference to create humour. The meme narrates a particular scene in the trailer where Tony Stark (the Ironman) hopelessly awaits death in a lost spaceship. The meme caption "when you know that if you die in space, nobody will put a smile on a shroud seller" is added to great effect. Here, "putting a smile on a shroud seller" is a funny pop-culture reference in Bangladesh. This saying is derived from a viral Facebook post in which the author claims that his death could make

a shroud seller smile. In this meme, Tony Stark is depicted as a sad human being because if he dies in space, nobody will be able to sell a shroud and thus nobody will smile.

Figure 13: Successful memes using a global context with a localized reference. Dec 8, 2018. Retrieved from www.facebook.com/groups/1685062184888011/

These two examples represent the importance of contextual knowledge in comprehending humour that often requires a pivot point in the process of comprehension. Estrella (2016) argues that audiences engage with humour when the content makes them compassionate towards the situation and allows them to imagine themselves in the context described. Personal experience is yet another foundational part of such humour as people can easily relate to the experience. In the above memes, familiar contexts along with popular references create relatable narratives to which everyday personal experiences are associated. As a result, meme viewers are more likely able to connect with the memes, creating the conditions for humour and/or laughter.

6.2.1.2 Balanced Incongruity

Kulka (2007) asserts that solving incongruities builds the foundation of aesthetic enjoyment. Some jokes always keep elements for the viewers to think critically to comprehend the humour and gain cognitive pleasure in the process. Similarly, meme producers often create humour that requires intellectual effort to comprehend. For instance, a famous tagline in Internet meme culture is often used as the caption that provides a hint of the puzzle: "you will need a higher knowledge of memes to understand them." The act of solving the puzzle involves amusing realizations and the generation of humour and/or laughter. A significant number of successful memes feature incongruity to produce humour. Striking a fine balance means the humour is neither too complex to understand nor too easy to solve.

The meme in Figure 13 is an example that draws on incongruity in a balanced way that offers viewers the opportunity to exercise their interpretive abilities. This meme consists of four blocks of images, and each image is associated with four lines of a popular song lyric: "let us hang out," "in an unknown place," "where the river," and "stopped flowing." Three of the four image blocks are globally recognized meme templates, with the fourth block being an icon of the Internet Explorer browser. The top left image is associated with the lyric "let us hangout"; the top right image connects with "in an unknown place"; the bottom left image is tied to the line "where the river"; and the bottom right image is associated with the line "stopped flowing." The top left, top right, and bottom left images are synchronized and connected in a logical sequence. However, the relationship between the bottom right image (Internet Explorer icon) and the associated lyric "stopped flowing" is confusing because the relationship between image

and text is ambiguous, and it can only be resolved if essential information is available to the user. Here, the key to solving the puzzle lies in Internet Explorer's reputation for being sluggish (i.e., it stops working after partially loading a webpage). Here, the viewer is meant to connect the lyric "stopped flowing" with the lack of performance on the part of the Internet Explorer browser. This is where the humour lies.

Figure 14: Example of the application of incongruity humour in successful Internet memes. Dec 2, 2018. Retrieved from www.facebook.com/groups/1685062184888011/

Incongruity humour is also used to discuss taboo topics such as sex in a cryptic manner. In Bangladesh, people often use incongruity such as metaphor or simile to discuss issues related to sex. Therefore, the use of incongruity has always been a significant aspect of sexual jokes in Bangladesh. The notion of using incongruity to produce sexual memes is similar to many business organizations that promote sexual elements in delicate and ingenious fashion (Freitas, 2008). In these instances, different forms of incongruity are

applied to create puzzles or surprising elements that work to conceal the sexual facts/message behind the puzzle. This application of humour does not fully mask the sexual discourse, but rather offers the audience a sense of cognitive pleasure by resolving the incongruity.

For instance, the meme in Figure 14 features a complex, metaphorical representation of masturbation. This meme connects an Internet phenomenon "No Nut November" to a flooded road in Mirpur area of Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh. Here, a flooded road is depicted where a rickshaw (a form of local transportation in Bangladesh) is submerged in water. The caption of the meme reads: "When No Nut November Ends, Mirpur:" The entire meme creates a puzzle because the image and the text alone do not make sense at first glance. The mystery can be resolved by establishing a connection between the caption and the image. The hidden message in this meme is about an extreme sexual contest "No Nut November" that prohibits any participating male from masturbating throughout the month of November. As November comes to a close, masturbation is once again permitted, leading to a proverbial tidal wave of activity. Additionally, "Mirpur" is one of the notorious areas in Dhaka for having a lousy sewer system; the image of blocked or backed up sewer systems only adds to the exaggeration of the inferred scene. The caption works as a clue for the audience to comprehend the metaphor and resolve the puzzle. Incongruity enables the meme maker to publish sexual humour without explicitly stating sexual elements. If the message embedded in the meme was overtly expressed, it would have received negative remarks, potentially leading to lesser engagement.

Figure 15: An extreme example of applying incongruity to mask sexual themes. Nov 30,

2018. Retrieved from www.facebook.com/groups/1685062184888011/

Despite the difference in subject matter, the above examples represent the use of

incongruity in successful Bangladeshi Internet memes. Other successful memes that used

incongruity to generate humour followed a similar technique: to maintain the balance

between the levels of incongruity and the ability of viewers to comprehend the humour.

Although both factors are subjective and there is no absolute scale to measure the tipping

point, these memes made the puzzle complex enough to provide viewers with cognitive

pleasure through meme comprehension, and easy enough that the viewers are not

overwhelmed in their attempt to understand the memes.

6.2.1.3 Mediated Superiority

Superiority is one of the three prominent humour theories that emphasizes making

fun of others' stupidity, mistakes, misfortunes, or weaknesses. A significant number of

successful Bangladeshi memes integrate superiority to generate humour. In these memes,

superiority is represented in two ways: displaying superiority in both comparison-based and non comparison-based scenarios.

In the non-comparison-based scenarios, an individual, object, entity, or situation is depicted to be beneath accepted standards without drawing comparisons between individuals, objects, entities, or circumstances. For instance, the meme in Figure 15 trivializes psychedelic music by associating the latter with an obese woman crushing a man with her body. The meme suggests that musical parties meant to feature acoustic music can be ruined when the people attending request or impose different music (i.e., psychedelic music). The obese woman, stereotypically considered below the accepted social standards of beauty, represents the ugliness of the gesture of wanting to change the music. Overall, the meme draws on stereotypical humour to critique a particular genre of Bangladeshi music.

Figure 16: Example of a meme utilizing superiority theory to denigrate entities to generate humour. Dec 5, 2018. Retrieved from

www.facebook.com/groups/1685062184888011/

Meme makers often use comparison humour to generate superiority by using templates that allow for comparison among people, scenarios, or entities. For instance, the meme in Figure 16 features a popular template that compares developed nations (represented by the USA flag) and Bangladesh. The meme depicts two sets of images of two sleeping actors who are compared through the lens of media critics. Generally, the comparison leads to the denigration of people, objects, and issues associated with Bangladesh. In this meme, the 'sleeping men' image associated with the USA is derived from the famous sitcom *Friends*; the image associated with Bangladesh is of a selfie of two Bangladeshi actors pretending to sleep. The comparison serves to belittle Bangladesh's sitcom/media/film industry, as well as the Bangladeshi actors in the image. In the process, the comparison provokes laughter by making the users feel superior.

Figure 17: Example of the application of superiority by belittling others through comparison. Dec 1, 2018. Retrieved from

www.facebook.com/groups/1685062184888011/

These two examples represent the ways superiority humour is used in Bangladeshi Internet memes, mostly by way of creating humour through offensive elements. The meme in figure 15 is an example from a group of memes that used offensive elements to generate humour. This meme not only misrepresents obese women but also stereotypes them. Overweight women or women who are insecure about their body shapes can be offended by the humour, but for most people, it is funny because they feel superior. The image demonstrates the way society depicts women who do not fit the social standards of beauty, which are offensive not only to women but also to obese people. Fans of Bangladeshi psychedelic music are also likely to be offended by the meme. Similarly, the meme in figure 16 did not use an overtly offensive element; instead, it presented a subtle way to denigrate the quality of mainstream media actors in Bangladesh. Certainly, the fans of these two actors or the consumers of mainstream Bangladeshi movies are likely to take offence based on the denigration of the actors. Nevertheless, the memes generated enough engagements to be considered successful memes. This paradox can be explained by the theory of "aggressive" and "mild aggressive" humour theory by Romero and Cruthirds (2006). The latter argue that two styles of "aggressive" and "mild aggressive" have particular distinctions, and these two styles share the characteristic of being aggressive, but only the "mild aggressive" humour produces a positive outcome. Aggressive humour, however, can be used to victimize, belittle and cause the vilification of others. Bangladeshi successful Internet memes that used superiority humour applied a certain category of humour like silliness to mediate the vilification and to transform the aggressive humour into mild aggressiveness. Such "mildly aggressive" superiority humour also worked as a coping mechanism for both

meme makers and viewers alike; as Bjerke and Rones (2017) state, humour often enables viewers to "save face" in embarrassing situations where friendly limits are crossed in non-intimidating ways.

6.2.1.4 Arousing Sentiments

Sentimental humour is the only type of humour that does not depend entirely on the incongruity-resolution theory; instead, humour that invokes sentimentality follows a process of arousal-safety (Schwarz, Hoffmann & Hutter, 2015). Being adorable and adopting safety measures are essential components of this humour because it is crucial to inform about the happy ending of an intimating story (Speck, 1990). Under this banner, cute and likeable icons, images, or cartoons are featured in memes to arouse positive and affective responses. Comedies that draw upon sentimentality transmit messages to recipients that are easily identifiable to evoke feelings of empathy (Schwarz et al., 2015). It follows that memes that trigger positive emotions among viewers are likely to channel sentimental humour while also applying the relief theory of humour. For example, the meme in Figure 18 features two images and a caption. Each of the standalone images represents popular meme templates. The image with a hen running signifies something to be done in a rush, and the picture of Tom (the cat dialling a telephone) signifies a curious conversation. Both of the respective templates and captions depict the activity of receiving phone calls (circa 1990s). During this era, parents often asked their children to receive calls on landline phones. Children would begin the conversation with "Hello, may peace be upon you. Who is talking?" In this meme, the first image of a hen sprinting signifies children rushing to pick up the phone. The second image features Tom, a famous cartoon character who displays enthusiasm when talking over the phone. Taken

together, this meme invokes a conventional childhood memory that, in turn, creates emotional energy. Meme viewers arguably release this emotional energy by generating humour and producing laughter.

Figure 18: Example of invoking positive sentiment in a successful meme. Dec 6, 2018. Retrieved from www.facebook.com/groups/1685062184888011/

While the meme in Figure 18 demonstrates one application of arousing positive emotional sentiments, the meme in Figure 19 demonstrates the arousal-safety concept of humour. According to Schwarz et al. (2015), "emotional stimuli like music or little children evoke the feeling that the ad message will lead to a joyful end. This humour process requires an increase of the recipient's arousal level due to the empathy with the portrayed person(s) who is/are in a discomforting situation" (p.73). Meme creators that introduce a mild sense of danger in the beginning and provide a feeling of resolution to the problem are likely to adopt the arousal-safety concept.

The meme in Figure 19 uses a template from the blockbuster movie *Thor*: Ragnarok in which Thor (the protagonist in the image) says, "that's what heroes do" before escaping prison to save his people. This image became popular in the meme community, and meme makers have been connecting this template to heroic deeds. Here, this meme addresses the attributes of men who keep track of their girlfriend's menstrual cycle and bring her sanitary napkins when she is in need. In conservative countries like Bangladesh, people tend to shame girls when they are menstruating because this natural biological process is considered taboo. As a result, content that is related to the period is likely to invoke a sense of danger among girls because they are cast as direct targets. This meme's caption ends with a safe exit. The positive ending features the man bringing sanitary napkins removes the additional anxiety the woman may experience during her period. Therefore, viewers can release the stress, which, based on the relief theory, creates humour in the process.

Figure 19: Application of safety-arousal concept in a successful meme. Dec 1, 2018.

Retrieved from www.facebook.com/groups/1685062184888011/

These two memes represent a large number of successful memes that integrated safety-arousal theory and positive sentiments to invoke humour. In both cases, relief theory played a pivotal part. The relief theory states that releasing nervous energy from our bodies can create laughter (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2014). This humour is also a channel to express repressed urges that offer shelter from sociocultural discomforts, which characteristically involve erotic and hostile forms of self-consciousness (Freud, 1905; Schaeffer, 1981). Meyer (2000) contends that expressions or symptoms of humour stem from the experienced relief of tensions when they no longer feel engendered. Here, both of the memes delivered the potential to help viewers to generate bodily tension; one invoked a positive sentiment, while the other provided the viewer with a sense of relief. In the case of the meme featuring Tom and the Hen, the viewers have the potential to experience positive tension through laughter. In the *Thor* meme, the narrative ended with a positive ending, providing viewers with an option to release tension and via humour.

6.2.2 Anatomy of Humour in Unsuccessful Bangladeshi Memes

While the successful memes are categorized under four thematic groups, I have identified three thematic features that also convey the use of humour in 54 unsuccessful memes: confusing context and/or ambiguous reference, making it obvious, and forced humour.

6.2.2.1 Confusing Contexts and/or Ambiguous Reference

In the previous section, I have shown that successful memes establish a context along with a relatable reference for the audience to first interpret then make sense of the text, a process that generates humour and/or produces laughter. When the context created

is confusing and/or the anchoring reference is not relatable to the audience, the humour is likely to fail, and the meme is unlikely to produce reactions or engagement.

For instance, the meme in Figure 20 features a scenario where a boy asks his girlfriend if she is mad at him because she is unpredictable due to her mood swings. This common relationship scenario is present among youth, making it attractive for meme creators to have fun with a stereotypical psychological feature of girls. In this meme, however, the girl's reply is depicted with an image where a bearded man says "possibly" to another person. This particular image template is unfamiliar to most Internet meme users, and the origins of this template are unknown to many. Despite being familiar with the immediate context (the caption), viewers cannot comprehend the humour because the reference is not relatable. In contextual humour, jokes must be entirely understood (Lin et al., 2014); therefore, any lack of clarity in the joke can potentially lead to failure.

Figure 20: Example of an unsuccessful meme using confusing contexts and/or reference.

Dec 10, 2018. Retrieved from www.facebook.com/groups/1685062184888011/

Some memes feature humour where both context and reference lack clarity for the viewers to understand the intended message. The meme in Figure 21 presents a context that is largely unfamiliar to the meme community, and the anchoring reference is not a common one to understand. The meme features Bugs Bunny, a famous cartoon character. In this meme, Bugs Bunny is demonstrating a sense of sassiness. The viewer quickly learns via the caption that the reason for Bugs Bunny's emotional state: "I felt special until I realized you talk to everyone like that" (dialogue taken from the Spike Jonze movie *Her*). This movie is far from being mainstream, so the majority of viewers cannot fully comprehend the particular scenario, which arguably led to substantively less engagement with this meme post.

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Figure 21: Example of an unsuccessful meme with out of context humour alongside non-relatable reference. Dec 2, 2018. Retrieved from

www.facebook.com/groups/1685062184888011/

In this regard, Marszalek (2012) argues that the proportion of a particular instance of narrative humour is not as humorous when the narrative is placed (or received) out of context. Marszalek (2012) asserts that context forms a part of the broader joke and that

humour appreciation hinges on the audience's ability to look for humorous meanings beyond their immediate viewpoint or reality. Thus, just as fish cannot survive without water, so too is humour incapable of functioning effectively without sufficient context. If the context and/or reference is unclear within a given meme, then the intended humour fails.

A significant number of memes also failed because they made jokes about highly technical topics or contexts that are unfamiliar to most users. Most of the meme creators were unable to establish a proper context from which the jokes could be deciphered, resulting in meme's overall failure. For instance, the meme in Figure 22 uses a popular template from the *Avengers: Endgame* trailer, in which Scott Lang (Antman) is asking for access to enter the building. Here the meme maker attempts to generate humour by relating the context of the film with a reference to photosynthesis (the biological process of making food by using chlorophyll and sunlight). Although the context and reference are both relatable, the complex topic ultimately fails to generate humour.

Figure 22: Example of an unsuccessful meme using complex context and reference.

Dec 7, 2018. Retrieved from www.facebook.com/groups/1685062184888011/

The above examples indicate that if context and reference are not relatable or familiar to the audience, then the humour is likely to fail, producing a lesser number of reactions, leading to meme failure. Another important notion is that context or reference alone is unlikely to be sufficient for meme viewers to comprehend the humour. Viewers need to understand and connect the dots between the background and reference in a meme; therefore, a familiar context cannot complement an ambiguous reference, or a relatable reference is not sufficient to make up for an ambiguous context.

6.2.2.2 Forced Humour

Subject to the creative forces and constraints of real-life comedians, meme producers often attempt to create funny memes by pure will or force. Comedian Reida (2008) asserts that "whenever the actors tried to force laughter from audience members, the show felt rehearsed and stale. Theater should feel fresh and new as if the events are something occurring for the first time in the life of the characters." Forced memes represent examples that manipulate the content (template, caption, or original texts) to make the finished product funny and relatable. In some cases, however, the level of force is beyond the acceptable standards or boundaries set by the meme community; in these instances, the memes fail to produce the intended amusement.

For example, imagine a meme (Figure 21) that boasts the following caption in a casual tone: "take care of your skin." The original meme template—both popular and widely used—features a similar caption: "take care of your eye." Here the massive manipulation of the text and the heavy personification of the template (altering a character's face through Photoshop) makes it a forced meme. Due to the extensive manipulation, this meme produces too much incongruity, creating a cumbersome venture

for viewers to comprehend the underpinning meanings. Therefore, the forced attempt to make the meme relatable generates little humour, which in turn produces even lesser engagement, which is manifested in the accumulated number of reactions in this meme. The significantly less number of reaction highlights the failure of this meme due to hyper-manipulation of the content.

Figure 23: Example of an unsuccessful meme that uses forced humour by excessively manipulating content. Dec 6, 2018. Retrieved from

www.facebook.com/groups/1685062184888011/

Another aspect of forced humour in failed memes is the use of extensive text-based content. Memes are predominantly visual media artefacts akin to print advertisements in newspapers. Advertisers create engaging ads by emphasizing more visual- and less text-based content (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005) because visuals are superior in capturing attention, regardless of the size of the ad (Pieters & Wedel, 2004). The logic applies to meme culture. The primary reason to use more visual elements across meme culture can be tied to the short attention span of social media users. A meme in a closed group is but

one of hundreds (or thousands) of items/artefacts uploaded every minute. Thus, users are unlikely to read long or heavy texts in a meme; memes that do will likely produce little impact or engagement. The meme in Figure 24 is an example of excessive use of text. The meme attempts to connect the *Avengers: Endgame* movie sequence to a Bangladeshi TV persona who covers the news related to the agricultural sector in Bangladesh. This meme also replaces the face of the TV persona with the face of a man who is featured in the famous "Am I a Joke to You" meme template. Typically, "Am I a Joke to You" meme template is used to mock something controversial or a self-contradictory act by individuals or entities. In the meme, the caption addresses the disappearance of 50% of living creatures in the universe when Thanos (the protagonist in *Avengers: Infinity War*) snaps his fingers. According to the caption, 50% of plants should have disappeared, but they existed while living creature were erased from existence. This controversial information is mocked by adding the "Am I Joke to You" face to the Bangladeshi agro-based TV persona's body. Even though the context is based on a trendy Hollywood movie and the manipulated template is related to the caption, the meme fails to produce humour primarily due to the significantly sizeable caption attempting to generate forced laughter.

Figure 24: Example of forced humour in failed memes that uses substantive amounts of

textual content. Dec 9, 2018. Retrieved from

www.facebook.com/groups/1685062184888011/

The example memes indicate that if a meme producer attempts to make it funny by force,

then the memes are likely to produce reactions. Meme makers strive to bring a sense of

funniness in the memes while originally, they lack contents humorous enough to grab the

viewers' attention. In one example, the meme producer manipulated extensively

manipulated the materials to make it funny, which caused the meme to lose its appeal.

Similarly, to make the second example meme funny, the meme producer had to import a

lengthy caption that also caused the meme to lose its appeal. It is difficult to conclude if

humour is being forced because of the subjectivity. A joke that is not humour can

potentially become annoying to the audience while the meme maker might view it as an

epitome of humour. However, meme success depends on how they view the meme and

how the meme influences them. Since the attempts to make the meme humorous were visible, the number of reactions were fewer, which is the reason these memes failed.

6.2.2.3 Making It Obvious

In the previous section, I have explained how incongruity helps meme viewers to experience cognitive pleasure by solving a puzzle to comprehend the meme, which in turn leads to amusement. A good number of successful memes integrate incongruity humour, but they maintain the level of incongruity to the point that the meme is neither too prominent nor too complicated. Applying excessive incongruity diminishes the effectiveness of humour. Furthermore, if the humour is too complicated, viewers may not feel compelled to put in any additional effort to comprehend the meme. A considerable number of the unsuccessful memes apply humour that is simply too plain for the intellectual acumen of Bangladeshi youth. For instance, the meme in Figure 26 is crafted based on sub-continental folklore. In the story, a woodcutter loses his bronze axe in the river. When he cries, a water-fairy brings three axes: silver, gold, and bronze (the latter being the woodcutter's lost axe). If the woodcutter accepts either the gold or silver axe, he will leave with none of them. However, if he remains honest and accepts only the bronze axe, he will get all three as rewards. In one version of this folk tale, the woodcutter accepts the gold axe, and the water-fairy disappears. This is a popular piece of folklore, and the meme merely describes a particular version of the tale that requires little to no intellectual effort to comprehend.

Figure 25: Example of obvious humour in unsuccessful memes. Dec 2, 2018. Retrieved

from www.facebook.com/groups/1685062184888011/

The meme in Figure 27 is another example of an unsuccessful meme that does not enable

viewers the opportunity to engage or sharpen their intellectual abilities. This meme has

the essential elements to be a successful meme (appropriate context, proper referencing,

and a balanced scale of incongruity.) In this meme, a WinZip (a compression software)

prompt asks the user to register for the software legally. A favourite meme template

depicts the response to the prompt in the form of a blind man singing "I will pretend I did

not see that." This meme template is mostly used to make fun of situations where people

deliberately avoid any issue which needs immediate attention. Most Bangladeshi

computer users willfully ignore the reminder to buy the original license by pretending not

to see the dialogue box. In this meme, two arrows indicate the license expiry warning and

the option that allows the user to use the trial version. Simply put, this meme does not

invite viewers to resolve the puzzle; as a result, the meme fails to engage the audience by generating humour.

Figure 26: Example of an unsuccessful meme that used insufficient incongruity. Dec 7, 2018. Retrieved from www.facebook.com/groups/1685062184888011/

As discussed before in the successful memes, a balanced incongruity in a meme is essential to invoke humour in a viewer's mind. In the above examples, the elements of surprise were taken out, and the memes became plain to the viewers. As a result, the viewers did not find any cognitive pleasure in the process of comprehending the humour. The first example narrated a story which is familiar to most of the viewers, and the second example assisted the viewers to solve the puzzle.

7.0 Discussion

In this chapter, I have discussed the overall role of humour in Bangladeshi meme culture, which is an extended summary of the analysis in the previous chapter. In this section, I attempt to answer the research questions of the study based on the findings generated through the dominant categories of humour in Bangladeshi memes and the application of humour in both successful and unsuccessful memes.

One of the most significant discoveries in this study is the strong prevalence of humour in Bangladeshi Internet meme culture. Of 1,008 sampled memes, only 10 memes were identified as non-humorous, which is a substantially smaller number compared to the sample size. In addition, while 65.1% of the memes shared in global meme pages contain humorous elements (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015), 99.01% of Bangladeshi memes feature humorous elements. This finding not only reinforces the strong association between humour and Internet memes (Shifman, 2014; Ding 2015), it also suggests that humour constitutes an essential feature of contemporary Bangladeshi Internet meme culture.

Of the 13 humour categories identified, silliness appears to be the most dominant and frequently used humour type in Bangladeshi Internet memes (featured 293 times); the next most prevalent humour category is sentimental humour (appearing 169 times). To some extent, the finding is analogous to the results of Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong's (2015) study on the impact of humour types in meme virality in which they explore the dominant humour types in Internet memes shared on globally recognized platforms such as 9GAG. Based on their findings, sarcasm, silliness, exaggeration, surprise, and personification are the most dominant categories of humour in descending

order. Therefore, the prevalence of sarcasm, silliness, and exaggeration is consistent with previous scholarship in the field: the latter are commonly found in the top humour categories in both Bangladeshi Internet meme culture and global Internet meme culture. On another note, surprise and personification are not widely used humour types in Bangladeshi Internet memes whereas these two humour categories are commonly used in global Internet meme culture. Another interesting finding relates to the use of comparison and sentimental humour as dominant humour types in Bangladeshi Internet memes. Overall, my findings suggest that in terms of the deployment and/or visibility of humour types, Bangladeshi Internet meme culture remains, to some extent, analogous to global Internet meme culture.

In addition to exploring the dominance of different categories of humour in the sample memes, I have also examined the prevailing humour categories in the segmented meme groups such as single humour memes, double humour memes, and triple humour memes. I have also identified successful and unsuccessful memes based on the number of reactions they produced and examined the dominant humour categories in both meme groups. Once again, silliness appears dominant in all meme segments, with the exception of successful memes (where exaggeration is featured most prominently). The overall dominance of silliness in the samples and segmented meme groups suggests that silliness occupies a constant place in Bangladeshi memes. The prevalence of silliness across memes is of particular interest because it explains in part the cautious use of humour as a conservative feature of Bangladesh's socio-cultural sphere. As argued elsewhere (Newman, 2015; Fernandes, n.d.), the conservative nature of South Asian cultures breeds an 'easy to offend' mentality among the people. Billig (2005) argues that the degree to

which humour is considered offensive depends on multiple factors, such as cultural orientation, timing, context, and gender, which makes the question of whether certain types of humour are offensive or appropriate a matter of debate. Silliness is widely popular across South Asian humour culture as this particular category can be a safe option if the humour fails and the viewers take a joke seriously. Robinson, Segal and Smith (2018) assert that humour and playfulness can help lighten tensions during conflict and restore a sense of connection. Such a light sense of humour also allows joke-tellers to deliver their points without intimidating their viewers or hurting their feelings (Robinson, Segal & Smith, 2018). Similarly, South Asian joke tellers are likely to punctuate their humour with silliness to imbue a sense of playfulness and to minimize the potential to offend the audience; this approach explains in part the dominance of silliness in Bangladeshi Internet memes. A high-level of cultural sensitivity and nuance is required to connect the jokes (and the joke-teller) with the target audience without sacrificing a balance between flippancy and seriousness (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014). Hence, in Bangladeshi humour, silly humour is used to transform deprecating or hostile humour into mildly deprecating or hostile humour. Through this process, silliness balances the offensiveness and flippancy in humour that generates more engagement in the meme.

The dominance of the above humour types in Bangladeshi Internet memes would seem to indicate that intelligent humour categories are not well regarded in Bangladeshi internet memes. That said, intelligent humour does occupy a significant portion of the total humour count altogether. Among the 13 categories used in this study, pun, irony, understatement, surprise, personification, and sarcasm often require intellectual effort to comprehend. Together these humour categories occupy 34% of the total humour count,

which suggests the influence or popularity of using intellectual or incongruous elements in the Bangladeshi meme culture.

In the second phase of analysis, I have conducted two separate thematic analyses of successful and unsuccessful memes. The findings show that both meme groups share two common applications of humour: the use of contextual and relatable references, and incongruity. A significant facet of humour that influences a given meme's success/failure is the use of familiar contexts and relatable references. The compatibility of humour for different groups of users is one of the most discussed issues in humour research, as digital users emerge from diverse cultures; effective humour must thus be contextual, interactional, and tailored to the target audience (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014). According to Kutz-Flamenbaum (2014), if a joke consists of familiar cultural signs and concepts that are shared between joke teller and audience, it is likely to be successful. If the desired harmony is not achieved, the humour can turn offensive. In South Asian culture, contextual knowledge plays a pivotal role for viewers to comprehend the joke (Mamidi, 2018) and viewers are unlikely to be amused if they are not familiar with the contexts of jokes (Satyal, 2015). A similar pattern has been identified among both the successful and unsuccessful memes. On the one hand, memes that integrate jokes about familiar settings (local or global) and establish relatable reference points are likely to produce more reactions/engagement; on the other hand, memes that fail to set up a familiar context or relatable background to the topics are less able to influence viewers.

On a similar note, memes that integrate incongruity require interpretive or cognitive effort to decrypt the underlying meaning. According to Mamidi (2018), the incongruity theory of humour explored by the likes of Berger (1976, 1993), McGhee

(1979), and Veale (2004) is also applicable to South Asian culture. The incongruity theory of humour underscores the degree of cerebral capacity needed to recognize and distinguish bizarre incidents, which is essential to stimulating humour (Forabosco, 1992; Berger, 1993; McGhee & Pistolesi, 1979). According to Forabosco (1992), the effectiveness of incongruous humour depends more on comprehension than appreciation. Through his examination of the impacts of humour in Amul adverts in India, Mamidi (2018) contends that to induce amusement incongruity must be of a certain level. If the complexity in the advert is beyond the standard intellectual level of the audience, the humour is likely to fail. Alternatively, if the humour is too plain, then the audience does not experience the cognitive pleasure of the exercise, which leads to the failure of the joke and, in turn, the advert. Bangladeshi Internet memes follow a similar pattern in the memes that utilize incongruity. Memes that use incongruity, which is analogous to the standard intellectual capability of the audience, receive more reactions. On the other hand, memes that overuse or underuse incongruity fail to attract viewers' attention. Incongruity also helps meme-makers to make jokes regarding sensitive issues. Sexual content occupies a significant portion of the memes integrating incongruity, with anything sex-related being taboo in Bangladesh. Elsewhere Das (2011) has argued that if a message is delivered in the right way, then even a topic as sensitive as sacred cows in India can be a topic of humour. Here, incongruity acts as the means to deliver sexual messages through the Internet memes.

While contextuality and incongruity are common features used to determine the success or failure of humorous Internet memes, successful memes exhibit two unique

humour features (superiority & arousing sentiments), and unsuccessful memes feature one unique feature (forced humour).

Successful Bangladeshi memes offer the audience a sense of superiority, and they arouse sentiments among users. According to Tafoya (2009), superiority humour works in three ways: making humour about more influential people to make the audience feel superior, mocking people who are less powerful than the audience to exhibit their superiority and the self-depreciation of the joke teller that makes the viewers feel more potent than the joke tellers. A significant number of the successful memes demonstrated all three types of superiority humour stated by Tafoya (2009), which is akin to the socio-economic dimensions in South Asian culture. According to Fernandes (n.d.), South Asian people tend to laugh at others' misfortunes, and they are likely to create humour based on race, cast, and socio-economic status. For instance, Sardarji jokes are quite popular in India. This particular type of one-/two-liner jokes focuses on the below-standard intellectual ability of people from a given specific area. Similarly, Noakhali jokes are also popular in Bangladesh. These jokes belittle the people of Noakhali district in Bangladesh by depicting them as selfish, self-centric, and wickedly shrewd. A significant portion of the memes in this study utilize superiority humour to generate amusement among the viewers. In recent years, youth have begun adopting superiority humour and using a unique form of self-deprecating jokes. In the memes drawing on these humour tropes, the meme makers ridicule themselves by pointing out their misfortunes and, in the process, offer viewers a sense of superiority, which in turn generates amusement. Another unique application of successful humour memes is the process of arousing sentiments. Typically, Bangladeshi people have strong emotions about positive events in their lives. Humour

related to life events or experiences thus allows them to relate to sentiments that in turn, generate humour and create engagement with the posted memes. Bangladeshi culture is also traditionally comedy-based rather than tragedy-based. Therefore, a positive ending or outcome in any situation is expected more than a negative conclusion. Hence, memes that use sentiment-arousal apply the relief theory of humour by creating tense situations only to later provide positive endings to allow viewers to release tension and generate fun. This logic is similar to most Bangladeshi movies in which the protagonist(s) struggle throughout only to become successful in the end.

Forced humour is a prevalent albeit unique feature of unsuccessful memes. Memes that typically use familiar contexts or the right scale of incongruity to create humour are more likely to be successful. However, memes following these steps may fail if the audience perceives the humour as being forced. For instance, memes that feature long textual elements or a substantive manipulation of either image or text are likely to be unsuccessful. Notably, the memes that excessively manipulate meme content assume the risk of appearing ineffectual due to the forced nature of the humour depicted.

A thematic analysis of unsuccessful memes also produces an unexpected but exciting result: despite meeting all of the characteristics of successful memes, memes failed to produce reactions. Among these memes, some integrated familiar contexts and relatable references, some adopted the right scale of incongruity with appropriate clues and some depicted positive sentiments for the audience. None of these memes featured any of the unique features of the unsuccessful memes. Despite having harnessed these strategies, the memes failed to engage the audience, which suggests the presence of other unknown variables and factors driving meme success.

8.0 Limitations & Possibilities for Future Research

Despite the organizational and methodological approach, there are some limitations to this study that open the door for future research. First, the humour typology used in this study is customized according to the goals of the study. Although most of the humour types were derived from humour categories fashioned by Catanescu and Tom (2001), some humour types were integrated from typologies proposed by other scholars, such as Kelly and Solomon (1975), Brooker (1981), and Speck (1987). The additional codes were adopted based on a pilot study of 50 randomly selected memes. In total, 13 types of humour as priori codes were used for the deductive analysis. Future work could adopt more codes to examine the dominant meme categories (e.g., the humour typology by Buijzen and Valkenburg (2004) consists of 41 types of humour).

Secondly, the Internet memes were collected from only one of the closed Bangladeshi Internet meme groups on Facebook. Only the members of that group can access the shared memes; hence, there is no option to calculate the number of times a meme can be shared, which is a vital indicator of meme virality or influence. Although the number of reactions produced by a meme is relatively stable in a closed group compared to a meme shared on a public page, calculating the number of shares could help measure virality or influence more accurately, which in turn could indicate the meme success more precisely. Future studies might be conducted drawing upon a limited number of memes that include shareable links to take the number of shares into account while calculating meme virality. Additionally, audio-visual memes can also be included in the sample memes along with the image-based memes.

Finally, in this study, I have examined Internet memes shared within a 10-day period. Despite having collected a large sample of Internet memes (significant enough to conduct a statistical analysis), examining the memetic qualities to measure meme success cannot be performed. Expanding the period of meme collection may increase the number of collected memes (to more than 5,000 samples) to calculate memetic quality statistically. As memetic quality is a vital indicator of meme success along with virality, adding the parameter in measuring meme success can bring different results and additional insights to current scholarship on Internet meme success.

9.0 Conclusion

The central goal of this study was to add insight into the dynamic and complex relationship between humour and Bangladeshi Internet meme culture, which is an uncharted area of humour and meme studies. There is a plethora of studies on both humour and Internet memes; however, the lack of studies in South Asian humour or the absence of scholarship on Bangladeshi humour inspired me to explore the role of humour in Bangladeshi Internet memes, which to my knowledge is the first academic work on Bangladeshi Internet meme culture. Internet memes that channel humour proliferate across digital media, influencing thousands of interconnected social media users. Hence, this study has focused on identifying dominant categories of humour in Bangladeshi memes, as well as the application of humour types that influence the success or failure of memes in terms of the reactions produced by the memes.

Influenced by previous studies exploring the role of humour on the virality of Internet memes (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015), I have explored the role of humour in memes collected from one of the most highly regarded Internet meme groups in Bangladesh: 'Rantages Goatposting.' By conducting a deductive content analysis in the first phase, and two separate thematic analyses of the successful and unsuccessful meme groups in the second phase, I was able to present some exciting findings. Among the 13 humour categories selected, silly humour represents the most dominant category in Bangladeshi Internet meme culture. This finding appears logical due to the fail-safe humour attitudes expressed across the conservative socio-cultural spheres in Bangladeshi/South Asian cultures. In addition, use of intellectual humour categories

collectively comprised more than one-third of the total humour appearances, pointing to the strong influence of global humour on Bangladeshi/South Asian meme production.

The application of humour in successful and unsuccessful memes offers genuine insights regarding the ways in which humour can influence meme success. The results show the existence of two common features in both successful and unsuccessful memes: applying contextual/situational humour with relatable references, and using an appropriate balance of incongruity in the memes. Apart from these two common features that most influence meme success, successful memes also feature the application of safety-arousal theory and superiority humour theory, which is also analogous to South Asian cultural dynamics. On the other hand, memes that fail to produce engagements demonstrate one unique characteristic: forced or contrived humour. And despite applying humour tropes found in successful memes, certain memes didn't produce any engagement, thus indicating that there are other unknown factors besides humour that influence the success or failure of Internet memes.

While the current study relies heavily on previously conducted studies on humour and Internet memes, it does offer some unique insights into contemporary Bangladeshi Internet meme culture and paves the way for future studies on Bangladeshi Internet meme culture, the role of humour in Bangladeshi Internet memes, and Bangladeshi humour more generally. This study opens the door for more extensive humour research in the context of Bangladesh or any other South Asian country, as the sense of humour in this region has the potential to contribute to existing theories of humour. This work may lay the preliminary groundwork to embark on research on Bangladeshi digital culture from new perspectives and to help media practitioners apply humour in more efficient

ways. The result may be more engaging meme content and more engaged social media

users.

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