

## A Phenomenological Study into How Students Perceive the Facebook Meme Culture in Shaping Online Identities

Geryl D. Cataraja<sup>1\*</sup>, Adrian Orven S. Rivera<sup>2</sup>, Rothelia Maria G. Ugsad<sup>3</sup>  
Palompon Institute of Technology

**Corresponding Author:** Geryl D. Cataraja [Geryl.cataraja@pit.edu.ph](mailto:Geryl.cataraja@pit.edu.ph)

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### ABSTRACT

This descriptive phenomenological study explored how Facebook memes shape students' online identities within the context of participatory and prosumer culture. Seven Bachelor of Arts in Communication students, selected through linear snowball sampling, were interviewed in-depth, and data were analyzed through two coding cycles. From 212 significant statements, 306 formulated meanings, and 21 clustered meanings, two themes emerged: memes as media for personal and social expression, and the role of discernment in meme engagement. Findings highlight how students perceive and use memes in identity formation, with implications for students, educators, administrators, social media users, and future researchers.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, social media platforms have become outlets for civic expression and social participation across the internet. It is built around the foundations of social exchanges generated by user-made content, creating the era of online-participatory culture (APK et al., 2020).

Information spreads fast and wide online, and content is curated according to users' interests. With social media revolutionizing how internet users interact and synthesize information, these exchanges have created exclusive groups of people who share the same attitude toward social constructs on social media sites (Valensise et al., 2021).

Postmodernism introduced prosumption as a two-way relationship wherein an internet user can directly participate in both ends of producing and engaging with multimedia content. Gen Z students, as digital natives with ideals and principles established based on the values of the online world, are given the tools to dynamically express their more eclectic idea of self-presentation on social media through repurposed media like internet memes (Sugihartati, 2020).

Moreover, online-participatory culture allows individuals to present themselves in ways they find most acceptable to others. The ability of prosumers to create internet memes and other visual content to engage with their audience is an example of how online personas are created to form meaningful virtual relationships (Davis, 2013).

Internet memes are relatively understudied despite the universality of their use on social media, and there are even little to no studies exploring how internet memes have shaped the attitude of social media users in expressing their online identities (Akhther, 2018).

Straying from Dawkins' original conception, internet memes are imperfect replicators that have become crucial sources of information that shape one's political, cultural, and social identity. Every time an internet meme is replicated, the chances of mutation exponentially rise to the point that it deviates from its original identity. These factors contribute to how individuals develop their online identity to fit an image perceived as ideal by the general public or an online community (APK et al., 2020).

Social networking sites, particularly Facebook, play a crucial role in shaping online dynamics and online self-representation (Ganda, 2014). User-generated internet memes are one way to spot these social expressions. Internet memes are continuously shaped by the prosumers' unique identities, a characteristic that can be attributed to their rapid growth in usage across the world.

On a global scale, countless Facebook users have integrated themselves into the prosumer culture. Users generate content to express their online social identities, showcasing how homophilic digital spaces like Facebook communities paved the way for these forms of expression to shape online attitudes and identity constructions (Procházka, 2018).

In a study conducted by Son (2022), Facebook memes were being used by Bangladesh prosumers to discuss contested and divisive social topics, principal to the formation of communal identities among the involved Facebook users.

These interactions formed collective narratives when discussing social issues, which led to more radicalized use of Facebook memes in the form of harmful jokes directed at the opposing faction.

Beskow et al. (2020) conducted a similar study focusing on the spread of Facebook memes in the USA, concluding that internet memes circulate faster and can be challenging to trace compared to other media types. This radical feature of Facebook memes caused some nations to ban their use on public channels upon recognizing that memes can cause information warfare between online users and become vessels for destructive political propaganda.

Furthermore, the Philippines is one of the largest hubs of social media users in the world. The emergence of social movements in Filipino online communities signifies the importance of online platforms in mobilizing individuals to engage in social and political expressions. Facebook posts using internet memes to elicit emotional responses toward issues concerning politics, mainstream entertainment, and other social constructs have become more pervasive as prosumer culture continues to grow among the country's social media users. Shaping how Filipinos identify and present themselves online into divisive social factions, especially observed during political seasons (Soriano, 2021).

Similarly, De Leon & Lintao (2021) argued that prosumers who participate in meme culture are more like to be victims of misinformation – concluding that Facebook users in the Philippines have rampantly shared Facebook memes that attempt to humanize public figures during social unrest to relay political messages with the intention to either support or criticize them.

The use of internet memes to initiate conversations between individuals shows a never-ending process of knowledge sharing between communities of online users, forming the fringes of culturally assimilating communities on the internet. These interactions help shape an individual's identity and modes of expression on the internet on a communal level (Procházka, 2018).

The researcher, as a campus journalist, has observed how students in the surrounding academic institutions have shared and used memes as jokes to poke fun at serious social topics, which led to retaliation from other users by sharing iterations of the said meme to debunk fallacious claims. These interactions caused major rifts among Facebook users, especially during times of social turbulence, as observed by the researcher in the last Philippine national elections. Through this phenomenological study, the researcher sought to describe the factors at play when users engage with Facebook memes that deal with topics they either gravitate towards or have reservations about.

This study was founded on two theories that supported the factors affecting online identity formation. These are (1) Hall's Representation Theory and (2) Lasswell's Magic Bullet Theory.

According to Hall (2005), language is a symbolic form of representation that functions as the foundation of every human relationship. Language expressed through social interactions creates one's identity of expression, thus emphasizing the value of meanings diverse representation can generate.

Lasswell (1972) sees that every form of media has a direct, powerful, yet passive impact on its audience. This impact causes an immediate reaction in the audiences' minds, albeit unknowingly. The injected media cause them to change their attitude toward the message passively.

The use of language and symbols in the form of internet memes as representations of one's conscious identity can be understood as the depiction of how perception is shaped by experience and one's desire to show their uniqueness (Moustakas, 1994). These manifestations of consciousness, injected through media like Facebook memes, can be observed in their most natural forms, free from suppositions and preconceived ideas, through lived experiences of individuals directly involved in the phenomenon. The schematic diagram of the conceptual framework of the study is shown in Figure 1.

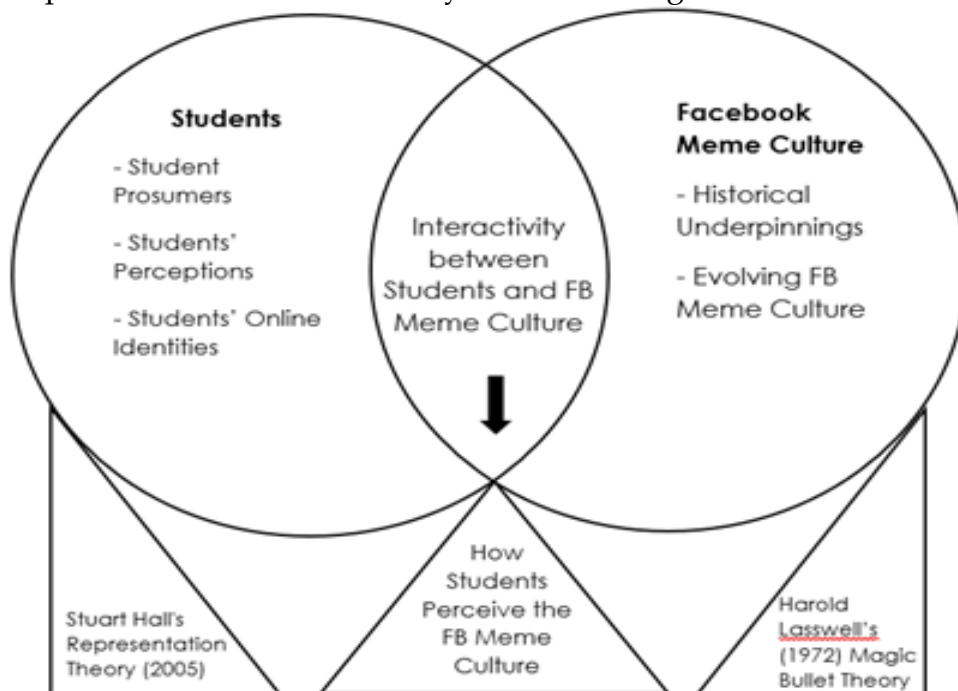


Figure 1. Schematic Diagram of the Conceptual Framework of the Study

Given these points, internet memes are media of discursive meanings reciprocally shaped by a prosumers' perceptions. The framework showed the phenomenological process of existential affirmation or negation on how the perceptions of students toward Facebook memes contribute to the formation of their online identities.

This study investigated how students' perceptions of Facebook memes affected their online identities. Discovering how students create meaning with how they interpret Facebook memes, the study provided further perspective on how the online identities of individuals are developed. The following questions were established to drive the investigation: (1) How do students perceive Facebook meme culture? and (2) How do these perceptions of Facebook memes shape the online identities of students?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

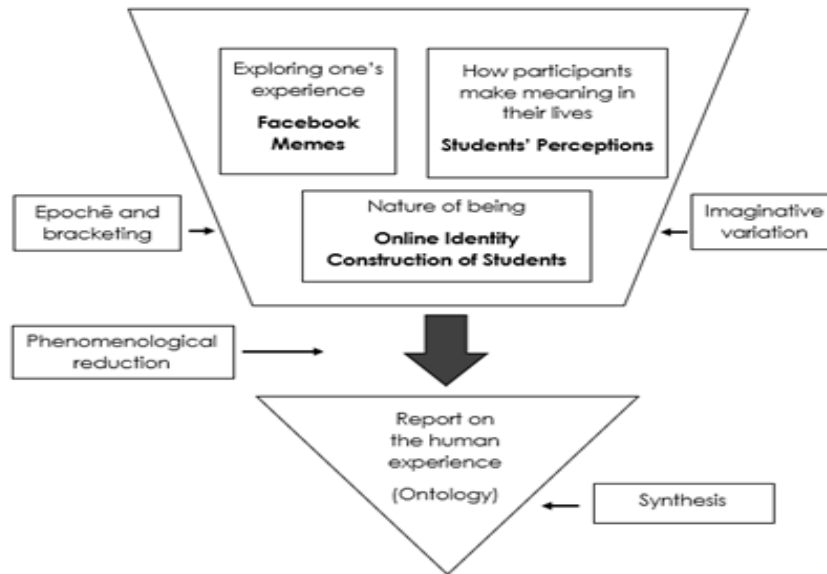
The emergence of social media platforms such as Facebook has significantly influenced how young people construct and express their online identities. Memes, as one of the most prominent cultural products of digital media, serve not only as sources of entertainment but also as symbolic tools that convey values, beliefs, and social commentary (Akhther, 2018; De Leon & Ballesteros-Lintao, 2021). In line with Hall's (1997) theory of representation, memes function as cultural signs that shape meaning-making processes, allowing individuals to negotiate identity within online communities. Studies further highlight that adolescents and young adults actively engage in prosumer practices by creating, sharing, and reinterpreting memes, reinforcing both personal and collective identities (Davis, 2013; Sugihartati, 2020).

Previous research underscores that memes can act as platforms for discourse on political, cultural, and social issues (Soriano, 2021; Son, 2022), while also reflecting dynamic patterns of evolution that influence public perception (Beskow et al., 2020). These findings suggest that meme engagement involves not only humor and creativity but also discernment, as users selectively interact with content that resonates with their experiences and perspectives. Within this context, exploring how students perceive Facebook meme culture becomes essential to understanding the role of digital media in shaping self-concept and online identity formation. Phenomenological approaches (Moustakas, 1994; Bevan, 2014) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) offer valuable tools in capturing these lived experiences, providing deeper insight into the interplay between meme culture and identity construction.

## METHODOLOGY

This study drew parallels between the lived experiences of the research participants, how they made sense of their experiences involving internet memes on Facebook, and how these interactions translated to their online identity construction using Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. The study's underpinnings included ontological, epistemological, and phenomenological approaches.

The ontological underpinning of the study was concerned with the nature of being and the existence of the entities affected by the phenomenon. The epistemological aspect of the study was concerned with the relationship between knowledge and beliefs, pertaining to how one participant's perceptions are completely different from others despite being exposed to the same phenomenon. Figure 2 shows the phenomenological inquiry of the study.



**Figure 2. A Diagram for the Phenomenological Inquiry of the Study**

The research data were gathered using the qualitative in-depth interview method. Seven Bachelor of Arts in Communication (BA Comm.) participants were interviewed in order to reach the data saturation needed for the completion of the study. The interview phase was cycled until data saturation was reached, leading to the emergence of recurring themes (Boyce & Neale, 2006).

The gathered data were analyzed using the thematic analysis method prescribed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and interpreted using Saldana's (2013) coding system to code the raw data gathered from the narratives of the seven interview participants.

The study was conducted at Palompon Institute of Technology, Palompon, Leyte, Philippines. The in-depth interviews were conducted in well-ventilated classrooms permitted for usage by the Communication Arts Department to maximize the conductivity of the interviewing phase.

The seven participants of this study were selected from the current roster of 1st year to 4th year BA Comm. students enrolled in the S.Y. 2022-2023. Suitable participants were identified using a nonprobability sampling method, the linear snowball sampling technique, to form a chain-referral sample group that consisted of individuals immersed in the online-participatory culture on Facebook, avid Facebook meme prosumers, and individuals who have developed distinct online personas. The first participant of the chain-referral group was identified using convenience sampling and environmental scanning on the end of the researcher.

### ***Data Collection Methods***

The researcher requested permission from the College of Arts and Sciences to conduct the study, and letters of consent were sent to inform the participants of the interview process. The informed consent given to the research participants explained the purpose of the study, the procedures employed in the conduct of the study, and the confidentiality of their information.

Employing the in-depth interview method consisting of open-ended and semi-structured questions, the study used an interview guide to aid in systematically describing and thematizing the participants' experiences on the lived experience and perceptions of the seven participants toward Facebook memes. The interview guide was structured in English or Cebuano as deemed necessary to the participants' level of language acquisition.

Table 1. shows Bevan's (2014) structure of phenomenological interviewing

Phenomenological Attitude	Researcher Approach	Interview Structure	Method
Phenomenological Reduction (Epoché)	Acceptance of Natural Attitude of Participants	Contextualization (Eliciting the Lifeworld in Natural Attitude)	Descriptive/Narrative Context Questions
	Reflexive Critical Dialogue With Self	Apprehending the Phenomenon (Modes of Appearing in Natural Attitude)	Descriptive and Structural Questions
	Active Listening	Clarifying the Phenomenon (Meaning Through Imaginative Variation)	Imaginative Variation: Varying of Structure Questions

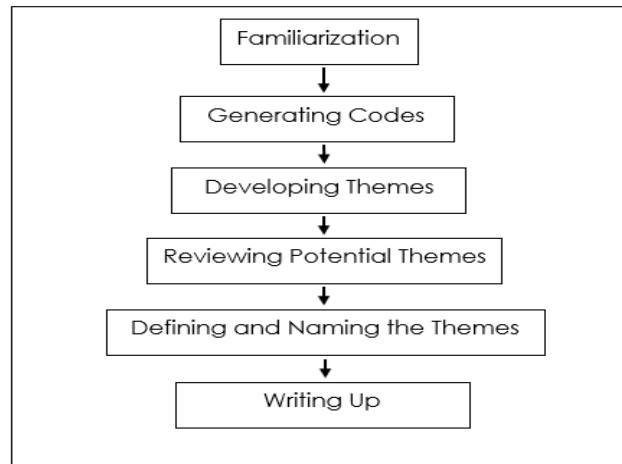
The researcher took the Noetic-noematic schema into account in the conduct of the study, ascribing that what a person feels, sees, perceives, or thinks during his/her exposure to a particular phenomenon has meanings unique to that individual.

Successive interview phases were administered to apprehend the phenomenon and provide clarity to what has already been established through the narration of the participants' experiences. The interviews were recorded via phone recorder, stored in an encrypted flash drive to ensure maximum confidentiality, and were transcribed for analysis and coding.

After the data-gathering phase, the researcher proceeded to the six-step thematic analysis phase to identify and code recurring themes. The collected data were reviewed, analyzed, coded, and interpreted into themes and meanings in the context of the phenomenon being studied.

#### Data Analysis Process and Procedure

Using the six-step reflexive thematic analysis proposed by Braun & Clarke (2014) as shown in Figure 3, the researcher closely examined the data embedded in experiences and described these meanings textually to identify common themes, particularly recurring topics, ideas, and patterns of meaning.



**Figure 3. Braun & Clarke's Six-step Reflexive Thematic Analysis**

Using Saldana's (2013) qualitative research coding manual, initial, simultaneous, process, and narrative Coding methods were used for the first coding cycle of the raw data. Each coding method contributed to forming the initial codes reflected in the codebook.

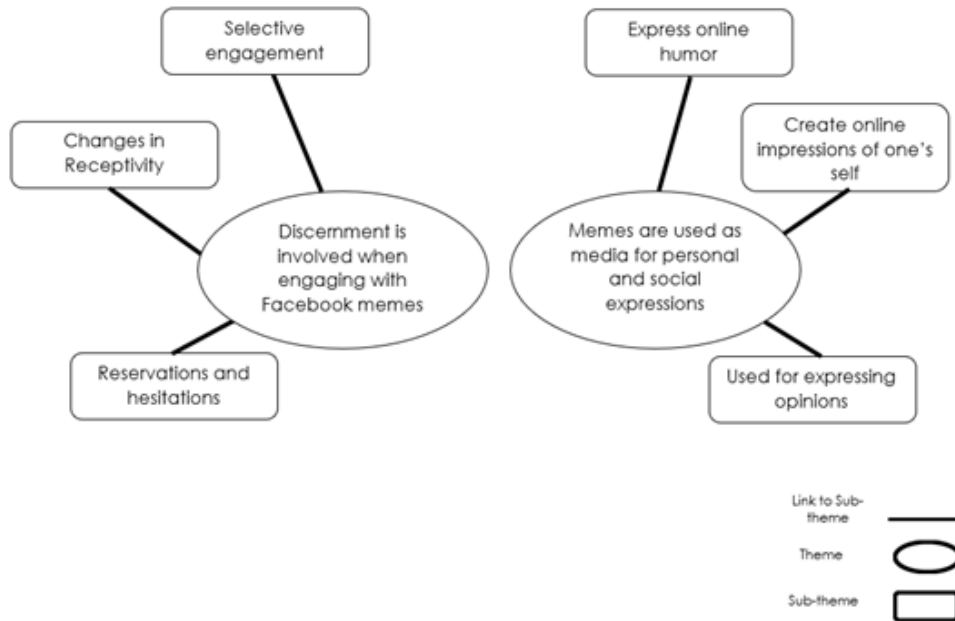
For the second coding phase, Saldana's (2013) axial coding method was used to reassemble the coded data that were sequestered in the initial coding phase into clustered meanings. Codes developed in the first phase were organized using Saldana's (2013) code mapping method and further refined through another coding cycle.

## **RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The interview protocol set the stage for extracting the needed data to supplement the analysis of interview transcriptions. This allowed the researcher to identify emerging themes from the lived experiences elicited by the participants. Phenomenological bracketing was practiced in the presentation of the narratives in order to isolate the natural formation of meanings from the participants' interviews.

The analysis of the participants' narratives resulted in the extraction of 212 significant statements, 306 formulated meanings, 21 clustered meanings, and six subsidiary themes.

The initial coding cycle produced 21 clusters which were classified into 12 distinct codes: Memes as Entertainment Media, Selectivity When Engaging with Memes, Memes Elicit Relatability and Familiarity, Memes can Cause Uneasiness, Changes in Receptivity, Worldviews, Formation of Online Identities, Online Impressions, Online Expressions, Factual Correctness, Reluctance, and Social Relevance. The second and last coding cycle led to the extraction of two core themes and their subsidiary themes, as shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 4. Thematic Map of the Core Themes and**

The first theme, Memes are used as media for personal and social expressions, portrays how the participants used Facebook memes to express their opinions and perspectives concerning social issues through the use of iterated internet jokes made by prosumers. The essence of the theme was how the participants used generally perceived media for comedic interactions to express their social and personal identities on Facebook—describing how Facebook memes were used to express their individuality when voicing opinions on topics that concerned the greater society. Participants immediately associated Facebook memes as humor devices on the internet used to express opinions on multitudes of topics ranging from casual online interactions to contested online debates like politics. The theme encompassed three subsidiary themes: Express online humor, Create online impressions of one’s self, and Use for expressing opinions.

The second theme, Discernment is involved when engaging with Facebook memes, was concerned with how the participants' diverse worldviews led to multitudes of perspectives regarding the same issue. Upon cross-referencing the clustered meanings from the narrative transcripts, many participants expressed their selectiveness when engaging with memes that did not align with their principles, morals, or personal preferences. Some expressed that they were more receptive to memes that evoked familiarity and relatability, which subsequently influenced how the participants' worldviews affected their online presence. The participants expressed their selectivity when it came to the memes they publicly displayed on their Facebook timelines. A consistent thread of description from the participants' narratives showed reluctance when engaging with Facebook memes that were contested by the public. The theme contained three subsidiary themes: Selective engagement, Changes in receptivity, and Reservations and hesitations.

#### Connection to the Research Questions

How do students perceive internet memes on Facebook? The first question was centered around probing the participants' perceptions concerning Facebook

memes. The linear snowball sampling method was used to identify the prospective participants of the study, which led to the formation of a chain-referral sample group consisting of seven students well-immersed in Facebook meme culture.

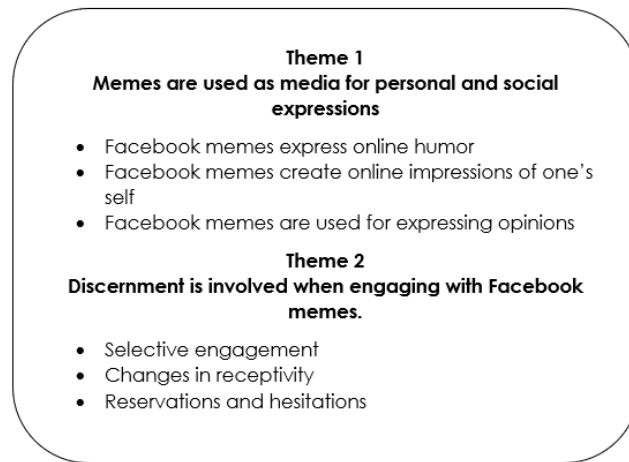
How do these perceptions of Facebook memes shape the online identities of students? The second research question drew on the ontological inquiry of the participants' perceptions. It concerned the parallel report of how the emerging themes contributed to the formation of the online identities of the participants. After rigorous coding cycles of the extracted data, two main factors contributed to how the participants presented themselves online.

The emergence of the two themes validated the research questions by providing insights into how the participants perceived Facebook memes in shaping online identities.

Mememes are used as media for personal and social expressions. The participants described Facebook memes as humorous media that were also used to express themselves and their opinions concerning various online conversations, including casual social exchanges and heated online debates. This was supported by three subsidiary themes: Facebook memes express online humor, Facebook memes create online impressions of one's self, and Facebook memes are used for expressing opinions. Parallel to the first theme, Facebook memes have evolved into other domains of expression, even beyond just light-hearted humor. The multimodal characteristic of internet memes allows endless iterations that fit multitudes of social expressions and identities in public channels like Facebook. With online discourse relying heavily on linguistic and social cues, internet memes function as media combining linguistic expressions and visual discernment into images readily understood by the public as internet jokes (Dancygier & Vandelanotte, 2017).

Discernment is involved when engaging with Facebook memes. The second theme described how the participants' principles and preferences affected their receptivity and perception of Facebook memes. Across the different phases of the interviews, the participants expressed recurrent discomfort about engaging with memes that deviated from what they believed was morally correct. Participants conveyed their aversion when talking about experiences that made them engage with memes they considered unfavorable. Conversely, participants who can associate a meme with something they relate to or their memory of someone are more receptive to engaging with the meme. This is supported by three subsidiary themes: Selective engagement, Changes in receptivity, and Reservations and hesitations. Parallel to the second theme, Huntington (2017) suggested that political internet memes can be classified as a separate genre of internet memes, showcasing the more significant social inferences of internet memes relative to their non-political counterpart. Furthermore, the persuasive nature of political memes is directly linked to the political identity of the prosumer. Despite their sole intention to sway the life-worlds of the public, they are less effective in persuading compared to non-political memes due to their exclusive and contended nature. The effects of political memes on online conversations can differ according to the social

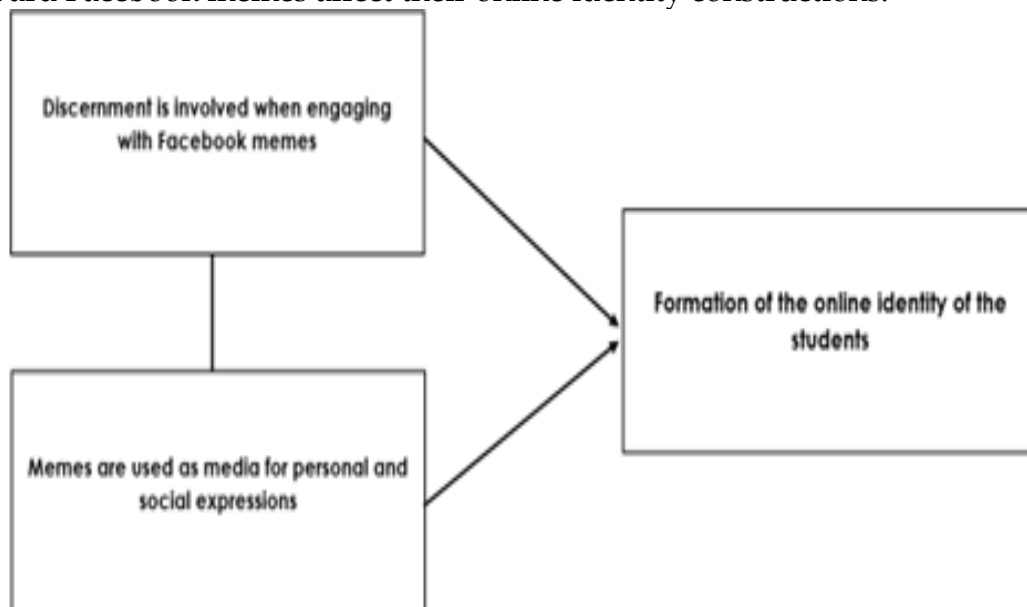
identities and personal leanings of the prosumers actively engaging with them. However, the attitude of prosumers toward internet memes is restricted by their own life-world and opinion.



**Figure 5. Demonstration of Themes**

By which the prosumer's life-worlds alter internet memes allowing the production and repurposing of other media to fit exclusively understood narratives. This evidently shows how the relationship between a prosumer and internet memes is reciprocal in nature, hence why the prosumer's own suppositions shape an internet meme and a prosumer's perception is subsequently altered by their exposure to internet memes (Al Zidjaly, 2017).

The emergent themes have been supplemented to develop a conceptual framework displayed in Figure 6 that establishes how the perceptions of students toward Facebook memes affect their online identity constructions.



**Figure 6. Conceptual Model of the Emergent Themes**

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Using Husserl's (1970) transcendental phenomenology, the study explored the lived experiences of the participants that led to the emergence of

themes fundamental to the investigation of how Facebook memes shaped the online identities of students. The first theme defined in the study, Memes are used as media for personal and social expressions, described the use of memes as media for humorous social expressions on Facebook. The multimodal characteristic of internet memes allowed endless iterations that fit multitudes of social expressions and identities in public channels like Facebook. With online discourse relying heavily on linguistic and social cues, internet memes functioned as media combining linguistic expressions and visual discernment into images readily understood by the public as internet jokes. The second theme emerging from the study, Discernment is involved when engaging with Facebook memes, described how selectivity and preferences were involved in the decision-making process of an individual prior to interacting with a Facebook meme. Exemplifying how perception was subjective, individuals were more likely to be open about social conversations that aligned with their life-worlds. Additionally, how the prosumers' life-worlds altered internet memes allowed the production and repurposing of other media to fit exclusively understood narratives.

#### **ADVANCED RESEARCH**

Building on Husserl's (1970) transcendental phenomenology, future research may advance the inquiry by examining how the evolving dynamics of participatory culture, algorithmic visibility, and digital labor further shape students' identity formation through memes. While this study highlighted memes as tools for personal and social expression and the role of discernment in selective engagement, advanced research could integrate perspectives from critical digital media studies to explore how platform governance, virality patterns, and socio-political contexts influence meme circulation and reception. Comparative analyses across different social media platforms (e.g., TikTok, Instagram, X) or cultural settings may also uncover variations in how memes function as identity markers, while longitudinal studies can capture shifts in meme practices over time. Incorporating multimodal discourse analysis alongside phenomenology could provide deeper insight into how linguistic, visual, and affective elements of memes converge to construct online identities within increasingly complex digital ecosystems.

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