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“Brazilians Would Rule the World If They Weren’t So Busy Making Memes”: Motivations and Characteristics of Internet Meme Consumption

Abstract

This article aimed to identify the motivations and characteristics of internet meme consumption by regular social media users. To this end, a qualitative study was conducted with 27 highly engaged meme consumers. The snowball sampling method was used, in which participants refer new respondents until no new information is obtained. Data analysis was carried out using Bardin’s content analysis method. The findings indicate that the primary motivation for consuming internet memes lies in their humorous nature, functioning as a mechanism for coping with boredom, escaping reality, and alleviating daily stress. As memes are light and easy to consume, they provide an immediate sense of enjoyment. Beyond entertainment, internet memes were also perceived as sources of information, identity, and social interaction. The audience that engages with memes is considered broad, encompassing a wide range of niches and varying according to age group, sexual orientation, occupation, local culture, social class, preferred social media platforms, and the time available throughout the day to engage with such content. This study contributes to the investigation of specific contexts, enabling broader theoretical developments and advancing research in consumer behavior.

Keywords: Internet memes; Consumption; Humor; Brazilian humor.

“O brasileiro só não domina o mundo porque tá ocupado fazendo meme”: Motivações e características do consumo de memes da internet

Resumo

Este artigo teve como objetivo identificar as motivações e características do consumo de memes da internet por parte de seus consumidores habituais em redes sociais. Para tal fim, foi realizada uma pesquisa qualitativa com 27 consumidores de memes da internet altamente envolvidos com esse tipo de conteúdo. Foi utilizada a técnica de bola de neve, em que os entrevistados indicam novos participantes até que não sejam obtidas novas informações. A análise dos dados contou com a análise de conteúdo de Bardin. Como resultado da pesquisa, a principal motivação para o consumo de memes da internet é o seu teor cômico, sendo uma forma de lidar com o tédio, a fuga da realidade e o alívio das tensões do dia a dia. Por ser um conteúdo leve e fácil de ser consumido, ele promove uma sensação de prazer instantâneo. Além da diversão, o consumo de memes também foi apontado como uma fonte de informação, de identificação e socialização. O público que mais utiliza memes é considerado amplo, abrangendo uma diversidade de nichos, podendo variar de acordo com a faixa etária, orientação sexual, ocupação, cultura local, classe social, rede social que utiliza e tempo disponível no dia para ver memes. Este estudo colabora com a investigação de contextos particulares, possibilitando construções teóricas mais amplas e contribuindo para o avanço das pesquisas em comportamento do consumidor.

Palavras-chave: Memes da internet; Consumo; Humor; Humor brasileiro.

Introduction

Every day, more and more memes emerge, ranging from variations of existing ones to new content or new types of memes (Coutinho; Loureiro, 2019). They have become an increasingly common form of humor, with their use becoming progressively more diverse (Börzsei, 2020).

Nowadays, any static image, audio, video, or even a simple phrase can become a meme. Memes reference television shows, series, celebrity lives, football games, everyday successes and failures, among others (Calixto, 2019), offering a wide range of creative opportunities. The speed at which memes are created about recent events is remarkable (Rentschler; Thrift, 2020). Responding to any emerging news, Brazilians quickly start producing memes, creating what is known online as an "internet craze." This reflects the popular online phrase, "everything becomes a meme in Brazil." The sources are endless, encompassing any topic that can be discussed worldwide. The question is not whether memes will be created, but rather which memes will emerge (Phillips; Miltner, 2012).

With each passing day, the topics covered become increasingly diverse, ranging from jokes and political or sports critiques to many others. Memes can even be created to cover news events (Börzsei, 2020). Many people become aware of important and significant events through this type of content.

Mememes are a type of content that has been gaining importance as objects of academic research due to their potential to serve as a lens for understanding certain aspects of contemporary culture (Shifman, 2014). However, according to a literature review on memes conducted by Chagas (2020), out of 1,080 articles, only 42 were publications in the field of marketing and consumption. The number of studies addressing this topic demonstrates the growing importance it has gained in recent years. However, the marketing field still has relatively few studies dedicated to this subject.

Internet memes are digital elements with common characteristics that are imitated and repeated in the online environment, becoming an important part of digital culture in recent years. However, despite being a growing phenomenon with significant societal impact, there are still few empirical studies in the academic field. This is surprising given that memes occupy a large part of Brazilians' daily lives. Memes may seem like insignificant or superficial jokes that are quickly shared and forgotten; however, they are a distinctive product of today's digital culture (Nissenbaum; Shifman, 2017), and humor can function as a mechanism for collective tension relief (Meyer, 2000), symbolically easing the pressure of living under critical social conditions and demonstrating that humor can be an effective form of protest. Accordingly, this article sought to identify the motivations and characteristics of internet meme consumption among regular social media users.

Internet Memes

Upon accessing social media, it is possible to observe an overwhelming presence of images conveying messages: memes (Giannini, 2017). This term has undergone a long process of adaptation before reaching its current interpretation (Chagas, 2020), with internet memes now being understood as content that spreads online and transforms along the way (Börzsei, 2020). "An internet meme is a fragment of culture, typically a joke, that gains influence through its online dissemination" (Davison, 2020, p. 144). According to Zanette, Blikstein, and Visconti (2019), internet memes are the cultural equivalent of biological genes, as they are transferred from person to person. However, during the transmission process, they can be modified.

The term meme is often misused when viral content is mistaken for memes. The key distinction lies in memes' capacity for replication (Tay, 2020). Memes are not singular units of analysis, such as a viral video or image that is merely shared repeatedly; rather, they are modified in the process. The difference between what is transformed and what is simply repeated is precisely what distinguishes memes from viral content. (Rentschler; Thrift, 2020).

Chagas (2021) explains that memes and viral content are not synonymous. One example that helps clarify this distinction is the case of the LOLcats meme family. These successful internet memes typically feature images of cute cats accompanied by humorous captions written in a peculiar style, as if from the cat's perspective (Tay, 2020). One of the most well-known images is *Happycat* (Figure 1), which emerged around 2005 and became a viral phenomenon within the LOLcats meme universe. However, not all memes go viral and remain relatively unknown. Many LOLcats continue to exist solely as memes. Memes can become viral by gaining popularity and being replicated independently of the context from which the family originated; conversely, viral content, once appropriated by the public, may evolve into memes (Chagas, 2021). According to Martino (2014), there is no strict separation between a memetic narrative and a viral narrative, as nothing prevents viral content from becoming a meme once it begins to undergo changes during its replication process. Thus, in practice, there appears to be a continuum between memes and viral content.

Figure 1: Happycat.



Source: <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/happy-cat>

It is believed that one of the first memes emerged in 1982 as a way to address a communication problem faced in online forums. Scott E. Fahlman believed misunderstandings were caused by misinterpreted humor. The solution was the use of the emoticon ":-)", resembling a smiling face, at the end of messages intended as jokes and not to be taken seriously. (Davison, 2020).

Around the 2010s, most consumers learned to use internet memes, becoming habitual users (Zanette; Blikstein; Visconti, 2019). Some reasons for this increase in meme dissemination and popularity are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Reasons for the Increased Dissemination of Memes.

Reason	Description	Source
Know Your Meme Platform Creation	An American website "dedicated to documenting internet phenomena: viral videos, image macros, catchphrases, web celebrities, and much more"	Know Your Meme (2019)
Meme generator websites	They have enabled internet users without extensive image editing skills to create memes based on popular pre-existing images.	Zanette, Blikstein, and Visconti (2019)
Graphic Editing Software/Apps	Provide the necessary tools to create memes on a computer or smartphone.	Santos (2019)
Internet Evolution	Serves as a platform for sharing, where memes can migrate and evolve.	Börzsei (2020)
Growth in Social Media Users	Exposed a wide range of users to memes through sharing on pages or friends' profiles.	Coutinho and Loureiro (2019)
Increase in Smartphone Usage	Gave users access to social media in the palm of their hands, anywhere, and at any time, especially during so-called "dead time," such as while commuting or waiting for an appointment. The smartphone has undoubtedly been one of the main drivers of meme proliferation, as it allows effortless sharing with a single tap.	Coutinho and Loureiro (2019)
Accessible Language	Requires little effort to be understood, enabling broader dissemination and allowing a larger number of people to grasp the message.	Coutinho and Loureiro (2019)

Source: Developed by the authors.

In scientific literature, it is possible to find a variety of types of internet memes. One of the most common types is the image macro. Some involve adding the same text to different images, while others consist of adding different texts to the same image. This type of meme thrives in the online environment due to its ease of creation and distribution (Davison, 2020). An example of an image macro is *Advice Dog* (Börzsei, 2020), as shown in Figure 2: a photo of a dog placed in the center, with a rainbow-colored background, offering some kind of advice to the viewer, written above and below its head.

Figure 2: Image macro example: Advice dog.



Source: <https://br.pinterest.com/pin/136867276145170311/> e <http://www.quickmeme.com/meme/367s>

Comic strip-style memes, one of the earliest formats to emerge, follow a panel structure that develops a narrative form (Oliveira Neta, 2017). Their main feature is the use of multiple panels, with a humorous situation typically presented at the end, as shown in Figure 3. The advantages of this type of meme include the ability to convey more information and the flexibility to address a wide range of topics. The disadvantage is that they tend to be lengthy (Coutinho; Loureiro, 2019).

Figure 3: Comic Strip Meme Example.



Source: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/tecnologia/album/2012/11/16/meme-o-que-queremos-faz-sucesso-na-web-ironizando-comportamento-dos-internautas-veja.htm> and <https://www.facebook.com/memesacessiveis/photos/a.121148251908024/288011061888408/>

Phrase-based memes are among the few types that can be used beyond the internet. They originate from videos, texts, or audios that become popular in the virtual world and are

soon transformed into catchphrases that fit a wide range of situations. Although phrase-based memes can be altered, not all the information they contain can be modified, as the elements that carry meaning must be preserved (Coutinho; Loureiro, 2019).

Memes featuring fixed characters are one of the earliest forms of meme creation. Two examples are Chapolin (a character from the series *Chaves*) and Nazaré Tedesco (a character from the soap opera *Senhora do Destino*), both widely used to create memes about a variety of topics, as shown in Figure 4. They generally originate from a humorous situation or expression of a real person or fictional character, and their images or voices become memes applied to various contexts (Coutinho; Loureiro, 2019).

Figure 4: Examples of Memes with Fixed Characters.

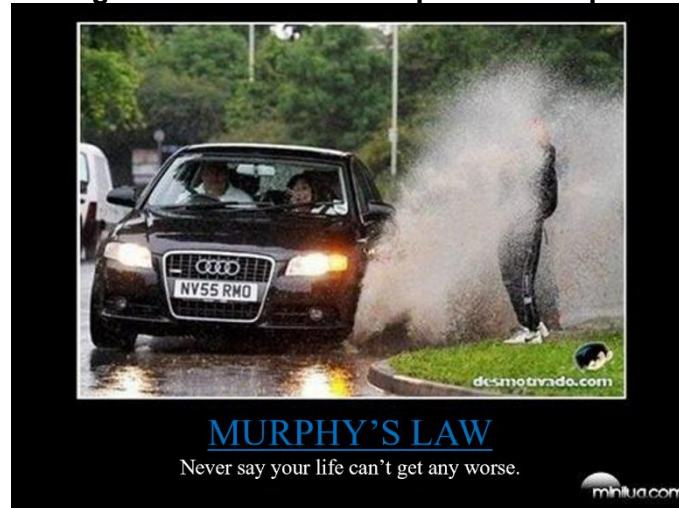


Source: <https://br.pinterest.com/pin/546765210983475551/> and <https://gshow.globo.com/Bastidores/noticia/criador-de-memes-da-nazare-de-senhora-do-destino-explica-perfil-nas-redes-sociais.ghtml>

“Loss memes” are those that have no meaning. They are created so that people waste time trying to understand a confusing image that does not convey a clear message. The humor lies in the user realizing they have wasted time and sharing it to trick their friends as well. This type of meme typically does not persist for long (Coutinho; Loureiro, 2019).

“Demotivational posters” are memes that prioritize humor over the message being conveyed. They are not as popular nowadays but were very successful in the early 2010s. The main characteristic of this type of meme is its dark humor, usually featuring images of awkward or strange situations with a dark background to draw attention (Coutinho; Loureiro, 2019). An example is presented in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Demotivational poster example.



Source: <https://minilua.com/melhores-placas-desmotivacionais-que-voce-ja-viu-1/>

Among the various types of memes, these were the ones identified in academic studies. They are not used only in isolation but can also be combined. A commonly used example is the combination of fixed characters with phrases (Coutinho; Loureiro, 2019).

Dawkins (1976) presents three key concepts that help better understand how the meme manifests as a replicator: (i) longevity (the ability to persist in collective memory), (ii) fertility (the ability to generate multiple copies of itself), and (iii) fidelity of copying (the ability to replicate identically).

Coutinho and Loureiro (2019) discuss these memes within the context of the virtual world. Longevity refers to the duration a replicator remains active. Internet memes are replicated at a very high speed, resulting in a shorter lifespan, whereas non-Internet memes, such as behaviors, beliefs, and ideas, have a longer longevity rate. Every year, various memes emerge in response to new events and typical dates, such as the World Cup, the Olympics, Carnival, Christmas, etc. Most of these memes fall out of use or remain only in the memory of a few. An internet meme that persists for years without being forgotten can be considered successful in terms of longevity.

The second key concept, fertility, refers to how quickly a replicator produces its copies, that is, its ability to generate a greater number of instances of itself. In the case of internet memes, this refers to the speed at which a meme is replicated or shared among users online. For example, if meme X reaches one thousand people per hour, while meme Y reaches the same number in half an hour, meme Y has greater fertility than meme X.

The third key concept, fidelity of copying, refers to the ability to avoid errors during the replication process, ensuring a greater number of copies that are identical to the original. The more similar the copy is, the lower the mutation rate and the greater the replicator's longevity. In other words, memes with less information are more easily memorized and tend to have greater longevity.

Table 2 below presents a synthesis of key information addressed in this section, such as the distinction between memes and viral content, the types of memes identified in the literature, and the main characteristics of internet memes.

Table 2: Synthesis of Meme Typologies and Characteristics in the Literature.

Element	Type	Description	Authors
Content Types	Memes	Content that is transformed and modified as it is shared.	Rentschler and Thrift (2020); Chagas (2021); Tay (2020).
	Virals	Content that becomes well-known by being repeatedly shared online.	
Meme Type	Image macro	Adding the same text to different images or adding different texts to a single image.	Davison (2020); Tay (2020); Börzsei (2020).
	Comic Strip Memes	Use of multiple panels that culminate in a humorous situation.	Coutinho and Loureiro (2019); Oliveira Neta (2017).
	Phrase-Based Memes	They originate from videos, texts, or audios that become popular and are transformed into catchphrases applicable to various situations.	Coutinho and Loureiro (2019); Oliveira Neta (2017).
	Memes with Fixed Characters	They arise from humorous situations or expressions of a real person or fictional character, and their images or voices become memes applied to various contexts.	Coutinho and Loureiro (2019).
	Loss Memes	They have no meaning. They are created so that people waste time trying to understand a confusing image that does not convey a message.	Coutinho and Loureiro (2019).
	Demotivational Posters	Dark humor memes typically using images of awkward or strange situations with a dark background to attract attention.	Coutinho and Loureiro (2019).
Memes Characteristics	Longevity	Ability to endure overtime. It is the duration in which the replicator remains active. An internet meme that persists for years without being forgotten is considered successful in terms of longevity.	Coutinho and Loureiro (2019); Dawkins (1976).
	Fertility	Ability to generate multiple copies of itself. It refers to the speed at which a replicator produces its copies, that is, the ability to create a greater number of instances of itself. In other words, it is the rate at which a meme is replicated or shared among people on the internet.	
	Fidelity of Copying	Ability to replicate identically. It is the capacity to avoid errors during the copying process, ensuring a greater number of copies identical to the original.	

Source: Developed by the authors.

Methodological Procedures

This article aimed to identify the motivations and characteristics of internet meme consumption among habitual consumers on social networks. To this end, the research

employed procedures based on the qualitative method, which enables understanding the phenomenon within its context by analyzing the perspectives of the individuals involved and allowing an integrated analysis (Godoy, 1995). Furthermore, the study is descriptive, as it seeks to describe characteristics of a population or phenomenon.

For data collection, 27 interviews were conducted using semi-structured guides, where the topics to be addressed are previously specified through central questions. The researcher decides the sequence and appropriateness of these questions during the interview, allowing freedom of expression for the interviewee and enabling the interviewer's intervention to ensure the conversation remains focused on achieving the research objectives (Cheron; Salvagni; Colomby, 2022).

The participants selected for the research met the following criteria: i) they acknowledge that memes are an important type of content in their daily lives; ii) they consume and share memes daily, indicating a high level of involvement; and iii) they self-identify and are recognized by others as highly knowledgeable about internet memes.

The research employed the snowball sampling method, which consists of participants referring new interviewees (Vinuto, 2014). There were 17 respondents from cities in the state of Minas Gerais, 7 from cities in São Paulo, one from Bahia, one from Goiás, and one Brazilian residing in Barcelona, Spain. Ages ranged from 19 to 34 years old.

The interviews were transcribed, and data analysis was conducted using Bardin's (1977) content analysis, which is considered a data treatment technique aimed at identifying what is being said about a particular theme, as well as seeking a deeper level that goes beyond the manifest meanings (Minayo, 2000).

Results and Discussion

The literature reviewed presents memes as a type of digital content, usually humorous, that spreads rapidly and transforms along the way (Börzsei, 2020; Davison, 2020). When asked what an internet meme is, some participants showed difficulty in providing a clear definition, indicating that the concept is not very well defined, as exemplified by Participant 7's statement.

"What is a meme? Wow, that's a really tough question, you know? Because I don't know, in my head, there's no clear definition of meme. A meme is kinda random, more than anything else. It's like, you see something and you're like 'lol'. It's just a random thing that represents many aspects of life, a funny way to express an idea without really saying anything. It's a funny way to show everyday stuff. Something like that." (Interviewee 7).

However, a point of strong agreement among the interviewees and the literature was the consensus that memes fundamentally have a humorous essence, which may include images, videos, phrases, or sounds addressing a wide range of funny situations. Some

participants acknowledged that transformations can occur, but they did not consider them a mandatory characteristic for an object to be classified as a meme.

"Internet memes... I think they are kind of a communication tool that people use online. They take things from videos or situations that end up going viral, and they take that scene and use it [...], kind of like they flip the meaning of the image. Sometimes there's a meme that comes from a specific situation, and then people take that image and use it in a completely different one." (Interviewee 19).

As with Interviewee 19, other participants in the study also recognize that modifications occur, an aspect highlighted in the literature by Tay (2020), Rentschler and Thrift (2020) and Chagas (2021). They gave examples of changes made so that a meme can fit into different everyday contexts. However, such modifications are not seen as essential, and no clear distinction is made between memes and viral content, as can be observed in the following statements.

"Oh, I think they are, I don't know, those kinds of communications that go viral. They're usually funny, but I think it's more about having the potential to go viral, something that lots of people know about, from all kinds of audiences" (Interviewee 13).

"You know what I used to think a meme was when it all started? I don't know if you remember those comics with little stick figures, with all the funny faces and everything. So, I started understanding memes as that, right? But then I realized there were other kinds of things being considered memes, as long as they went viral and had some kind of context for being used." (Interviewee 23).

Thus, the perception of the respondents aligns more closely with Martino (2014), who states that there is no rigid separation between a meme and a viral, with transformation being a possibility within the transmission process, as also noted by Zanette, Blikstein, and Visconti (2019). In addition to this point, the concept of a meme may vary from person to person. Some interviewees even mentioned the question "are stickers memes too?" during their interviews. The following interviewee illustrates how this perception may vary.

"Another important thing is the concept of a meme. For me, it means one thing, but if you talk to someone else, like, man, it's totally different, you know? Like, 'oh no, a meme is just an image', 'a meme is just a GIF', or 'a meme has to be of a famous person.' But for me, no, you know? I took a picture of my sister, and to me, that was a meme" (Interviewee 16).

Other important characteristics of internet memes presented in the literature were also mentioned by the interviewees, as illustrated below.

"I see memes as anything that's, in a way, kind of generic, you know? So they fit into a niche or something a lot of people can relate to. But at the same time, it's something that changes really fast—especially for Gen Z, right? Like, every 20 minutes, the context has already shifted. And it has to be kind of funny, or have some dark humor, or a very specific theme. That's what I understand a meme to be." (Interviewee 1).

"What I understand today... Let me think about how to put this. They're fragments of things that happened; day-to-day stuff, things from the internet, from TV, and people take that snippet and use it to make a joke. For me, that's what a meme is." (Interviewee 12).

The interviewees' statements above highlight points discussed in the literature, specifically: (i) the emergence and constant transformation of memes due to the overwhelming amount of information currently being created and shared, memes appear quickly but often disappear just as fast (Coutinho; Loureiro, 2019; Rentschler; Thrift, 2020) and (ii) the possibility for a meme to emerge from a wide range of everyday situations, whether from someone's personal life, a scene on television, or any other event circulated on the internet (Calixto, 2019).

The first question in the interview guide was about what, in the participant's opinion, constitutes an internet meme. Even at this initial stage, some interviewees brought up interesting points regarding identity, social and cultural capital, and the use of memes by brands. However, these topics will not be explored in depth, as they are beyond the scope of this study. The following statements illustrate these points.

"What I understand as a meme is this closeness in communication, that sense of identification you have with something [...] that the internet brought and made so present in our lives that you relate to it so much you end up using it like a daily phrase, like saying good morning. 'Good morning, Brazil, good afternoon, Italy,' you know?" (Interviewee 16).

"Man, I can pick up on irony or some message just by seeing a meme used as a reply to something. So nowadays, whether we like it or not, it's kind of essential. I can't imagine myself not replying to a group chat with a sticker, for example, which is basically a meme from the internet, you know? So, it's something that's really become part of my daily routine." (Interviewee 2).

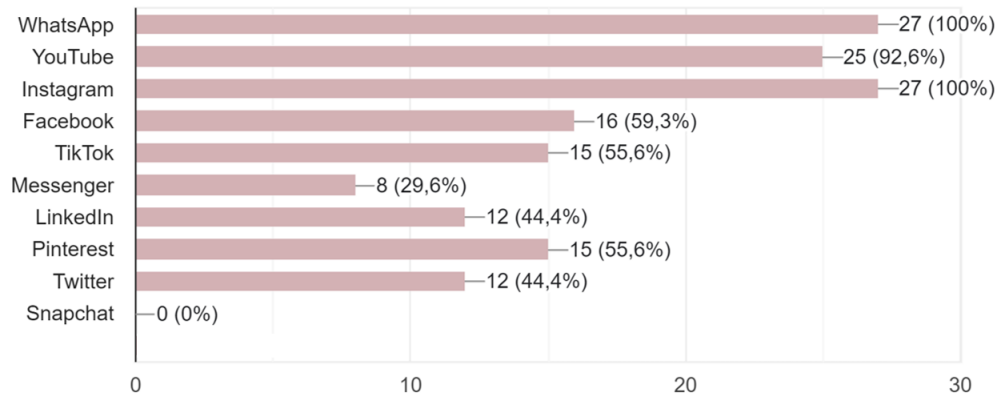
"A meme is, above all, a set of slang expressions, right? A language, a form of recognition between groups, you know? I mean, it's a language of recognition beyond the language we use in real life, you get it?" (Interviewee 14).

"I think it's a fun way to share certain kinds of information, sometimes even a fun way to advertise something. Like, if you want to make an ad, and since Brazilians really like memes, and make a lot of them, it becomes a way to communicate in a fun way." (Interviewee 27).

In order to observe the interviewees' use of social media, a multiple-choice question was included in the form containing demographic data. The options presented were the most commonly used social media platforms in Brazil, based on data from *Redação Escola de E-commerce* (2022), and the results are shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Social Media Used by Interviewees.

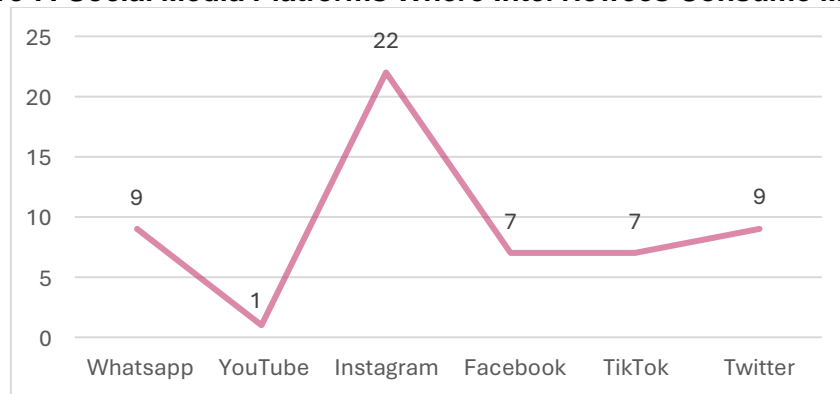
"BRAZILIANS WOULD RULE THE WORLD IF THEY WEREN'T SO BUSY MAKING MEMES": MOTIVATIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERNET MEME CONSUMPTION



Source: Developed by the authors.

From the figure above, it is evident that all interviewees use WhatsApp and Instagram, followed by YouTube, used by 92.6% of participants, making these the three most used social media platforms among them. However, when asked during the interview about where they usually view internet memes, not all of the social media platforms listed in the questionnaire were mentioned, indicating that some of them are used primarily for other types of content consumption. Instagram was the most frequently mentioned platform (22 mentions), followed by WhatsApp and Twitter (9), Facebook and TikTok (7), and only one interviewee mentioned YouTube, as shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Social Media Platforms Where Interviewees Consume Memes.



Source: Developed by the authors.

The interviewees expressed interest in joining groups and following profiles where memes are shared, as illustrated by the statements: "Wow, on Instagram, most of what I have are meme accounts" (Interviewee 10) and "I follow a lot of pages just for the memes. Actually, lately, I've been following pages basically because of memes" (Interviewee 11). However, beyond following specialized profiles, content recommendations driven by social media algorithms were also mentioned, as Interviewee 26 states: "Oh, since the algorithm is already 'addicted,' I open my phone and memes just show up." This feature interprets that certain types of content are preferred by the user based on data generated by their activity in the digital

environment, analyzing likes, comments, shares, and even views, thereby recommending posts similar to the themes they have interacted with.

Regarding the times of day when interviewees typically consume memes, most reported starting right after waking up, as Interviewee 9 expressed: "I think my day feels different. If I wake up and don't see a meme, I say, 'wow, something's missing'". Consumption continues throughout the day through exposure to posts when opening social media and receiving memes from friends, lasting until the moment they go to bed.

"All the time. When I get up, the first thing I grab is my phone. I open my Instagram and say, 'Oh, let me see what's new today,' and I start watching memes and sending tons of memes to my friends. [...] I'm on my phone all the time because my phone is my work tool. [...] And if you go into any of my social media accounts, there's memes. So, anytime I pick up my phone and open a social network, there's a meme, like, within a minute, there's a meme rolling by." (Interviewee 7).

"People already send them to me naturally, without me even having to look. And even if I don't search for them, if I scroll through my feed, I'll still see memes." (Interviewee 15).

"If I wake up at 3 a.m. and open Instagram or WhatsApp, someone will have sent me a meme." (Interviewee 17).

Some participants stated that they only view memes during their free time, when they get home, relax, and have time to browse the internet. Others mentioned that even in short idle moments, they are on their phones looking at memes, often consuming them alongside other activities, such as at the gym, during meals, at work, or while attending classes. Respondents who work with social media reported being exposed to memes throughout the entire day and sometimes even getting distracted from their tasks by them.

"Look, I really like memes, you know? So throughout the day, whenever I get a little break, a moment to breathe, I go to social media for a bit, you know?" (Interviewee 5).

"All day long (laughs). But mostly at night, you know? When I have my time and I say, 'Okay, let's take a break from studying and just relax.'" (Interviewee 10).

"Waking up happy and going to bed happy, right? The stress hits in the afternoon." (Interviewee 5).

The statements from Interviewees 10 and 5 highlight key motivations behind the consumption of this type of content. Due to their humorous nature, the primary reason cited by participants was relaxation, a way to cope with boredom through content that is light and easy to consume. As Interviewee 27 explains: "I think it's because it's a quick joke, you know? It's something we usually don't have to think too hard about, and it's very fast, so it gives you an instant sense of pleasure, right?". Additionally, memes are mentioned as a form of escapism, a means of disconnecting from reality and relieving the stress of everyday life, as discussed by Meyer (2000) and illustrated in the following statements.

"It's like a little pill of peace, you know? Like, everything's chaos. My job is really draining me, I'm far from my family, my sister is back in the countryside

of São Paulo, missing us... It's like, two seconds, and we're laughing at something that feels genuine, which is really rare these days. That's why I like it so much." (Interviewee 16).

"Sometimes you have a really exhausting day, full of problems. Like, I work in customer service. [...] Sometimes, wow, there's just one issue after another. So memes are kind of a way to disconnect from reality, you could say, right?" (Interviewee 26).

The statements from Interviewees 16 and 26 illustrate the need for comic relief as a mechanism for coping with responsibilities, whether related to work or study, that generate stress, as well as with various everyday challenges, as noted by Meyer (2000). However, the motivation for consuming memes goes beyond entertainment; memes also serve as a source of information. Some participants mentioned that upon waking up, they reach for their smartphones with the intention not only of viewing memes but also of catching up on what has happened in the last few hours.

"It's an escape, entertainment, and there's also a bit of information in it, right? There are a lot of memes I get that, like, for example, I'll mention World War III, which for me was great. It's old, but it's a good one (laughs). I was like, 'Dude, what's going on?' Then I went looking for info, like checking G1 and all that, to understand the situation. But yeah, it's a source of information. It's all of that." (Interviewee 1).

"Mainly, I think it's humor and distraction. And I also think it's a way to stay updated, you know? Because there are memes about everything, right? There are memes about politics, culture, social issues, regional memes, [...] national memes, and international memes too, which is cool for keeping me in the loop about what's going on." (Interviewee 11).

This highlights a point in the literature regarding memes' ability to even cover news (Börzsei, 2020), serving as informative content through which consumers become aware of important events related to a given topic after encountering a meme. Additionally, issues related to identification and socialization were mentioned as further motivations for meme consumption.

"I like to keep laughing, watching these funny things, relating to them, saying 'wow, this is so me.' Then I send them to my friends like, 'this is us.' So, I enjoy watching things I identify with that make me laugh, you know?" (Interviewee 8).

"I also really like it for socializing, you know? Like, if it's been a while since you talked to someone, you say, 'Okay, I'm going to send a meme.' Then you send the meme, and it hits the mark. 'Hey, how are you?' 'I'm good, and you? I saw this meme and thought of you, check it out.'" (Interviewee 10).

"So, often you don't have much to say, so you go ahead and start a conversation with a meme, because usually you send a meme to someone with something that you recognize in them, right? I get that because, like, I don't send the same meme to a bunch of people at once. I send a specific meme to a specific person." (Interviewee 17).

The issue of identification, of feeling represented in that content, relates to the individual's sense of identity, while the use of memes as a means of socialization and interaction with others reflects aspects of social capital as theorized by Bourdieu (2010).

A summary and categorization of the reasons given by the interviewees for consuming internet memes can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3: Reasons for Consuming Internet Memes.

Category	Reason
Meme characteristic	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Light content- Easy to consume- Humor
Escaping reality	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- A lot to do / many daily responsibilities- Tension relief
Entertainment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Nothing to do / boredom- Distraction- Fun
Interaction with others	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Joking / teasing- Communication facilitator / form of language- Means of interaction and bonding
Identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Identifying with the content, feeling represented
Information source	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Keeping informed about the news- Ideas for creating new memes
Habit	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- It is already part of daily life/routine

Source: Developed by the authors.

The audience that consumes internet memes is broad, encompassing a variety of niches that engage with this type of content. Among different groups, there are memes that tend to resonate with each of them. In this study, age emerged as the predominant characteristic in the interviewees' responses when discussing this diversity, indicating a higher likelihood that certain memes are consumed, understood, and shared within specific age groups.

"Who do I consider the audience? I think there are many meme niches on the internet. And then there are the memes that will reach my niche, which is people between 25 and 30 years old. There are younger memes that appeal to a generation called Generation Z, which probably my generation won't even understand. [...] Older people have a different kind of meme." (Interviewee 1).

"I think there can also be segmentation, with each age group having its own type of meme, right? Because there's this issue of identification too, since the things my younger friends go through, I don't. So, the memes for their age relate to their daily experiences. And the ones I consume relate to what I go through today. [...] Younger people, I think, consume more memes, but they're different memes for different age groups." (Interviewee 3).

However, even though this type of content is present in the daily lives of individuals of different ages, internet meme consumption, according to the interviewees, is more prevalent among younger people. This is attributed to their greater ease in handling technology and spending more time online. According to the respondents, the more exposure one has to the internet, the greater the likelihood of understanding memes. It is also possible that, as the years go by, members of this younger generation will continue to consume memes due to their familiarity with them, thus extending the age range of the meme-consuming audience.

"Mostly younger people. [...] They're the ones who use memes more than older people, right? Also because of understanding, older people sometimes

aren't keeping up with everything that's happening on the internet, and sometimes you send them a meme and they just don't get it." (Interviewee 2).

"So the audience ends up being people who have contact with the internet, because, like, it's rare for older people to really get memes. [...] I have a lot of contact with older folks [...] and, like, it's rare that my older friends, like over 40, understand memes. [...] My parents don't get memes because they don't understand the logic, you know? [...] They're like, 'okay, but who is this person? What are they doing?' And I'm like, 'guys, that doesn't matter'. [...] What matters is what's happening there, the expression, the phrase, whatever." (Interviewee 7).

An interesting point emerged in some cases where interviewees referred to the audience that consumes memes as being predominantly younger, even though they and their close friends, frequent meme consumers, did not belong to that age group.

"Well, I think it's a younger audience... I mean, I'm not that young anymore... Am I still a young adult? No, right? I'm an adult already, right? I'm 28. Oh, and here I was thinking I was a young adult. Oh my God. It's just that in my head, I still feel like I'm 20, you know? I don't know if that happens to you. (laughs) [...] So, I think it's people around my age, up to their early thirties, who still think they're young." (Interviewee 15).

There appears to be some confusion among participants regarding the age group to which they belong. The lifestyle of today's youth differs significantly from that of previous generations. A phenomenon mentioned by some interviewees is emerging adulthood or prolonged adolescence, which refers to the extension of the adolescent phase due to various factors and has direct implications for the transition into adulthood (Silva, 2021). Many individuals are choosing to remain in education for longer periods, often continuing to live with their parents, which delays the start of their professional careers, marriage, and parenthood. In addition, the increase in life expectancy contributes to a shift in how adulthood and aging are perceived.

Another relevant aspect highlighted by participants, in addition to age, was sexual orientation. As some interviewees pointed out: "And I think gender and sexual orientation also have a big impact. Like, the LGBT community has a lot of memes, a lot of memes" (Interviewee 16); "LGBT people make memes out of everything. [...] I think they manage to create more memes. They have a faster dynamic, a greater ease with it" (Interviewee 26). Most participants stated that the LGBT audience is the one most deeply involved in the topic and that they are more engaged in the consumption, dissemination, and creation of memes, especially gay men, who were most frequently mentioned.

"Oh, it's the gay audience. I mean, the LGBTQIA+ community. They're the ones who use memes the most. And gay men, without a doubt. We know how to work with this stuff. We know what we're doing. [...] No modesty here." (Interviewee 5).

"Well, I think it has to do with, although it's a bit of a stereotype, at least my gay friends understand and use memes way more than my straight friends do." (Interviewee 21).

"Well, I think the main audience is people around 20 to 30 years old. And I believe the ones who use memes the most are women and gay people. I think it's more along those lines. At least, those are the people I follow the most on Twitter. I think straight men probably have their own memes, but they're more specific. Because I also think there are meme niches, right? Some memes appeal more to women, some to the LGBTQ community, and then there are probably those that appeal to straight men. But I think the majority, and the ones that get updated more frequently, are the memes aimed at women and the LGBTQ community." (Interviewee 19).

Women, whether heterosexual or homosexual, were mentioned as strong consumers of memes. However, it was highlighted that frequent interaction with the LGBTQ community may influence this preference for such content, as illustrated by Interviewee 7, who identifies as homosexual: "The friends of mine who understand memes are the ones I send memes to. And they're around a bunch of 'queers' all the time. Just from spending so much time with 'queers'. I think that's it. LGBTQ people have this habit of communicating through memes". It is worth noting that a large portion of the interviewees occasionally belong to the LGBT¹ community, which may present a bias in the research. Still, even some heterosexual participants pointed out that the LGBTQ environment, in general, has greater mastery and involvement with memes.

The difference in meme consumption across social classes was a point raised by some participants. Interviewee 16 is an economist who works at an investment firm, comes from a middle-class background, and does volunteer work. Because she interacts with people from both ends of the socioeconomic spectrum, she reports noticing that memes are more commonly consumed by individuals from lower-income or middle-class backgrounds. She attributes this to the lack of access to cultural activities, as she puts it, and to the stronger identification with the characteristics of meme content.

"Because I think there's a certain lack of access to culture, which, for me, has a big impact. [...] I've met a lot of people, worked with a lot of people [...]. So, I've always had that comparison, and with some friends from lower-income backgrounds, you can really see how much more they embrace memes. [...] It's a Brazil thing, inequality. [...] And then there's this embrace of memes because they're so simple. [...] Someone from a higher economic class might just think, like, 'this is silly,' you know? Because they're already focused on other goals. Their perspective is different. [...] Or maybe, more open-minded people might say 'oh, that's funny,' but then they move on, they don't share it—and I think that's really important for memes too. [...] For a meme to really become a meme, for example, for Toquinho to become Toquinho, for Inês Brasil to become Inês Brasil, a lot of people had to share it. [...] I think that the sharing aspect is really important. And then, when you put this economic class, it just doesn't go anywhere. It dies there, I see that." [...] And then, because the person lacks cultural options, it's not like they'll go, 'oh, I'll just swing by Sala São Paulo,' or 'I'll sign up for a book club,' or 'I'll go check out the Mário de Andrade Library.' No, that's not it. They'll pick up their phone,

¹ Statement based on statements from interviewees who, without being asked, mentioned their sexual orientation.

which they're still paying off in installments, go on social media, which is free, and they'll laugh. [...] So I think that identification is key." (Interviewee 16).

"Oh, I think it's all just poor folks having fun on the internet. I, the working class, feel seen through the suffering there. I think it's about the proletariat, really, the internet is our fun. I'm speaking for myself, I don't even care, I'm judging myself. [...] I lie down in bed and scroll through my memes. It's the working class's daily joy. I even fall asleep on just one side." (Interviewee 21).

The issue of identification aligns with what Bourdieu (2010) states about the working-class finding enjoyment in what feels familiar. The tendency is for them to feel more comfortable with narratives that are easier to understand and that do not use refined language, making them more accessible. Additionally, some interviewees mentioned the desire to be part of that representation and to see themselves reflected in the joys or sorrows present in the content, as the author also affirms.

Other characteristics, though less frequently mentioned, also tend to influence the type of meme consumed by a given individual. These include profession, geographic location, and the social media platform they use. People who share a profession or live in or frequent a particular area are more likely to relate to certain topics. Additionally, different social media platforms tend to favor specific types of memes, as noted by the interviewee below:

"But I also understand that there are profession-specific memes, and I'll give you an example: there's a page on Instagram called *Faria Lima Elevator*, which is usually followed by people in the financial market, working in executive areas. Depending on the joke, depending on the meme, it's something that only those people can understand, right?" (Interviewee 23).

"In fact, I believe that memes can vary depending on the platform, right? What shows up on Facebook is usually different from what appears on Instagram, or WhatsApp, or even Twitter." (Interviewee 23).

Thus, in summary, according to the interviewees, the audience for a specific type of meme can vary, covering different segments of society and being shaped by factors such as: (i) age group; (ii) sexual orientation; (iii) occupation; (iv) geographical location, that is, local culture; (v) social class; (vi) the social media platform used; and (vii) the amount of time available during the day to view memes. Various groups were mentioned, but the ones most emphasized were age, with a focus on younger people, and sexual orientation, with many references to the LGBT community.

Final Considerations

This article aimed to identify the motivations and characteristics behind the consumption of internet memes by regular social media users. First, the concept of internet memes is not perceived by the research participants as having a clear definition. However, there is strong agreement regarding their humorous aspects. Transformations are seen as possible, but not essential for content to be considered a meme. Thus, according to the

interviewees, there is no clear distinction between memes and viral content, with modifications being regarded as a possible part of the transmission process.

As a result of the research, the main motivation for consuming internet memes is their humorous nature, serving as a way to cope with boredom, escape reality, and relieve everyday stress. Because memes are light and easy to consume, they offer a sense of instant gratification. Interviewees reported following meme profiles on social media and receiving memes from friends, maintaining contact with this content from the moment they wake up until they go to bed. In addition to entertainment, meme consumption was also identified as a source of information, personal identification, and socialization.

The audience that most uses memes is considered broad, encompassing a variety of niches that may vary according to age group, sexual orientation, occupation, local culture, social class, social media platform used, and available time during the day to view memes. However, there is a noted predominance among young people due to their greater familiarity with the language, as well as among the LGBT community, who were considered by participants to be the most engaged in meme creation and sharing.

This research contributes by highlighting how memes serve as an important form of communication for their habitual consumers, constituting a language that supports the messages they wish to convey. Furthermore, this study aids the investigation of particular contexts, enabling broader theoretical constructions and contributing to the advancement of consumer behavior research. Suggestions for future research include: (i) conducting a study focused on the LGBTQIA+ community to investigate their high involvement with internet memes and expertise on the subject; and (ii) research that profiles users of each social media platform, as well as the predominance of meme types on each.

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