Exploring Online Memes as Pedagogical Tools in Health Knowledge and Behaviour

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Abstract
This exploratory workshop consisted of a rapid, intuitive, exploratory session around the following briefing: create a meme that displays understandable, accessible health-related content. The workshop addressed current scientific mistrust - partly due to a chasm between hermetic authoritative discourse, and the allure of subjective skepticism. Online disinformation has been pointed out as a main contributing factor in this phenomenon, particularly during the recent pandemic: often critical of scientific reliability, often using crude humour and irony - yet always direct, impactful, and accessible. The session therefore explored how health experts and policy-makers could benefit from communicating beyond formal discourse, adopting online semantics and aesthetics as tools for pedagogy with skeptical demographics. Participants consisted of voluntary conference delegates attending the respective session. Hand-produced memes explored the unlikely merging of reliable scientific information and delirious online semantics. A range of visual content, sourced from online meme communities and meme generator apps (and printed prior to the session), were provided in order to be captioned with statements created on the spot: images were printed prior to the session, and captions were handwritten using markers. This revisitation of tangible, material processes goes against expectations that memes have an exclusively digital existence, thus opening new possibilities for hybrid discourse and outcomes. Lastly, the group reflected on the pedagogical applicability of the outcomes in design classrooms, online communities, and public campaigns. The output was a collection of large-size, low-resolution printed/handwritten memes. The workshop ended with a group discussion on the viability and applicability of the produced drafts and adopted processes.

Keywords: Design for Health, Meme Design, Online Health Communication, Scientific Mistrust, Exploratory Design

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Introduction

The workshop "Exploring Online Memes as Pedagogical Tools in Health Knowledge and Behaviour" intended to garner a practice-based, contributive reflection to the ongoing exploratory project "An Infodemic of Disorientation: communication design as mediator between scientific knowledge and cognitive bias." The project stems from empirical and authoritative evidence on the apparent rise in science skepticism due to the proliferation of misinformed and misleading online content, resulting in beliefs and behaviours that resist fact-checking and logic; this double challenge is most clearly substantiated by DiResta (2023): "Institutional communicators / public health entities do not understand that the way people communicate has changed […]: you have to begin to understand the power of storytelling", in articulation with Goel (2022): "The Reasoning Mind Recruits the Instinctive Mind."

We thus hypothesise that scientific knowledge and pedagogy may benefit from looking into an adoption of online media formats, semantics and aesthetics that have often been undervalued in their efficacy to reach subjective cognitive and behavioural components. By adopting accessible formats often associated with skeptical and negationist trends, the project aims at testing the viability of science and policy-making reaching demographics that have so far resisted acting on proven evidence, while often displaying overt hostility. Given the proliferation of online media, and corresponding exponential complexity, the workshop focused on the employment of memes.

As part of the conference program, the workshop was offered to delegates, who in themselves are unlikely to correspond to the target profile of the science skeptic: this factor was taken into account, dictating that the session would adopt a strategic perspective, rather than a direct pedagogical exercise.

The Workshop

Seven participants joined out of a choice between ongoing parallel sessions; their presence and participation were anonymous, as a means to ensure unfiltered discussion. Several of the participants stated simple curiosity as the deciding factor for their presence; one potential participant decided to leave the session once the premise was explained, out of an apparent disinterest in the topic.

The workshop was the last activity in a session that included one prior presentation; it had a total length of 50 minutes, divided into four sequential stages:
1. Contextualising presentation (10 minutes);
2. Exercise instructions (5 minutes) ;
3. Practice-based exercise (20 minutes);
4. Open discussion on outcomes and possible developments (15 minutes).

The contextualisation was based on the aforementioned premises, with visual examples of previously generated content within the scope of the project; the materials provided consisted of:
1. A1-sized print-outs of fourteen memes, devoid of caption, selected according to online circulation and recognition - two copies per meme, so as to foster polysemic approaches (Fig. 1);
2. black, red and blue markers for manual captioning;
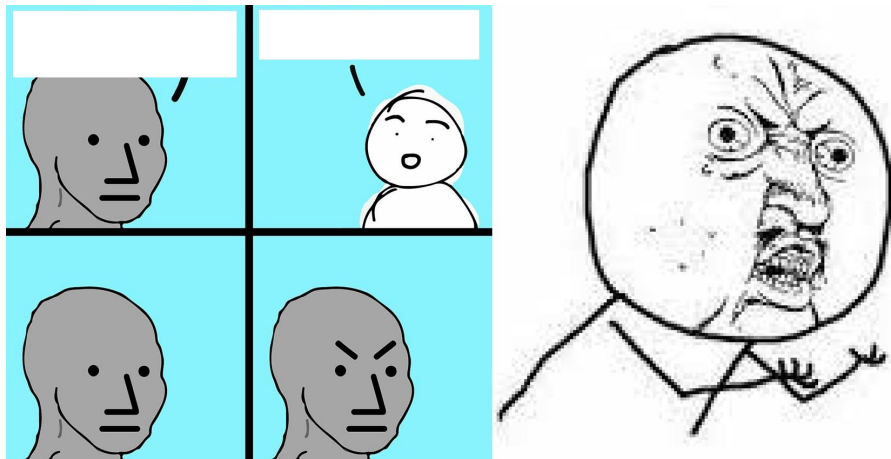
3. masking tape for hanging captioned memes.

Figure 1: Examples of blank memes provided as workshop materials. Source: imgflip (online)

The motivation for printing out memes rather than conducting the workshop in a digital/online environment stemmed out of the chance to explore the extent of tangible, in-person dynamics, rather than fulfill a contextual expectation. Furthermore, materials-based activity tends to foster immersive, empathic dynamics, as opposed to a tendentially fragmented, antagonistic nature of online media. The print-outs were hung on the room's four walls prior to the session; participants were free to pick up the ones they would like to caption according to the workshop premises, and subsequently gather them cumulatively on the (blank) projection screen. Rapid, intuitive action was encouraged (Fig.2): this was ultimately fostered by an aforementioned choice of in-person, tangible experience and the printed materials provided. Upon conclusion, a total of twenty meme print-outs had been captioned by participants.

Figure 2: The stage 3 of the workshop. Source: the authors

Analysis

Stage 4 of the workshop, a discussion of the outcomes and participants' experience, provided insights to be incorporated into the broader project. While provisionally pointing towards the original hypothesis on the understanding that further exploratory sessions and participants will be needed, the workshop provided an additional set of issues to be further analysed and incorporated. These are summed up below, while Figure 3 documents a sample of the outcomes.

Figure 3: The sample of workshop outcomes

Further issues besides a provisional confirmation that memes may be adopted as a tool for the engagement with skeptic demographics included:
1. The rapid, intuitive approach meant that a significant percentage of generated captions deviated from the briefing of scientific engagement: 35% captions were deemed off-topic, while an additional 10% created meta-narratives on the workshop itself. This was nevertheless regarded as a tolerable contingency in order to maintain the overall flow of the session;
2. Once the exercise was concluded, one participant raised uncertainty regarding the efficacy of the original hypothesis, i.e. the employment of social media formats by extraneous entities and individuals. The participant rightfully pointed out that online trends seem to be imbued by auras of "cool authenticity", undercurrents that are as volatile as they are unreplicable; this comment points towards the possibility that the original hypothesis may be employed as a pedagogical strategy that younger generations may subsequently develop in their own terms, rather than proposing a direct employment by scientists and policy-makers;

3. One participant, a professional illustrator, voiced a level of perplexity in face of the briefing and processes; nevertheless, he was an active, engaged participant, and stated he would reflect further on the experience;
4. As educators, two participants expressed an interest in developing similar approaches in their classroom environments, particularly in regards to the employment of printed material originating in online/digital environments. According to these participants, offline group dynamics around online content looked promising as a strategy for a hands-on re-engagement of digital native students, as well as a potential strategy for dissipating tensions around sensitive topics.

Conclusion

The overall consensus was that the workshop had been successful as an exploratory endeavour, and came across as a particularly unexpected activity within a conference format; however, both the short duration and the small number of participants dictated that only a glimpse of possible answers could be envisioned. Further, longer workshop environments will need to be developed in order to consolidate an unequivocal answer to the stated hypothesis; meanwhile, this particular experiment proved useful in rehearsing in-person dynamics and reiterating a largely open space among the current, urgent imperatives regarding a pedagogy of scientific accessibility and policy-driven behaviours.

Acknowledgments

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