

#gradschoolproblems: Understanding Communicative Aspects of Memes on PhD Students' Shared Experiences

Debopriya Roy, Tezpur University, India

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Abstract

This paper primarily discusses the challenges faced by PhD students as they face limited communication space for expressing and sharing their issues within the higher education system. The rigorous demands of PhD programs, coupled with external stressors, contribute to mental health issues and feelings of isolation. Memes have emerged as a significant mode of discourse in contemporary digital culture, providing insights into the unique struggles of PhD students through the niche of PhD memes. The study particularly focuses on the 'Phd_meme_page,' an Instagram page created to infuse humor into the PhD experience. This page fosters a sense of shared identity among followers, creating a community that collectively navigates and finds amusement in common challenges they face every day. Through an analysis of 200 meme posts and interviews with followers, the paper aims to decode the intertextuality of these humorous expressions, linking them to the lived experiences of PhD students. The research sheds light on how the social media discourse, facilitated by these memes, brings visibility to certain aspects of their daily struggles and emphasizes the relatability shared among individuals undergoing the demanding journey of a PhD program. This study also identifies that this discourse of relatable humour does not include issues related to gender, caste, and disability.

Keywords: Meme, Digital Culture, Youth, Students, PhD Student, PhD struggles

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Introduction

“Here to release some stress, to share some laughs and to support my peers... Looking forward to be called ‘et al’.”

– The bio of the Instagram page ‘PhD Meme Page’ (Phd_meme_page, n.d.)

PhD students worldwide find a shrinking space for expressing their opinions and sharing concerns, underscoring a need for improvement in communication channels within the higher education system. The unique challenges of a PhD program, demanding unwavering dedication, tenacity, and hard work, and often accompanied by external problems, contribute to mental health issues, identity crises, and feelings of loneliness among these students. In contemporary times, memes have emerged as a significant medium as an alternative space for communication, providing insights into the challenges faced by PhD students. This paper delves into the realm of PhD memes, specifically examining an Instagram page dedicated to PhD memes, known as the 'Phd_meme_page.' Created by a researcher, as evident from the description, the page aims to infuse humor into the experience of PhD students. This endeavor fosters the development of a shared identity among its followers, cultivating a sense of community that collectively comprehends the challenges and finds amusement by treating experiences with humor. Through a combination of analysing the memes and conducting interviews with followers, the paper aims to decode the intertextuality of these memes, relating them to the lived experiences of students. By doing so, it seeks to shed light on how aspects of their lived experiences become visible through the social media discourse provided by these memes.

Context

Richard Dawkins coined the term "meme" in his book *The Selfish Gene* in 1976 to describe the spreading of ideas through the act of copying or imitation from one person to another (Shifman, 2014). Years after the ‘meme’ transformed into a cultural artifact. The advent of digital media ushered in a new era that shaped the entire landscape of digital cultural practices, revolving around creating and sharing memes and opening up new ways of communication. Considering Internet memes as a form of socially constructed public discourse to represent a variety of voices and perspectives, Shifman (2014) defines them as a collection of digital items with shared characteristics that are widely circulated, imitated, and sometimes transformed by numerous Internet users. He explains an Internet meme as a “(unit) of popular culture that (is) circulated, imitated, and transformed by Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience” (ibid.). Internet memes can also be understood as a cultural medium in which shared norms and values are constructed. This involves re-creating a particular text to imbue it with fresh meanings (Shifman, 2014). These memes are a discursive unit of the contemporary digital culture (Wiggins, 2019). On social media platforms, this bottom-up mode of communication diverges from conventional concepts of content creators and their audiences. Instead, it exemplifies a new realm of participatory culture that plays a pivotal role in the dynamics of popular culture in the twenty-first century (Shifman, 2014; Wiggins, 2019).

Within the realm of participatory media environments, such as social media platforms, memes hold significant implications for the development of one's identity and the shaping of public discourse (Huntington, 2013). These memes represent the process of constructing identity in online spaces, where an in-group's identity is defined by what it is and, equally importantly, by what it is not. In essence, the in-group identity distinguishes itself from the

out-group by highlighting its differences and the absence of certain qualities found in the out-group's identity. (Wiggins, 2019). This particular meme subgenre of PhD memes does this by crafting humor designed exclusively for insiders, with the punchline reserved for those equipped with essential inter-textual knowledge (Miltner, 2014). This, in effect, contributes to the ongoing creation and resonance of collective identity which is constructed through the act of exclusion and inclusion (Gross, 1998; Gal, Shifman, & Kampf, 2015). Here, the audience's daily engagement in posts, comments, and reactions sustains social engagement (Marichal, 2013). These niche memes should not be reduced to digital trends embraced by PhD students. They can generate counter-discourses (Davis, Glantz, & Novak, 2015) and serve as a medium through which groups communicate amongst themselves.

In the Indian higher education system, communication traditionally follows a top-down approach. Within this context, PhD students find themselves in a unique position, grappling with the challenge of defining their identity, and balancing between being students and emerging academics. Their collective identity is shaped by shared experiences and distinguished by the differences that set them apart from those outside this group. Niche PhD memes play a significant role in fostering connections among PhD students, facilitating a sense of bonding among them. Here, students are not primarily seeking information to solve their problems; rather, they come together to share and lighten the burden of their shared challenges. These meme discussions also draw the interest of the general public to the scholars' concerns which is often overlooked by mainstream media discussion.

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative content analysis, examining 200 meme posts obtained from the Instagram account 'phd_meme_page' till May 2023. With over a hundred thousand followers this page creates relatable posts tailored for PhD students. The memes, primarily in image or short video formats, creatively utilize templates from Western and popular Hindi films and TV shows, occasionally integrating elements from Indian news and political scenarios. Alongside its predominantly humorous content, the page sometimes features motivational posts. Notably, the identity of the creator remains ambiguous, except for the information that she is pursuing research.

This research work does not aspire to understand the creator's motivations for crafting these memes or their impact on the creator's fame or social capital. Instead, the paper aims to explore how these niche memes represent the PhD experience, contribute to the formation of collective student identities, and identify the key characteristics of these identities by recognizing the core themes within the meme discourse. The thematic content of the memes revolves around the challenges faced by PhD students, and deciphering the intertextuality necessitates an understanding of their relatability to student experiences. Moreover, the study aims to grasp the limitations these memes may have in representing issues related to marginalized identities.

To achieve these objectives, the study primarily identifies and analyses prominent themes appearing in the memes. This approach is complemented by semi-structured interviews with PhD students who are followers of this meme account on Instagram. The themes discussed in the following sections resonate strongly with the challenges encountered by the interviewed PhD students, as evidenced by their interactions, as well as PhD students in general. The identity of the ten students interviewed will remain confidential.

Relatable Self-Depreciation: Procrastination, Lack of Productivity, and Self-Doubt

PhD students often find themselves navigating a myriad of challenges. The weight of academic expectations becomes overwhelming, seeping into every corner of their lives (Woolston, 2022). Failing to handle this stress, many students encounter issues with productivity and struggle to maintain their schedules. Additionally, they have to contend with imposter syndrome and writer's block, which often come with advanced degrees.

These timeless challenges now intersect with a contemporary issue: digital addiction. In an interview, the participant details that spending hours scrolling through social media exacerbates their stress levels. One interviewee says, "I often find myself stressed by the workload and resort to social media. Before I know it, hours have passed, and I haven't accomplished anything. Guilt sets in, and stress intensifies." The first meme (Fig 1) here addresses these, focusing on those within the scientific domain who face the enduring struggle of balancing experiments and writing. This is ironically portrayed through iconic scenes from the Hindi film 'Three Idiots.' Here, the researchers, failing to juggle effectively, end up indulging in web series thereby wasting time. Furthermore, the interviewee reflects on how the environment in his laboratory and his colleagues' achievements lead him to question his self-worth. The perpetual uncertainties and cutthroat atmosphere within Ph.D. programs often plant seeds of self-doubt. The second meme here (Fig 2) is about the issue of rampant imposter syndrome among PhD students.

The third meme (Fig 3) is targeted at procrastination, another prominent struggle that the PhD students face. The fourth (Fig 4) discusses the decline in motivation throughout the PhD journey. This sentiment resonates in the interviews as well. A participant expressed, "I had high hopes and expectations. Upon entering the Ph.D. program, I experienced a significant reality check. Now, I consider it just as a degree."

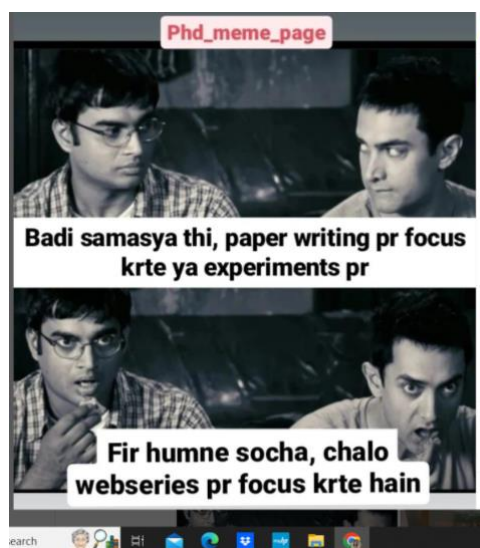


Fig 1: Screenshot Image of an Instagram post with content on balancing writing with experiments



Fig 2: Screenshot Image of an Instagram post with content on imposter syndrome

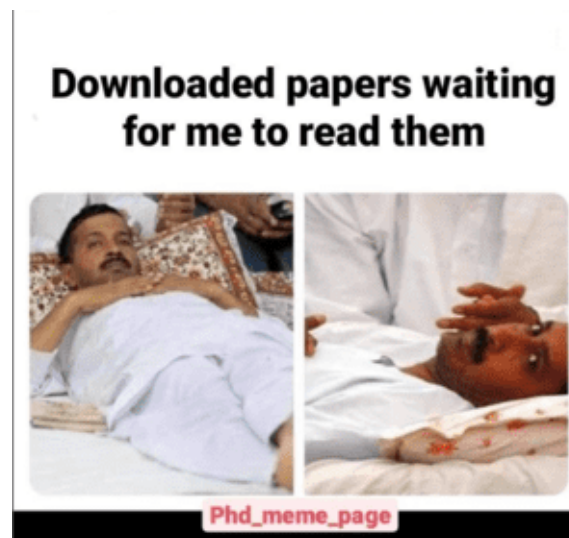


Fig 3: Screenshot Image of an Instagram post with content on procrastination



Fig 4: Screenshot Image of an Instagram post with content on decreased motivation

Handling these concerns adopts a self-deprecating humor, expressing a shared understanding and generating a good-natured chuckle. The students' firsthand experiences make them

insiders to this humor. The popularity of these memes among PhD students reflects an appreciation for the sarcastic approach.

Relationship With Supervisor

PhD advisors typically serve multiple roles: they act as educators, mentors offering emotional support and guidance, and patrons providing the launching pad for a student's career. The significance of a PhD mentor in a doctoral candidate's path is substantial. Participants in this study recounted prioritising a better mentor over a prestigious institution while taking their PhD admission. However, the effectiveness of this relationship can be compromised due to the power dynamics prevalent in academia. The unspoken grievances within the PhD student-advisor relationship are subjects awaiting empirical studies and a structured framework for examination. In India, instances of PhD students facing toxic relationships with their advisors gain public attention when tragic outcomes like suicide or sexual harassment incidents occur (Misra, 2023; Chandrababu, 2023). The substantial power imbalance often restricts students from expressing their concerns, confining such discussions to spaces such as peer groups or other closed communicative spaces. The students interviewed for this paper shared their mixed personal experiences and those of their peers in handling diverse issues with supervisors, highlighting the issues stemming from power imbalances.

This particular meme page focuses on various aspects of unethical behavior exhibited by supervisors, including but not limited to inadequate guidance, lack of support for financial issues, and delays in paperwork. One of the memes highlights the shock students feel upon seeing their supervisor as the chief guest at a mental health awareness program, which satirically underscores the immense mental strain experienced by students. In another short video, it is shown students feel apprehensive about openly discussing their supervisors with colleagues, concerned that their peers might betray their trust. Memes under this theme do not always focus on the problems; sometimes, they humorously depict how supervisors react to student's work, bringing back self-deprecating humor.

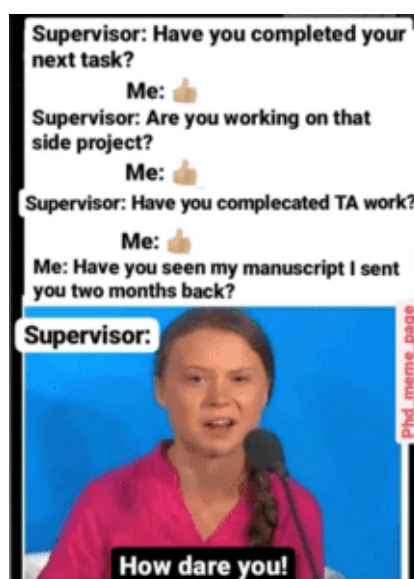


Fig 5: Screenshot Image of an Instagram post with content on issues with Supervisor



Fig 6: Screenshot Image of an Instagram post with content on issues with Supervisor



Fig 7: Screenshot Image of an Instagram post with content on issues with Supervisor



Fig 8: Screenshot Image of an Instagram post with content on issues with Supervisor

The first three memes (Fig 5,6, and 7) here illustrate the experiences of students with an unsupportive supervisor, while the last meme (Fig 8) addresses how students negotiate deadlines. During the interviews, issues such as exploitation (including sexual exploitation), and obligatory behavior came up. Interestingly, the meme posts do not touch upon issues related to discrimination and exploitation. Respondents acknowledged this trend and expressed that they don't expect memes to address such serious topics. One respondent commented, "Yes, memes have established a space for discussion, but they cannot afford to be critical. Memes are not supposed to solve problems you know."

Struggling With Finances: Satirizing the Burdens of Low Payment

The memes are seemingly crafted for an Indian audience, employing templates from Indian films and TV serials. To grasp intertextuality here, one must have a deep understanding of those templates and also must be well aware of the financial challenges faced by PhD students. While the page occasionally touches on various fellowship systems, the primary focus remains on the relatable aspect of the underpayment in PhD courses.

PhD students in India experience varying stipends based on their institution and funding sources. Those enrolled in private universities often receive less funding than their counterparts in public universities. According to an interviewee, fellowship amounts are generally considered reasonable to low given the required expertise. Students in central universities, for instance, receive a mere monthly stipend of 8,000 Indian rupees (approximately USD 96). Among the respondents, the highest payments were received by those holding Junior/Senior Research Fellowships starting at approximately USD 372, or those engaged in research at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, where students receive a comparable sum. This year, there was an increase of approximately USD 72 for JRF and USD 84 for SRFs (after the interviews were taken), while students in central universities' institutional fellowship did not experience any raise. Notably, securing funding from public agencies often requires qualifying through national-level exams like CSIR-NET, UGC-NET, or GATE. Those who do not succeed in these exams but are recruited through some other grants at times receive stipends of nearly half for similar work (Joseph, 2021).

Numerous student protests in India highlight the gravity of the issue (Padma, 2015; "Research Scholars Finally Get Stipend Hike After Weeks of Protests Across India," 2019; "'Research Pays Better Abroad, need 60% Hike in Fellowship,' Say Protesting PhD Scholars," 2023). PhD students, typically at an age with various financial responsibilities, sometimes opt to pursue their studies abroad due to these difficulties (Purakayastha, 2022). In line with reports, the students' interaction highlighted a distinct frustration regarding finances, particularly due to occasional delays in payments, inadequate raises, and insufficient funding to cover other academic expenses, etc. Some, upon introspection, regret not considering pursuing research overseas.

The memes cleverly convey the message of low payment in the PhD by comparing it to a job that pays less than the minimum wage or expressing frustration about delayed payments. The content on funding also resorts to relatable humor on the happiness experienced by students upon finally receiving funding after a prolonged period. The discourse at large focused on the challenges of low funding in academia and its implications.



Fig 9: Screenshot Image of an Instagram post with content on low payment in PhD

Struggling to Strike a Balance: The Psychological Toll of Managing Life and PhD

In 2020, the National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) reported a harrowing statistic: a student took their own life every 42 minutes in India, resulting in over 34 student suicides daily (Sarveswar & Thomas, 2022). This data is not specific to PhD students only. Still, the academic journey, laden with research demands and teaching commitments, transforms into a delicate juggling act, leaving scant room for respite. The persistent doubt regarding one's capabilities poses a continuous threat to confidence, impeding academic progress. Pursuing a PhD transcends mere intellectual endeavors; it is an emotional and psychological challenge that rigorously tests resilience and determination. Adding to this complexity, students grapple with uncertainty, workplace issues, financial hardships, and various other stressors.

A study conducted in Kerala reveals the alarming extent of this crisis, with nearly 68% of PhD students experiencing some form of depressive disorder, according to Nair (2021). The severity of this condition is particularly pronounced among non-science students, with 84% displaying signs of depression compared to 62% in science disciplines. This issue is not unique to India; it is a global phenomenon (Sekhar, 2019; Murguía Burton & Cao, 2022). The severity is notably pronounced in the Indian context.

Despite the global and national scale of the problem, the issue of mental health in PhD students often garners attention only in the aftermath of tragic events, such as suicides. Unfortunately, public discussions seldom translate into concrete actions to safeguard the well-being of these students. Contributing factors to this distressing scenario include issues with academic guidance, instances of discrimination, and overwhelming mental stress (Chaudhuri, 2022; Deeksha, 2023; Aswani, 2023; Gokhale, 2023). Addressing these multifaceted challenges is crucial not only for the academic community but also for society at large.

Anxiety Exists

Grad students:



Fig 10: Screenshot Image of an Instagram post with content on the mental health of PhD Students

The meme posts on this talked about anxiety, lack of social life, etc. The interviewed students consistently emphasized the gravity of the various mental health challenges they face. They also pointed out the lack of available avenues for seeking help. As their social life and circles reduced, the sense of loneliness among them intensified. Although some of their supervisors and Institutions showed little effective concern for these struggles, some shared hopeful experiences. The students further expressed that while memes may not directly help them survive the situation, the content fosters a sense that they are not alone. This relatability is a key factor in why they engage with this genre of content.

Understanding the Limitations of Relatability in PhD Memes

In the digital age, memes have emerged as a powerful medium for expressing shared experiences and fostering a sense of community (Wiggins, 2020). A closer look at memes portraying the challenges faced by PhD students, especially in India, reveals a complex interplay between humor, identity, and representation. The humor embedded in these memes does not necessarily provide solutions to their struggles; instead, it creates a space where PhD students connect over relatable challenges. This phenomenon echoes the idea put forth by Wiggins (2020) that social media tools offer a platform for individuals to express and perceive support, fostering a reification of identity. Relatability also appears from the act of participating in the culture by sharing or reposting the meme and having the same feeling after seeing the meme (Kanai, 2017). The experiences of the PhD students serve as the text that further aids in decoding the humor.



Fig 11: Screenshot Image of an Instagram post with content on the relatability of PhD memes

These memes effectively capture the universal struggles of heightened stress and lack of motivation. Insider humor gains prominence through content focused on rejections, how PhD students find joy in various situations, the slow progress of a PhD, delayed reviews, poking fun at various academic aspects like citations, 'et al' and more. The creation of identity here also occurs by distinguishing them from others who do not understand the intertextuality of these memes.

A deeper analysis reveals a nuanced perspective on identity representation within these meme discourses. They also expose a glaring gap in addressing issues pertinent to marginalized identities. Despite their popularity, the memes predominantly focus on generic PhD student experiences, sidelining critical issues faced by women or queer people dealing with gendered challenges, casteism, issues faced by disabled students, exploitation, sexual harassment etc. This exclusion raises questions about the inclusivity of these spaces and whether they inadvertently exclude those struggling with intersectional challenges.

An interviewee highlighted this exclusion, stating, "The memes would not speak of caste. Then the discussion will be regarding whether we need reservations or not, and the fun will be gone." Another interviewee questioned the creators' intentions, stating, "The meme makers are not calling for a change, you know? They are just making fun of PhD life." He added, "We do not expect change from these, for that, we all have to be united and voice our opinions seriously". This acknowledgement implies that the satirical nature of these memes while making struggles visible, might be intentionally limited in scope. The humor acts as a buffer against engaging with more complex and challenging issues, reinforcing the notion that memes despite their visibility, may not be catalysts for substantive change. Another respondent states "If the memes start becoming political they (creators) will be in trouble, they might lose followers as well because it would not be relatable to everyone". However, concluding these calls for inquiry into the creator's perspective and requires a separate investigation that exceeds the confines of this paper.

This selective representation is not unique to PhD student memes; it mirrors a broader trend in internet visual culture. As Nakamura (2008) points out, unequal representation persists in digital spaces, with certain voices, often those of privileged individuals gaining more visibility. The memes, despite their potential to challenge authority and critique power dynamics, unintentionally or deliberately contribute to this unequal representation by focusing on certain specific aspects of the PhD student experience.

Conclusion

The 'PhD meme page' catalyzes fostering a sense of community, offering a space where humor acts as a unifying force, bonding students through shared challenges and collective understanding. By decoding the intertextuality of these memes and relating them to the daily realities of PhD students, this paper revealed how meme discourses contribute to visibility and relatability of shared experiences. It also underscores the pressing need for improved communication channels within higher education systems. While PhD student memes play a vital role in building a sense of community and articulating shared challenges, their limited representation raises concerns about inclusivity and perpetuates unequal visibility. The study acknowledges its constraints in analyzing just a single page among many and recognizes the absence of the meme creator's perspective. Moreover, it advocates for deeper investigation into alternative communication avenues for students while emphasizing the importance of

recognizing and understanding the diverse experiences of PhD students in the wider academic realm.

Note: The images featured are sourced from the public Instagram page titled Phd_meme_page (@phd_meme_page) and are utilized solely for educational and research purposes, under fair use exceptions within copyright regulations.

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