Do the Ends Justify the memes? Exploring the Relationship between Youth, Internet Memes, and Digital Citizenship

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ABSTRACT

Internet memes are an extremely popular form of online communication that are often disregarded as "trivial" due to their association with humor, emotion, and youth (Shifman, 2014, p. 15; Shifman, 2019). While these digital texts (e.g., image macros, tweets, hashtags, short videos, GIFs, etc.) play a significant role in the circulation of information (e.g., Milner, 2016), there is little empirical research on how they figure into young people's daily information practices. To address this issue, I collaborated with a secondary school teacher, co-designing a class unit that invited students to examine the relationship between memes and digital citizenship. Adopting an ethnographic approach (Markham, 2017) inspired by several design-based research methodologies, I collected a variety of data from 21 youth participants (e.g., field notes/photos, assignments), performing 15 semi-structured student interviews and 2 semi-structured teacher interviews. These materials, which I analyzed using narrative and visual analysis (Frank, 2012; Rose, 2016), included student projects on various meme-related topics (e.g., free speech, dark humor, misinformation, etc.). My findings showcase the significance of humor to students' conceptualization of memetic storytelling and the joyful nature of the personal experiences they associated with it. Laughter, I argue, impacted their negotiations of the values memes represent and shaped the information they provided. Through its conceptualization of the informational role humor plays in young people's meme engagements, this research contributes to present knowledge of how memes factor into civic discourse, offering valuable insight to educators, librarians, and guardians who engage youth in information literacy and citizenship education.

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ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Education; Information literacy; Information needs; Information use; Specific populations.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Youth; Internet memes; Digital citizenship; Literacy; Information practice.