

MEMES AND GIF ANIMATIONS AS A PHENOMENON OF DIGITAL CULTURE

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Abstract: This article explores the cultural and communicative significance of memes and GIF animations in the context of the digital era. Tracing the origin of the term "meme" from Richard Dawkins' concept to its modern internet adaptation, the study highlights how visual formats such as memes and GIFs have become powerful tools for expression, critique, and identity formation. Special attention is given to the unique features of the Russian-speaking internet space, where memes are infused with political satire, post-Soviet references, folklore, and linguistic play. The article argues that memes are more than entertainment—they function as condensed, multi-layered messages shaping public discourse and visual culture in the digital age.

Key words: memes, GIF animations, internet culture, visual communication, digital media, Russian internet, political satire, identity, cultural criticism, visual language

With the development of the internet and digital technologies, the forms of communication, expression of emotions, and articulation of opinions in the public sphere have undergone drastic changes. One of the most striking and representative phenomena of the new media culture is the emergence of memes and GIF animations — forms of visual messaging capable of conveying complex meanings in a concise and ironic manner, commenting on events, and engaging people in discussions. Today, memes are an integral part of online communication and have become the subject of research for cultural theorists, sociologists, and linguists. Their role in shaping collective consciousness and interpreting reality goes beyond mere entertainment and requires in-depth reflection.

The development of digital environments has significantly influenced how people communicate, process information, and form cultural identities. One of the most vivid examples of this transformation is the increasing dominance of visual culture, especially through formats such as GIF animations and internet memes. Originally developed in 1987 by CompuServe, the GIF (Graphics Interchange Format) was intended to provide simple animations compatible with the low bandwidth of early internet connections. Over time, however, GIFs evolved into powerful communicative tools. Their brevity, looped nature, and emotional immediacy made them ideally suited for online conversations, where speed and clarity are essential. As platforms like Giphy and Tenor integrated GIF search engines directly into messaging apps and social media, users across the globe began expressing feelings not through words, but through looping visual snippets of popular culture, celebrities, or humorous reinterpretations of everyday situations. In many ways, GIFs became emotional shorthand, a visual supplement to language that made online exchanges more dynamic and expressive.

In the Russian-speaking segment of the internet, visual communication tools like GIFs and memes acquired distinctive cultural traits. This digital space is characterized by a rich interplay of humor, satire, nostalgia, and linguistic creativity. Russian-language memes often reflect deeply rooted cultural narratives and societal dynamics, drawing on historical references,

Soviet-era symbolism, and contemporary political discourse. Unlike the often universally humorous tone of many global memes, Russian memes tend to carry layered meanings, incorporating irony, absurdism, and even existential reflection. For instance, the popular character “Zhdun” “ждун” (translated as “The Waiter”), a hybrid creature waiting patiently—quickly became a symbol of bureaucratic stagnation, social inertia, and the hope for a better future. Other memes borrow imagery from classic Soviet films, transforming well-known quotes or scenes into satirical commentary on current events. This creates an effect of collective memory, where humor becomes a way to critically engage with the past and the present.

Political satire is another hallmark of Russian meme culture. Memes often serve as a socially acceptable form of dissent, mocking government officials, criticizing political decisions, or highlighting social contradictions. Well-circulated images like the “sad Putin” meme or humorous edits of political speeches become viral not just for their comedic effect, but for their ability to communicate dissatisfaction in an environment where direct criticism may be risky. This function of memes as tools of soft resistance or indirect protest demonstrates their power beyond mere entertainment. They become part of an informal public discourse where ordinary people participate in shaping political narratives through humor and shared imagery.

Moreover, memes and GIFs have taken on a communicative role that extends into the realm of identity construction. People don’t just consume memes; they use them to signal group affiliation, express values, and define themselves within online communities. Certain memes become “insider jokes” within subcultures, fostering a sense of belonging among participants. The linguistic aspect of Russian memes—often filled with neologisms, deliberate spelling errors, anglicisms, and slang like “kek,” “cringe,” or “based”—also reflects this performative dimension. Language becomes a playground where creativity and rebellion intersect, and where digital natives experiment with norms in ways that feel both liberating and subversive.

GIFs, too, participate in this identity work. The selection of a particular reaction GIF - whether it’s a well-known celebrity eye-roll or a scene from a cult movie - conveys not only an emotion but a certain cultural stance. It suggests familiarity with the source material, a sense of humor, and a shared worldview. In this sense, visual culture in digital spaces operates not only as a mode of expression but as a social filter, organizing people into micro-communities with shared symbolic references.

As memes and GIFs become embedded in political, cultural, and emotional communication, they also emerge as sites of power and contestation. Governments and corporate actors increasingly attempt to harness the virality of memes to shape public opinion or neutralize criticism. Official campaigns may produce “state-sponsored” memes, attempting to mimic grassroots humor in order to appear relatable or defuse tension. This strategic use of visual content adds another layer to the meme phenomenon, turning it into a battlefield of meaning where opposing ideologies compete through humor and aesthetics.

Thus, the fusion of GIFs and memes within the Russian-speaking digital sphere illustrates how visual communication is no longer supplementary but central to the way people relate, resist, and recreate culture. These forms are dynamic, ever-evolving, and deeply rooted in both local context and global media flows. Through them, users do more than laugh—they participate in the ongoing negotiation of identity, memory, and power in the digital age.

Mememes and GIF animations are not merely elements of digital entertainment, but also meaningful cultural markers. They convey information, emotions, interpretations, and

meanings. Analyzing them offers insight into how forms of collective memory, social critique, irony, and visual language are being transformed in the digital environment. Modern society increasingly thinks visually, and the meme has become a new form of expression — concise, multi-layered, and powerful.

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