

Inferring the Target of Self-defeating Humour in Internet Memes: A Pragmatic Analysis

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Abstract—Nowadays, people spend hours on social media conversing and sharing information through jokes and references made online. Digital memes are one of the most favourable means of internet communication, which thrives on humour. The main purpose of humour is to entertain and make people laugh. So, to avoid hurting others by joking at the expense of others, many people turn to self-mockery. One type of self-mockery is self-defeating humour in which the speaker targets himself/herself in a “poor me” fashion. By using a mixed approach of qualitative and quantitative analysis, this research investigated how internet users interpret the target of self-defeating humour in memes. This analysis used the relevance theory of Sperber and Wilson (1995). On this account, this research addressed the process of decoding and inferential enrichment, and lexical pragmatic adjustment. It is said that making oneself the target of a joke is safer and less sensitive than targeting other people. After analysing the inferences of 100 netizens that were drawn from five self-defeating memes, it has been concluded that targeting oneself could be as sensitive as targeting others.

Index Terms—Internet Memes, Humour, Targets of humour, Social media, Ad hoc concept.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, social media has a key role in facilitating new forms of humour, such as internet memes. The Internet has provided netizens with services such as producing, bookmarking, posting, sharing, tagging, commenting, reviewing, ranking and evaluating digital contents. This eased the way for such digital content to be able to spread like wildfire on the Internet. Besides, the digital culture’s “relatively low barriers to artistic expression” (Jenkins, 2009, p.xi) made it possible for internet users to express whatever they want by whatever means they want. This smoothed the path for introducing a new medium of communication to the users, known as memes. Internet memes are spreading contagiously on the Internet and are generated by human creativity. Most importantly, they have been used as a medium to channel humour. Therefore, they are referred to as jokes (Davison, 2012; Dynel, 2016). Memes, like any other jokes, have a target which is either the author himself/herself or another person or something worthy to be made fun of. Targeting oneself, which

is done through using the objective personal pronoun “me”, is prevalent in internet memes. The unique nature of memes, which is multimodality (using more than one mode in expressing a message), made the audience look for the target of the humour not only in the texts but also in the other modes which accompany the texts. This study deals with image macros (a type of meme which is a combination of texts and images), in which the targets could be inferred through both the texts and images from which the memes are made. This paper hypothesizes that the coded concept “me”, which is used to target oneself, could be inferred beyond its conventional sense (which is the speaker) into a broader sense. Besides, it aims to find how internet users interpret the clues in both modes, and how their different interpretations of these clues result in different interpretations for the scope of the target.

II. HUMOUR IN MEMES

Unquestionably, the vast majority of internet memes exist by virtue of their humorous nature. It is said that humour is a key feature that assists internet memes in getting popularity among the participants (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Shifman, 2014; Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015). According to Shifman (2014), humorous memes have become the most dominant category of online memes because of the tendency that internet users have for circulating comical and laughable items to give others joy and satisfaction. Therefore, as Miltner (2014) adds that when the participants receive a meme, they automatically expect it to be humorous in some ways. Knobel and Lankshear (2007) point out that people are entertained through “the playful and absurdist ideas carrying little “serious” content [...] or serious content which may be considered to be social critique and commentary” (p.217). Similarly, Yoon (2016) and Dean (2019) share the same view that online memes can play the role of ‘serious’ media while being represented in the form of a joke. Therefore, serious messages in relation to society, politics, ideology, and the culture of individuals and social groups can be propagated among netizens through such not-so-serious means of communication. Therefore, it does not mean that the humour form of memes only makes them an entertainment tool and something that should not be taken

seriously. Afflerbach (2015) says that humour has some social weight and function. To him, humour is not as innocent as it seems to be by being only a source of entertainment, but in fact, it is “a powerful tool for repression, expression, and social change” (p.14). It is also asserted that humour is a unique key to understanding a culture or a society (Shifman, 2007). While humour exists as a universal phenomenon (Boyd, 2004, as cited in Shifman, 2007), its appreciation is related to the time and place of its creation and reception (Boskin, 1997, as cited in Shifman, 2007).

Internet humour on social media comes in several types, including comparison, exaggeration, personification, sarcasm, pun, silliness, and surprise (Catanescu & Tom, 2001). Moreover, detecting the type and structure of humour is objective, while its perception is subjective. Although the participants can detect certain structures, such as the exaggerated use of incorrect grammar and vocabulary, that are intentionally used for creating humour effects in memes, still identifying and obtaining the full intended humorous effect by the audience is related to their understanding, and familiarity with certain references. And since such kinds of familiarity are related to their background knowledge, each audience may perceive a meme differently. Therefore, the perception of humour will differ from one person to another.

III. TARGET OF HUMOUR IN MEMES

The target of humour is either a person (oneself or others) or a subject (a situation, practice or ideology) (Soltanoff, 1994). In this relation, humour comes in four styles, which are:

1- self-enhancing: people with a sense of self-enhancing humour tend to have a humorous viewpoint on life and target themselves in the humour in a good-natured way; generally, they are entertained by incongruities, and they keep a comedic perspective in diversity.

2- affiliative: people prone to this style of humour try to amuse others and facilitate relationships by saying funny things, making jokes and using witty banter about things that everyone might find funny.

3- self-defeating: people prone to self-defeating humour tend to say humorous and disparaging things at their own expense to amuse others.

4- aggressive: people who are engaged in this style of humour tend to use humorous expressions and make funny statements without regard to their effects on others, that they might hurt or alienate others (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray & Weir, 2003).

“Oneself” has been targeted through using self-enhancing and self-defeating styles, while “others”, through aggressive styles, have been targeted. In memes, “me” is the most popular form of pronoun which is used in self-mockery. And, in aggressive memes, mostly the speakers refer to others through nouns (proper and common nouns) or pronouns including “he/she” and “you”. Since memes are multimodal, meme producers use other modes to express their intention. So, the readers are expected to interpret the whole meaning of the memes by considering all the modes (such as texts and images

in the case of image macros). That is why the readers will look beyond the texts even in searching for the intended target of the memes.

IV. SPERBER AND WILSON’S (1995) RELEVANCE THEORY

The French scholar Dan Sperber and the British scholar Deirdre Wilson inaugurated relevance theory, which is a framework for understanding the interpretation of utterances. They maintain that the key to explaining the communication of human beings resides in the concept of relevance, which is a basic feature of human cognition. This theory is based on two principles of relevance: a Cognitive Principle (the system of human cognition works to maximize relevance), and a Communicative Principle (‘[e]very act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance’ (1995, p.260)

They argue that the information that is conveyed in every utterance needs to be at least relevant enough to be worth processing (Wilson & Sperber, 2002). Relevance theory is a cognitive pragmatic theory, which stresses that there is a gap between what is said (coded) and what is meant (implicated) (Carston & Uchida, 2012). This informational gap is filled up by the audience with the guidance of their cognitive rooted tendency to search for relevance.

In this regard, to find a relevant interpretation, the addressee needs to identify what the addresser intended to say explicitly (explicature), and/or implicitly (implicature), along with having access to the addresser’s intended context; that is to say, apart from the overall interpretation of the discourse, it is the information about the context that the addresser intentionally provided for the audience to recover. Sperber and Wilson maintain that an utterance may be interpreted explicitly and implicitly. During the explicit inference, the addresser fills in the gap between the sentence meaning and the speaker meaning by following several inferential strategies, such as “disambiguation, saturation, reference assignment, concept adjustment” (Sperber & Wilson 1995).

- 1) *Disambiguation*. In this process, the audience has to decide which of multiple possible meanings of a word is relevant in a specific conversational context.
- 2) *Saturation*. In this inferential operation, the audience needs to infer some elided parts of the utterance to make sense of the whole utterance.
- 3) *Reference assignment*: in a specific conversational context, typical indexicals (i.e., pronouns and adverbs) and proper nouns (which are empty before being put in such contexts) will be filled with a referent.
- 4) *Concept adjustment*. In this operation, the audience normally has to adjust the concept coded by a word that is not relevant enough. The outcome of this pragmatic adjustment is an ad hoc concept, which is slightly different and merely resembles the stabilized concept coded by the word in the utterance.

Carston (2002) illustrates that “[ad hoc concepts] are not linguistically given, but are constructed online in response to

specific expectations of relevance raised in specific contexts. There is a difference then between *ad hoc* concepts, accessed by a spontaneous process of pragmatic inference, and lexicalized concepts, which are context-invariant” (p. 322). This communicated concept may be *broader* (i.e., less exact) than the coded concept; or *narrower* (i.e., more exact). In other words, the concept that has been intended to be communicated may be broader or narrower than the concept which has been literally communicated.

V. METHODOLOGY

A. DATA COLLECTION

This research employs a qualitative and quantitative approach in analysing the selected memes. The qualitative analysis will be adopted to explain the process by which the targets are inferred based on the Relevance theory of Sperber and Wilson (1995). And, the quantitative approach will be adopted for analyzing the data that has been collected from Internet users. For this purpose, five image macros have been selected which are self-defeating memes, in which the speakers use the objective personal pronoun “me” to target themselves. 25 inferences are provided for all the given memes (i.e., each meme is given with a list of 5 inferences). And these selected memes have been shown to meme practitioners to choose their inferences from the given list. This is done by posting a survey form in two meme- groups on social media (a Facebook group “YOU KNOW WHAT I MEME!!!!” and a Subreddit “r/Memes_Of_The_Dank”). Besides, for the data to be more accurate, the respondents have been also given the chance to give their own interpretation and to choose that they do not get the memes’ message, in case they did not understand the memes. And also, only the responses of those participants are included in the analysis who could understand all the 5 given memes. In this way, data from 100 participants have been taken in the analysis.

B. MODEL OF ANALYSIS

The adopted model for the analysis of the collected data is Sperber and Wilson’s relevance theory. The qualitative part of the analysis (explaining the process of inferring the target of the selected memes) is carried out by taking the explicit and implicit inference of relevance theory, and the quantitative part (analysing the responses) is done by taking the lexical pragmatic adjustment of relevance theory. Lexical pragmatic adjustment is “conceived as the formation of an *ad hoc* concept that is narrower or broader in extension (or both) than the lexicalized concept involved” (Allott & Textor, 2012, p.1). By adopting a quantitative analysis, it is shown which interpretation is highly likely among the participants, and in which percentage the scope of the lexical concept “me” has broadened (has become less exact), or has the exact scope as the lexical concept when inferred.

C. B. DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

The collected data have been analysed quantitatively and then explained qualitatively. In the quantitative analysis, the

percentage of responses for choosing each inference has been derived, with the one(s) who has been targeted in the inference, and the scope of the targets has been indicated (whether the scope of the inferred target is the exact scope as the literal meaning of the concept “me” or it is broadened in the inference).

VI. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Five memes have been taken in the analysis to be inferred by 100 meme practitioners. In total, 500 responses have been collected for all the given memes. Moreover, among these 100 participants, none of them has written their own inferences and all of them responded by choosing from the lists of inferences which were given in the survey. In the given inferences, the lexical concept “me” has been inferred in two ways, which are “without extension” (i.e., “me” is inferred as the speaker; therefore, the scope of the target has not been extended and is exactly as the scope of the coded concept “me”) or “with extension” (i.e., “me” is inferred into a less exact meaning; therefore, the scope of the target has been broadened from the speaker to other people). And among the 25 inferences, 17 inferences are chosen in which both cases (inferring me as oneself and others) can be spotted.

The responses to the first question, in which the meme in figure (1) is given, can be analysed as in table (1):



Figure 1: “Stay-at-Home Dad” meme

Table 1: The Analysis of the Responses to the “Stay-at-Home Dad” Meme

No.	Inferences	Response Percentage	Target of Humour	The Scope of the Target
1.	The speaker is ready to do the impossible thing such as giving birth for the sake of his dream car.	31%	The speaker	Exact
2.	Some men are willing to accept the role of women for the sake of their dream car.	11%	Some men	Broad
3.	Men are willing to accept the role of women for the sake of money.	58%	Men	Broad
4.	Some men are willing to accept the role of a woman for the sake of money.	0%	Some men	Broad
5.	Men are willing to take the offer for the sake of their dream car.	0%	Men	Broad

Table (1) shows that in the “Stay at Home Dad” meme, 31% of the respondents inferred “me” as “the speaker”, and to them, the humour in this meme has targeted no one but the speaker/producer of the meme, which has the exact scope as the lexical concept “me”. Yet, the other 69% of the respondents, believe that the humour in this meme is projected at the expense of others, not the speaker (i.e., 11% of the respondents have broadened the scope of the target into “some men” and 58% into “men”).

Normally, the word “me”, which labels an image in memes, carries the meaning “*This is me*”; therefore, through the process of saturation and reference assignment, the readers can put back the elided part that accompanies “Me” as “*The man in the image is me (the speaker)*”, as in (a), which shows an explicit inference of this meme.

a. The speaker is the man in the photo (who is with a big belly in front of the expensive car looking like a pregnant man staring at the car) and the photo is a response to the question asked in the meme (would you be a stay-at-home dad if your wife was making 12 million), so the photo is the speaker’s response to the question.

At the implicit level, through using encyclopaedic information, such as knowing that it is impossible for men to get pregnant, the audience would know that the intended humour is in this exaggerated way of answering the question which is asked in the meme. This 31%, by following the path of least effort in interpreting the meme, have stopped at the conventional sense of the word “me”, so they have interpreted that the author of the meme, by humorously giving his answer to the question, projects self-mockery. In other words, the target of the humour is the speaker himself. Accordingly, they have chosen inference (No.1) for the meme.

However, the other 69% of the respondents would go further in their interpretation, and broaden the scope of the target into “some men” and “men”. In other words, inferring “me” as the speaker is not relevant enough to them, thus the outcome is such ad hoc concepts. This is mainly because, a) the author of the meme is invisible, so it is not clear whether the speaker is a male who humorously shows his approval of taking the offer or just someone who jokes about men’s love for cars and money and their unwillingness to be stay-at-home dads. And, b) the question in the meme is directed to all men, so the speaker’s answer could be inferred as men’s answer to the question. Thus, it is highly likely among the respondents to interpret that the one who has been targeted in this humour is “men” instead of “the speaker”. And since this question implicitly asks men to take the role of women for money, most people will not go further in looking for other interpretations; that is why the highest number of the respondents (58% of this 69%) have selected inference (No.3). And only 11% (of this 69%) will find “the man’s gaze on the car” relevant to their interpretation, and through their background knowledge and their life experience with men, they know that some men (not all men) do the impossible thing for their dream car; therefore, they adjust (broaden) the lexical concept “me” into “some men” as in inference (No.2).

Furthermore, the responses to the second question, in which the meme in figure (2) is given, are analysed in table (2):

Gets blocked

Me with a second account :



Figure 2: “Gets blocked” meme

Table 2: *The Analysis of the Responses to the “Gets Blocked” Meme*

No .	Inferences	Response Percentage	Target of Humour	The Scope of the Target
1.	The speaker does not accept a refusal and is persistent in getting what s/he wants.	72%	The speaker	Exact
2.	Men on social media are shameless, and they do not know what is meant by privacy.	4%	Men on social media	Broad
3.	Some people on social media are shameless, and they do not know what is meant by privacy.	24%	Some people on social media	Broad
4.	Some men on social media are shameless because they do not take a no for an answer. Even if women block them, they still try other ways to invade their privacy.	0%	Some men on social media	Broad
5.	Some women on social media are shameless because they do not take a no for an answer. Even if they are blocked, they still try other ways to invade privacy.	0%	Some women on social media	Broad

From table (2) of the “Gets Blocked” meme, it can be seen that 72% of the responses have chosen an inference in which the target has been interpreted as “the speaker” whose scope is exact (inferred without extension). And 28% have broadened it (i.e., 4% of them inferred it into “Men on social media” and 24% into “some people on social media”).

At the explicit level of inferring the “Gets blocked” meme, the coded message undergoes some inferential strategies, such as reference assignment by which the reader knows that “me” refers to the speaker. Also, the reader knows who will get blocked by whom through saturation and disambiguation. This meme could be explicitly inferred as:

a. When the speaker gets blocked on social media, like Tom (the cat) in the image, the speaker with a second account will stealthily view the posts or profile of the person who has blocked the speaker.

The humour in this meme could be spotted in the comparison between the speaker’s action after being blocked and Tom’s act of looking through the door stealthily. Thus, it looks like the speaker is trying to target himself/herself in the humour. 72% of the respondents stop at this level and do not spend more effort to look for other interpretations, since they believe that the message of this meme is only related to the speaker. That is why to them, the literal interpretation of “me” is relevant enough and

there is no need for looking for other targets. That is why they have chosen the inference (No. 1).

However, the other 28 % think that the message of the meme is related to others. That is why they think that interpreting “me” as the speaker is not relevant enough and looked for other interpretations. 4% of this amount think that Tom (who is a male cat) in the image is relevant to their interpretation since they have experienced that men fit this description. Therefore, they have inferred that the target of the humour is “men on social media”, not the speaker, by choosing the inference (No. 2). And 24% of this 28% through life experience that some people (both males and females) could fit that description, have interpreted the target as “some people”, as can be seen in the inference of (No.3) that they have chosen.

The responses to the third question, in which the meme in figure (3) is given, are analysed in table (3):

Me: “I have nothing to wear!”

Also me:



Figure 3: “I have nothing to wear” meme

Table 3: The Analysis of the Responses to the “I Have Nothing to Wear” Meme

No.	Inferences	Response Percentage	Target of Humour	The scope of the target
1.	The speaker cares so much about his/her clothes and always wants to have something new to wear.	28%	The speaker	Exact
2.	Some women care so much about their clothes and always want to have something new to wear.	48%	Some women	Broad
3.	All women care so much about their clothes and always want to have something new to wear.	8%	All women	Broad
4.	Some people care so much about their clothes and always want to have something new to wear.	16%	Some people	Broad
5.	Some men care so much about their clothes and always want to have something new to wear	0%	Some men	Broad

Table (3) illustrates that for the “I Have Nothing to Wear” meme, 28% of the respondents have chosen an inference in which the target has been interpreted as “the speaker” whose scope is exact (inferred without extension). And 72% have broadened it (i.e., 48% of them inferred it into “some women”, 8% into “all women” and 16% into “some people”)

The explicit meaning of the “I have nothing to wear” meme could be:

a. The speaker has a closet full of clothes and still complains about not having anything to wear.

The author of this meme intends to show humour in

comparing himself/herself to the girl in the closet full of clothes, and also in the contradictory idea that the speaker has nothing to wear yet he/she has lots of clothes. Then this meme could be regarded as a self-defeating meme, in which the author makes himself the butt of the joke. Only 28% of the respondents stopped at this level and did not go further in their interpretation, as evidenced by their selection of the inference (No.1). And the other 72% believe that inferring “me” as the speaker is not relevant enough and have gone further in their interpretation by inferring it into ad hoc concepts which are different from the conventional meaning of the concept “me”. Among this 72%, 56% of the respondents find the girl in the image relevant to their interpretation. This is because they believe that the message of the meme is related to the stereotypical idea of women always complaining about having nothing to wear, as 48% of this amount have chosen the inference (No. 2). And this is an indication that these respondents think that only some women have been targeted since through experience they know that not all women are like that, while the other 8% of the 56% respondents think that the message has targeted “all women”, as it can be seen through their selection of the inference (No.3). However, the other 16% of the 72% respondents believe that the one who has been targeted in this meme could be a woman or a man since to them this behaviour could be seen in men too. That is why they have adjusted the scope of the target to “some people”, as it is shown in their selection of the reference (No. 4).

The responses to the fourth question, in which the meme in figure (4) is given, are analysed in table (4):

me in social media vs me in real life...



Figure 4: “Me on social media vs. real life” meme

Table 4: The Analysis of the Responses to the “Me on Social Media vs. Reality” Meme

No.	Inferences	Response Percentage	Target of Humour	The scope of the target
1.	The speaker is not showing his/her true self on social media and puts on fake and deceptive appearances.	23%	The speaker	Exact
2.	Some women on social media are not showing their true selves and put on fake and deceptive appearances.	18%	Some women on social media	Broad
3.	Some people on social media are not showing their true selves and put on fake and deceptive appearances.	43%	Some people on social media	Broad
4.	people on social media are not showing their true selves and put on fake and deceptive appearances.	16%	People on social media	Broad
5.	The girls of this generation are not showing their true selves on social media and put on fake and deceptive appearances.	0%	The girls of this generation	Broad

Table (4) reveals that in inferring the “Me on social media vs reality” meme, 23% of the respondents have chosen an inference in which the target has been interpreted as “the speaker” whose scope is exact (inferred without extension). And 77% has broadened it (i.e., 18% of them inferred it into “some women on social media”, 43% into “some people on social media” and 16% into “people on social media”)

The explicit meaning of the “Me on social media vs. real life” meme could be as in (a):

- a. The speaker on social media is like the pretty fox on the left of the merged image, yet in real life, the speaker is like the ugly fox on the right.

The humour in this meme is in the comparison of the speaker’s change of appearance to the two foxes’ appearance. Thus, the target of this self-mockery could be interpreted as the speaker himself/herself. 23% of the respondents have interpreted it in this way, as it is evidenced by their selection of the inference (No.1), while the other 77% of the respondents infer the target of the humour as others. That is to say, 18% believe that the pretty female fox is relevant to their interpretation and take it as a clue for telling them that the message is about those women who fake their beauty on social media, as it can be seen through their selection of the inference (No.2).

Yet, nowadays it has become a trend for both men and women to put on filters and fake their beauty on social media, the scope of the target of the joke could be even broader than “some women on Instagram” and be adjusted into “some people on Instagram” or “people on Instagram”. Accordingly, 43% of this 77% infer the coded concept “me” into an ad hoc concept “some people”, as if the speaker by writing “me on social media vs. me in real life” he/she means “some people on social media vs. the same people in real life” this can be seen through the inference (No.3) that they have chosen. Besides, the other 16% of this 77% believe that the description of faking beauty on social media can fit everyone on social media, which is why they broadened the scope of the target to “people on social media” and this is shown in their selection of the inference (No.4).

Lastly, the responses to the fifth question, in which the meme in figure (5) is given, are analysed in table (5):



Figure 5: “Strong Doge and Weak Cheems” meme

Table 5: The Analysis of the Responses to the “Strong Doge and Weak Cheems” Meme

No.	Inferences	Response Percentage	Target of Humour	The Scope of the Target
1.	The speaker likes anime characters.	10%	The speaker	Exact
2.	The boys of this generation do not like to take responsibility compared to their ancestors.	25%	Boys of this generation	Broad
3.	This generation compared to the previous ones are childish.	65%	This generation	Broad
4.	The speaker wants to grow up and start a family just like his dad.	0%	The speaker	Exact
5.	The boys of this generation compared to the previous ones childish.	0%	Boys of this generation	Broad

Table (5) displays the analysis of the responses to the “Strong Doge and Weak Cheems” meme, in which 10% of the respondents have chosen an inference in which the target has been interpreted as “the speaker” whose scope is exact (inferred without extension). And 90% have broadened it (i.e., 25% of them inferred it into “boys of this generation” and 65% into “this generation”).

The explicit meaning of the “Strong Doge and Weak Cheems” meme could be drawn by using some inferential enrichments, such as reference assignment by which the lexical concept “me” would refer to the speaker and “my dad” the speaker’s dad. And also, through saturation, the reader will be able to infer some elided parts as:

- a. The speaker at *the age of 17 compared to the speaker’s dad at the age of 17 is weaker since the speaker at the same age as his/her dad says “Damm I wish I were a cute anime girl”, while his/her dad has a family to come to and greet them with “Darling I’m home, how are the kids?”*

The humour of this meme could be shown in the way the author of the meme pokes fun at how much he/she is different from his/her dad. By comparing the difference between himself/herself to his/her dad to the difference between the strong Doge and the weak Cheems, the speaker projects a self-defeating humour, in which he/she makes fun at his own expense. Only 10% of the respondents believe that inferring “me” as “the speaker” is relevant enough to their interpretation that they do not need to spend more effort searching for other relevant targets. Between the inferences of (No.1) and (No.4), in which the speaker has been targeted, this 10% have chosen the one in (No.1), since they believe that it is more relevant based on their experience.

Typically, the strong Doge and the weak Cheems are used for stereotyping people from the past and present respectively; so normally the readers of this meme interpret the target as the speaker’s generation (more specifically as “this generation” which means the generation of the period, in which the meme is shared). That is also the main reason for the high number of responses (which is 90%) in which the target is inferred as the generation of the speaker instead of the speaker, as can be seen in their selection of the response (No.2) and (No.3). That being so, 65% of this amount adjusted (broadened) the coded concepts “me” and “dad” into ad hoc concepts “this generation” and “the previous generation” respectively. One of the stereotypes about this generation is that they do not act their age

and will not take responsibility compared to their ancestors. Using the encyclopedic information that boys are compared to their dads and girls to their moms in some cultures, the other 25% of the 90% of the responses have interpreted that the author of the meme has targeted only “the boys of this generation”.

VII. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the perspective of Sperber and Wilson’s relevance theory (1995), the lexical concept “me” could be inferred into ad hoc concepts at the explicit level, and its scope can be broadened based on the background knowledge about the ideologies on which the message of the memes is built and the form of the memes. In the “gets blocked” meme, 72% of the responses inferred the coded concept “me” as the speaker, while in the “Stay at Home Dad”, “Nothing to wear”, “Me on Instagram vs. reality” and “strong Doge and weak Cheems” the responses in favour of the speaker are (31%, 28%, 23%, 10%) respectively. That is to say, in each one of them, the number of responses which infer the concept “me” as “the speaker” is even fewer than half the amount of the ones in the “gets blocked” meme, that is mainly, according to most people, the behaviour that is made fun of in the “gets blocked” meme is more related to the speaker than others and based on their background knowledge there is no specific person or group of people who fit this description and being criticized for. That is why an insignificant number of the responses have broadened the concept of “me” into others (that is to say only 4% of the respondents inferred that the meme has targeted “men” and 24% of the respondents inferred it as “some people”). In the other four memes, unlike this one, only a small number of the respondents inferred the scope of the target as exactly as its literal concept, because the topics on which the message of these memes is built seem to be more related to others than the speaker himself/herself, as in the “Stay-at-home dad” meme, 64% of the respondents think that the meme has targeted others (i.e., 58% of the responses broadened the coded concept “me” into “men”, and 11% broadened it into “some men”), that is mainly because the question mentioned in the meme seems to be directed to all men. That is to say, the speaker’s response is taken as men’s response to the question and the meme is interpreted as mocking men for doing anything for money. In the “I have nothing to wear” meme, 72% of the respondents inferred that the meme is stereotyping others rather than a self-mockery meme (i.e., 48% of the responses infer the lexical concept “me” as “some women”, 16% infer it as “some people”, 8% as “all women”). In the “Me on social media vs. reality” meme, 77% of the data broaden the scope of the target into others (43% interpret the target as “some people on Instagram”, 16% as “people on Instagram”, and 18% as “some women”). This is mostly because faking beauty has become a trend on social media, which is why the majority of the respondents believe that this meme is related to those with such behaviour rather than the speaker himself/herself. Last but not least, in the “strong Doge and weak Cheems” meme, 90% of the responses have shown that “me” refers to others rather than the speaker

(i.e., 65 % of the responses broaden the lexical concept “me” into “this generation”, and 25% think that the meme has targeted “the boys of this generation”). Unlike all of the other memes, this meme has the largest percentage of data that infer “me” as others, that is because, despite the universal stereotypical idea that this generation is weaker than the previous ones, the form of this meme is behind this kind of interpretation. Since this meme has been used for comparing people from the past and present, most people interpret this form of meme to be a comparison between generations.

All in all, the total number of those responses who chose to infer the coded concept “me” as the speaker/the author of the meme (oneself) is “164”, while, those who chose to infer it as other than the speaker (others) is “336” responses. This illustrates that self-defeating humour in memes could be problematic because there is an interrelationship between self and others. That is to say, although the author of the meme tries to make others laugh at his/her own expense, the readers might interpret such kind of humour as if it is done at their own expense or at the expense of others that is related to them or they might hold dear.

CONCLUSION

On the account of the relevance theory, the readers, to find an optimally relevant interpretation, will spend the least effort in their interpretation. Hence, most readers will stop at a kind of interpretation that is closest to their background knowledge. Through analysing the data that have been taken from 100 meme participators, it could be shown that the readers will draw a kind of inference for the targets that are closest to their background knowledge. And instead of a literal interpretation, they will infer them into ad hoc concepts, which are either broader (less exact) or narrower (more exact) than their lexical concepts. In the case of the lexical concept “me”, which is commonly used in self-mockery memes, the readers of the meme will broaden it as a part of the process of deriving the explicit content of the memes. Moreover, it could be seen that the scope of the target will vary from one reader to another because of their different background knowledge.

In a nutshell, examining how the target of self-defeating memes has been inferred by internet users shows that there is an interrelationship between “self” and “others”. That is because the readers will look beyond the texts in searching for the speakers’ intended targets. As a result, the coded concept “me” which is used by the speakers to refer to themselves could be interpreted as “others” by some readers. For that reason, mocking oneself through memes could be as hurtful as mocking others. That is why, to be in the safe zone and not be misinterpreted, the form of the meme and the topic on which the meme’s message is built need to be taken into consideration in projecting humorous memes, since they can trigger the identification and the scope of those who have been targeted in the humour.

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APPENDIX

QUESTIONNAIRE SAMPLE

Choosing Inferences:

What is the meaning behind the following memes?

1.



- I do not get the meaning behind it.
- Men are willing to accept the role of a woman for the sake of money.
- Some men are willing to accept the role of a woman for the sake of money.
- Men are willing to take the offer for the sake of their dream car.
- Some men are willing to take the offer for the sake of their dream car.
- The speaker is willing to take the offer for the sake of his dream car.
- Other ...

2.

Gets blocked

Me with a second account :



- I do not get the meaning behind it.
- Some people on social media are shameless, and they do not know what is meant by privacy.

- Men do not take "No" for an answer. Even if women dismiss and reject them, they will find another way to go back to their lives.
- Some men on social media are shameless because they do not take a no for an answer. Even if women block them, they still try other ways to invade their privacy.
- Some women on social media are shameless because they do not take a no for an answer. Even if they are blocked, they still try other ways to invade privacy.
- The speaker does not accept a refusal and is persistent in getting what s/he wants.
- Other ...

3.

Me: "I have nothing to wear!"

Also me:



- I do not get the meaning behind it.
- The speaker cares so much about his/her clothes and always wants to have something new to wear.
- Some women care so much about their clothes and always want to have something new to wear.
- Some men care so much about their clothes and always want to have something new to wear
- All women care so much about their clothes and always want to have something new to wear.
- Some people care so much about their clothes and always want to have something new to wear.
- Other ...

4.

me in social media vs me in real life...



- I do not get the meaning behind it.
- The speaker is not showing his/her true self on social media and puts on fake and deceptive appearances.
- Some women on social media are not showing their true selves and put on fake and deceptive appearances.

- Some people on social media are not showing their true selves and put on fake and deceptive appearances.
- People on social media are not showing their true selves and put on fake and deceptive appearances.
- The girls of this generation are not showing their true selves on social media and put on fake and deceptive appearances
- Other ...

5.

My dad at 17:



Darling I'm home, how are the kids?

Me at 17:



Hi daddy! I'm home!

- I do not get the meaning behind it.
- The new generations compared to the previous ones are childish.
- That boys of this generation do not like to take responsibility compared to their ancestors.
- The speaker wants to grow up and start a family just like his dad.
- The speaker likes anime characters.
- The boys of this generation compared to the previous ones childish.
- Other ...