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# Engaging with extremely online psychology students: Creating a meme “study guide”

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** Memes are a viable way to introduce students to psychology concepts and to actively engage with class content.

**Statement of the Problem:** Given our ever-increasing engagement with technology, educators have been calling for innovative ways to engage with students who are often steeped in internet culture.

**Literature Review:** Building on Kath et al. (2022)’s strong theoretical foundation for memes as an effective pedagogical tool in the psychology classroom, memes assignments seem to provide an ideal medium for this engagement.

**Teaching Implications:** This paper describes an innovative assignment designed to have students engage with class content using memes.

**Conclusion:** The assignment provides students the opportunity to actively engage with class content and fulfills many of the APA teaching goals, making it a viable assignment for students at any level of their education journey.

## Keywords

memes, instructional methods, learner-centered instruction, student engagement, multimedia, scientific communication

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## Introduction

Over the past several years there has been concern about the impact of social media on the spread of fake news and false science (Suarez-Lledo & Alvarez-Galvez, 2021; Wang et al., 2019). This has led to some viewing such platforms as antithetical to learning (Fernandez, 2008). However, there are also examples of social media being used to promote scientific inquiry and accuracy; Dr Inna Kanevsky has become a rising star on TikTok for debunking psychological myths and promoting scientific literacy (Ernest, 2021). The psychology professor currently has over 1.1 million followers and has received over 35 million likes on their TikTok videos. Luckily, psychology instructors do not need to go viral to incorporate new forms of communication into their classrooms. A more practical approach is the use of memes—a repeated or familiar visual (often pictorial) means of communication that is anchored in popular culture which is shared in online platforms (APA, n.d)—which has had a profound impact on the way that younger generations communicate with one another (Iloh, 2021). In practice, memes convey messages by pairing familiar pictures (which have culturally imbued meaning) with novel information, such as another picture, text, or video (Dancygier & Vandelanotte, 2017; Shifman, 2012). For example, the image and text in Figure 1 often accompanies news headlines or captions where the first few words lead the audience in one direction before clarifying later on, such as “I thought I would never find love and then I didn’t.” Alternatively, users may generate their own initial caption with which to precede the meme to elicit an audience reaction (e.g., “When your test goes from essay questions to multiple choice”).



**Figure 1.** Example of a common meme format

Note. The above image is taken from a post-game interview with an American high school football player whose team rallied from a large deficit to win their game in the second half. It has been since used as a ‘reaction image’ to express surprise toward captions where the initial and later messages convey different meanings.

While the use of memes as a pedagogical tool is in its infancy, it constitutes a form of arts-based teaching which has an established history as an effective teaching method. Arts-based teaching methods have been used to enhance higher education teaching across disciplines including medicine (Emami et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2021; Yakhforoshha et al., 2018) and teacher education (Srivastava et al., 2019; Zakaria et al., 2019). Integrating art throughout the curriculum can be a transformative force that presses students and educators to drive learning and teaching across curricula (Marshall, 2014). Additionally, arts-based teaching methodologies have been shown to have a positive effect on student burnout (Khaleghkhah et al., 2021—providing reprieve to marginalized students already facing stress from other sources. Despite these benefits, there has been little empirical work on their utility in teaching psychology; the few studies that exist have found them to be transformative pedagogies that have enhanced student learning in class (Fleming et al., 1990) and during clinical supervision (Deaver & Shiflett, 2011).

A modern iteration of art-based pedagogies is the use of image- and video-based internet memes (Kath et al., 2022). Kath et al. (2022) recently provided a strong theoretical foundation for memes as an effective pedagogical tool in the psychology classroom. Boyle (2022) has also called for librarians to develop memes to enhance students' information literacy. Indeed, these have been used in other disciplines to foster critical thinking (Wells, 2018) and media literacy (Elmore & Coleman, 2019), and to enhance student participation (Purnama, 2017). Others have identified memes as beneficial to English second-language (ESL) students (Harshavardhan et al., 2019). Memes have shown promise in pedagogical settings with students and instructors reporting positive experiences incorporating them into undergraduate courses (Mendez-Requera & Lopez Cabrera, 2020; Reddy et al., 2020; Riser et al., 2020). This evidence of effectiveness includes a burgeoning body of evidence supporting the use of memes in psychology classrooms (Addanante, 2018; Riser et al., 2020), but research evidence is limited, and more is required to reach a definitive conclusion (Kath et al., 2022). Additionally, despite the promise of the pedagogical advantages of memes in the classroom, there has been some reticence with students pointing out several inherent challenges with using memes in the classroom (i.e., required knowledge and context of the meme format, the rapid shelf life of memes, and the risk of some students not grasping the context of the memes used; Read, 2021).

## Popularity of memes

Despite these challenges, memes should be embraced as a useful and innovative pedagogical tool. They have already been identified as important social exchanges with the ability to raise awareness and inform (or misinform) users across cultures on emerging political and social issues (Brodie, 2009; Du et al., 2020; Simmons et al., 2011). Further, memes can also promote political change and foster feelings of connectedness (McLoughlin & Southern, 2021; Vásquez, 2019; Zhang & Pinto, 2021). While it is difficult to capture the pervasiveness of memes in modern culture, a recent analysis of five meme-based subreddits indicated that over 129,000 memes were posted in a one-week period (Barnes et al., 2021). A review by Instagram in 2020 found that over one million memes were posted every day on the platform (Instagram, 2020). Because memes rely on repetition and shared sociocultural knowledge, there are a relatively small number of original memes themselves; the website KnowYourMeme (<https://knowyourmeme.com/>), which details the context and history of each meme, currently recognizes 7,962 different meme formats (although over 33,000 have been submitted for review). It is the unique

variations in memes that allow them to continue to resonate; an early analysis of memes on Facebook identified over 120 that had spawned over 100,000 different variations (Adamic et al., 2016). This is important for educators as it indicates that: i) they do not need to memorize hundreds of thousands of meme formats; ii) most students will be familiar with at least several meme formats; and iii) memes allow for considerable creative flexibility—necessary for both students and educators in applying them to psychological concepts.

## Using memes to study psychological concepts

Given their simple visual presentation of information, we saw memes as an easy, engaging way to aid students in their understanding of complex psychological concepts. Given the evidence that engaging in interactive multimedia learning improves outcomes (Khan et al., 2017; Kiili, 2005; Neo & Neo, 2004), we decided that it was not enough for students to be passive consumers of meme content, they should be actively engaged in the creation of the memes. This desire to have students create memes rather than passively consume their content is theoretically sound (Kath et al., 2022). Indeed, research demonstrates that, when students are actively involved in a learning environment where they can draw connections to the outside world (e.g., by sharing and co-creating classroom content with instructors [Schmidt, 2016; Tyler et al., 2009]), outcomes are improved (Schmidt, 2016). Thus, the Meme “Study Guide” was created and implemented in Introductory Psychology classes taught by the first author.

## Implementation

As this approach is fairly novel, its use requires careful consideration and planning. While the task itself is fairly simple to implement and requires very few resources, instructors should carefully consider the objectives that they want to accomplish with the assignment, accessibility needs of the class, the group of students in their individual class, and any other unique elements of their teaching context. For example, if a class is composed of mainly mature students who are less familiar with internet culture, there may be additional difficulties in implementing the assignment (i.e., lack of required knowledge and context of the meme format, the rapid shelf life of memes, and the risk of some students not grasping the context of the memes used; Read, 2021). While the authors have implemented this assignment as a voluntary assignment (often for bonus marks), there is no theoretical reason that the assignment could not be adapted to a graded one. The instructions described here are flexible and can be adapted to the needs of unique groups (e.g., populations with disabilities, different age groups) in individual classrooms.

## Instructions for students

Ideally, students should be introduced to the assignment early in the class and given the opportunity to contribute memes weekly as spacing leads to retention (Cepeda et al., 2008). Having multiple opportunities to create memes increases students' opportunities to engage with material and increase retention. The assignment can be modified to involve any desired number of memes to be submitted and on essentially any timeline. The goal of the assignment (i.e., to engage with class materials and summarize it in a visual way) and the objectives of the assignment should be clearly communicated to students and students should be given regular reminders about submitting content. Additionally, given the sensitive nature of many of the topics covered in psychology

classrooms, students should be reminded to approach materials with sensitivity and respect. One approach that we have taken to avoid potentially offensive materials being shared was to have the instructor vet the content (described below) prior to posting them for the whole class to see. An example of the assignment instructions is provided in the Supplemental Materials section

[[https://osf.io/j8th4/?view\\_only=f520e15e210a4aefa6fd40eec488fc06](https://osf.io/j8th4/?view_only=f520e15e210a4aefa6fd40eec488fc06)]. Memes created by students are viewable to the class once they have been vetted for studying purposes. Depending on instructor preference, instructions about the use of TikTok or Reel style videos may also be added.

## Instructions for instructors

Given the sensitive nature of much of the content covered in Introductory Psychology classes, one approach that we have taken is to have students submit their memes through the class learning management system (LMS; or through email) where they can be reviewed prior to posting them for the class. The vetted memes can then be posted on a read-only Google Doc or page on the class LMS. This allows the memes to be checked for accuracy, appropriateness, and readability before they are posted to the class “study guide”. Students are also asked up-front for their permission to share the memes so that they can be incorporated into future class lessons.

## Providing examples

As the use of memes in educational settings may be quite novel to students, examples of memes should be provided to students. Depending on resources, these example memes may be generated by the instructor themselves, may be pulled from the internet, or may be from previous years where this assignment has been used (see Figure 2 for some examples of student-generated memes). Examples of memes can be included in lectures to illustrate points. A folder of examples can also be maintained on the LMS.



**Figure 2.** Examples of Student Generated Memes (some memes have been cropped for space)

### Aligning the meme “study guide” with the APA learning goals

In addition to providing a student a creative way to engage with materials, the meme “study guide” also fulfills many of the American Psychological Association’s learning goals and outcomes for undergraduate psychology majors (APA, 2014). As seen in Table 1, this assignment fulfills many of the objectives in goals 1 (Knowledge Base), 2 (Scientific Inquiry and Critical Thinking), and 4 (Communication). While one assignment will never be sufficient to master these domains, this assignment provides students a chance to develop these skills and to create a base for further mastery of these skills as they proceed through their degree.

**Table 1.** APA major goals and meme “study guide” attributes

<b>APA Goal &amp; Outcome</b>	<b>Meme “Study Guide” Attribute</b>
<b>1. Knowledge Base</b>	
1.1 Describe key concepts, principles, and overarching themes in psychology	Describing content visually is a key goal of the assignment
1.2 Develop a working knowledge of psychology’s content domains	Memes are created across the domains
1.3 Describe applications of psychology	-
<b>2. Scientific Inquiry &amp; Critical Thinking</b>	
2.1 Use scientific reasoning to interpret psychological phenomena	Students must interpret and summarize complex psychological concepts into a meme
2.2 Demonstrate psychology information literacy	Students must interpret and summarize complex psychological concepts into a meme
2.3 Engage in innovative and integrative thinking and problem solving	Students must interpret and summarize complex psychological concepts into a meme
2.4 Interpret, design, and conduct basic psychological research	-
2.5 Incorporate sociocultural factors in scientific inquiry	The creation of memes relies on students’ sociocultural knowledge
<b>3. Ethical &amp; Social Responsibility in a Diverse World</b>	
3.1 Apply ethical standards to evaluate psychological science and practice	-
3.2 Build and enhance interpersonal relationships	-
3.3 Adopt values that build community at local, national, and global levels	-
<b>4. Communication</b>	
4.1 Demonstrate effective writing for different purposes	Students have to effectively use text within their memes to communicate concepts
4.2 Exhibit effective presentation skills for different purposes	Students have to effectively communicate information in a visual format
4.3 Interact effectively with others	Given that the memes are shared among the class, this is accomplished (in a broad sense)
<b>5. Professional Development</b>	
5.1 Apply psychological content and skills to career goals	-
5.2 Exhibit self-efficacy and self-regulation	-
5.3 Refine project-management skills	-
5.4 Enhance teamwork capacity	-
5.5 Develop meaningful professional direction for life after graduation	-

## Conclusion

Memes are rapidly becoming an important means by which information is created and exchanged. This medium has the capacity to transcend traditional cultural boundaries and to create new shared identities as members of a digital culture (Brown, 2022). Memes, therefore, represent a unique opportunity for educators to harness a fun, flexible, and relevant means of communication to enhance their own teaching practices. The goal of this paper was to enlighten psychology instructors (and those in other disciplines) of the merits of memes in their pedagogical practice. The present work built upon the theoretical foundations of meme-based instruction proposed by Kath et al. (2022) by offering tangible guidance to instructors—including instructions and assignment options that can be tailored to use. Instructors should consider the unique needs of their own classroom composition (e.g., accessibility needs, technology access) when adapting this assignment for use in their teaching. It is hoped that this inclusion is useful and will facilitate further research into the utility of meme-based pedagogy. The authors are currently planning and undertaking research projects aimed at assessing and understanding the use of memes in psychology classrooms.

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## Data/code availability statement

Given the theoretical nature of this paper, there is no data/code associated with this manuscript. An example of the assignment with sample memes is available at [https://osf.io/j8th4/?view\\_only=f520e15e210a4aefa6fd40eec488fc06](https://osf.io/j8th4/?view_only=f520e15e210a4aefa6fd40eec488fc06).

## Ethics approval

Given the theoretical nature of this paper, institutional ethical review was not necessary, as per Article 2.1 of the Government of Canada's Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS-2).

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