

Beyond Laughter: How Political Memes Can Threaten Peace in South Korea

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Abstract

This paper examines political memes as a hybrid phenomenon at the intersection of media culture and political discourse. From a communication studies perspective, memes function as cultural texts that condense complex issues into shareable, humorous, and symbolic narratives, shaping how citizens interpret events and political actors in digital spaces. From a political science perspective, memes also serve as tools of mobilization, identity formation, and contestation, amplifying grassroots activism while potentially fueling polarization and disinformation. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship and comparative examples, the analysis demonstrates how memes operate simultaneously as vehicles of satire, instruments of influence, and reflections of public sentiment. The paper argues that political memes are not trivial byproducts of online culture, but significant agents shaping political communication and democratic engagement in the digital era. It also highlights the potential role of Incheon and local academic institutions as important sites for researching, contextualizing, and educating about the political functions of memes in democratic and cross-cultural settings.

Keywords: Political Memes; Emotional Polarization; Emotional Violence; Political Trust; Political Cynicism; Political Efficacy; Youth Political Participation; Digital Culture; George Mason University Korea; Peace and Conflict Resolution Studies

Introduction

As technologies have developed, cultures and lifestyles have changed accordingly. The internet, now accessible to nearly everyone, has become a central space for the creation and circulation of history, culture, and education. Among the many forms of online content, memes have emerged as one of the most widely consumed and influential. Easy to create and capable of spreading rapidly, memes shape how society interprets events and political actors. Experts warn that this virality amplifies their societal impact, as memes can elicit ridicule and strong

emotions that fuel online conflict and division. This raises a critical question: can seemingly humorous memes move beyond entertainment to threaten social stability and contribute to broader societal conflict? Research suggests they can, noting that memes are increasingly “used in political conflicts to ridicule opponents, stir emotions, and polarize communities.”¹

This paper explores the warning signs of these largely invisible online conflicts within Korean society. While previous studies have examined political memes, emotional consumption, and political trust as separate phenomena, few have approached these dynamics from the broader perspective of “peace.” In this study, peace is understood not simply as the absence of physical violence, but as freedom from cultural, structural, and emotional forms of harm. Such forms of violence can be subtly embedded and perpetuated through digital content, including memes. To address this gap, the paper asks a central question: how do political memes threaten peace by shaping polarization and conflict among Korean youth and society?

South Korea’s digital reach is nearly universal: internet penetration stood at 97.2 percent in January 2024, underscoring the country’s deep reliance on the internet for information, communication, and expression.² In this context, political memes are far from trivial. They increasingly shape youth perceptions and public consciousness, functioning as catalysts for polarization and societal division.

How Can a Meme Be Bad?

Memes are widely consumed as humorous digital content, but their role extends beyond entertainment. As cultural units circulated, imitated, and transformed by internet users, memes create shared experiences and collective identities.³ Their repetitive and emotionally charged nature makes them effective at transmitting affect and building social bonds, while also deepening ideological divides.⁴

Political memes, in particular, can function as powerful tools of influence. They may operate as weaponized content—designed not only to persuade or mock, but also to incite, mobilize, and radicalize.⁵ This form of “memetic warfare” intentionally manipulates emotions, potentially destabilizing political discourse.⁶ As Shifman warns, virality often conceptualizes people as passive recipients of media “snacks,” masking deeper ideological messages beneath humor and mimicry.⁷

This emotional transmission is often deliberate. Lunenburg describes “affective publics” in which information circulates through networks of shared emotions rather than facts, building solidarity while bypassing rational debate.⁸ Parody memes, though humorous on the surface, repeatedly exaggerate inconsistencies and foster cynicism toward institutions.⁹ Over time, this repetitive ridicule may normalize disengagement, particularly among youth who primarily encounter politics in digital spaces.

For young audiences, memes are omnipresent across digital platforms and often appeal more through emotional resonance than factual clarity. Political participation in this environment may emerge from emotional consumption rather than critical analysis.¹⁰ Routine practices such as liking, sharing, and commenting reinforce these affective publics, shaping political views through feelings rather than evidence.

Algorithms further amplify the emotional force of many memes. Research suggests that curated exposure positions youth not as passive consumers, but as emotional feedback agents.¹¹ By blending humor with anger and mockery, memes can cultivate cynicism and emotional defensiveness. As Lunenburg notes, this form of affective engagement risks emotional saturation, potentially leading to avoidance or disengagement rather than constructive participation.¹²

These dynamics raise important questions about how memes are not only seen, but also felt. As Mihailescu argues in “Weaponizing Memes,” memes operate as cultural delivery systems that implant ideology through viral familiarity, entangling youth in political narratives disguised as trivial humor.¹³

Memes, Cynicism, and Political Efficacy

Limor Shifman argues that memes function as cultural information passed from person to person, gradually scaling into shared social phenomena that shape collective behaviors and mindsets.¹⁴ Their perceived triviality can mask their power to structure political communication, often transforming humor into cynicism. A University of Michigan study warns that exposure to political attacks on social media increases anxiety, anger, and political cynicism, with anger most strongly linked to cynicism.¹⁵

Highfield notes that parodic meme accounts repeatedly perform critique, generating cumulative political cynicism.¹⁶ Constant ridicule can erode young people’s willingness to engage, replacing deliberation with

sarcasm and distrust.¹⁷ Algorithmic repetition may turn young users into subjects of emotional feedback, reinforcing frustration and avoidance.¹⁸ Over time, this cycle can lead to emotional burnout, in which politics is perceived as toxic and unsolvable, ultimately weakening the legitimacy of democratic institutions as the gap between public sentiment and institutional response grows.

As Hetherington explains, declining trust in institutions erodes expectations of collective benefit, reducing political efficacy—the belief that participation matters.¹⁹ Jang and Ryu similarly find that cynicism among Korean youth lowers confidence in political influence and reduces involvement in political activities.²⁰ This cycle of distrust and disengagement is reinforced by memetic warfare, which dominates affective space through repetition and ridicule rather than truth.²¹ When emotional narratives prevail, politics risks becoming a spectacle, governed by reactive sentiment rather than debate.²²

In Korea, these patterns are already visible. Student Council President Lim observed that political discourse has shifted toward emotional backlash and personalized attacks, with memes fueling “criticism for the sake of criticism, emotional verbal fights, and messenger attacks.”²³ Despite the proliferation of online political content, participation remains low. Ryu and Cha found that conventional political participation across six cities scored just 5.75 out of 100, while online involvement reached only 9.25.²⁴ Political protest ranked highest at 18, suggesting that youth engagement is driven more by emotional expression than by sustained institutional involvement.

A Korean youth society characterized by high levels of emotional cynicism may face challenges such as weakened democratic participation, erosion of substantive political discourse, and a growing tendency among young people to perceive politics as meaningless, inconsistent, or hostile.²⁵ In this environment, humor risks becoming an emotion-driven form of politics without institutional mediation, contributing to what has been described as “a transition to a society without empathy,” where public discourse is shaped by reactive affect rather than deliberative engagement. Political trust serves as a vital link between citizens and the political system. As Kim, Oh, and Choi explain, this trust is increasingly strained as political differences are interpreted through emotional antagonism rather than rational debate, reinforcing a cycle of hostility.²⁶

This cycle is not only emotional but also cultural. Korea’s cultural tightness can make meme-driven political conflict more intense than in

looser societies. A tight society is characterized by strong social norms and limited tolerance for rule-breaking.²⁷ Gelfand notes that East Asian countries score high on cultural tightness because historical threats required strong social coordination. While tight cultures encourage order and cooperation, they can also foster ethnocentrism and distrust of outsiders.²⁸ In more flexible societies, memes are often dismissed as satire, helping to ease tension by framing politics humorously. In such contexts, political figures may become targets of humor rather than symbols of crisis.

In Korea, however, memes may be perceived as challenges to core social norms, thereby intensifying political and social polarization. When individuals in tight cultural systems feel threatened, they may react negatively, resulting in greater prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination.²⁹ In this context, cultural tightness can turn satire into polarization by enforcing conformity and sharpening group boundaries. Memes thus risk functioning less as entertainment and more as catalysts for hostility. Research shows that stress heightens bias and stereotyping of outgroups. Given Korea's ongoing domestic and geopolitical pressures, meme-driven discourse can quickly fuel antagonism, an effect further amplified by the country's highly digitized political environment.

Digital spaces are not culturally neutral, and the same technological practices can have vastly different political consequences depending on local cultural conditions.³⁰ The resulting polarization and heightened emotions may not remain confined to online spaces, but can spill into real-world hostility, creating forms of emotional violence. In such contexts, political conflict becomes increasingly personal, binary, and morally charged.

Hate in Play: Emotional Violence

As emotional distance grows, it can foster a binary worldview of "us versus them." This shift moves beyond partisan disagreement toward a deeper form of existential distrust. As Kroll observes, to speak of the "other" is to postulate difference, but difference only becomes meaningful when both sides belong to a shared system.³¹ When emotional or ideological distance prevails, the sense of belonging diminishes, making cooperation increasingly difficult. Political cynicism deepens, identities harden into moral boundaries, and discourse shifts from rational deliberation toward emotional waves, producing fragmentation and confrontational communication.³² Over time, politics becomes less about reasoned debate and more about increasingly dangerous rhetoric.

Political memes, though often dismissed as trivial, can amplify emotional polarization. Ross and Rivers argue that memes delegitimize political institutions, actors, and ideas through ridicule, sarcasm, and irony, portraying opponents as “morally corrupt, stupid, or ridiculous.”³³ By employing “strategies of moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis,” memes extend skepticism from individual actors to institutions. In this way, memes function as discursive tools that both entertain and erode legitimacy, creating a polarized environment in which political opponents are perceived not merely as different, but as harmful and ethically flawed.

Reporter Lee documents how meme-based hatred circulates in Korea, noting that particular groups are now routinely targeted in digital culture, especially among youth, thereby weakening sensitivity to discrimination. The viral meme “put them in the drum,” originating from a crime film, ridicules political figures with implications of elimination. Such memes trivialize violence, normalize exclusion, and encourage emotionally charged attacks to be consumed as light entertainment. Hatred becomes internalized through repeated laughter, reinforced by group norms that demand conformity and punish deviation. As Professor Seol of Jeonbuk National University warns, “Hate speech is being distributed under the excuse of being ‘funny expressions,’ which is a very dangerous trend.”³⁴

This dynamic fosters a vicious cycle: cynicism breeds disengagement, disengagement fuels distrust, and distrust reinforces hatred. Primacy effects compound the problem, as early exposure to memes shapes durable political frames. As Paul and Weiss explain, initial impressions often carry greater weight, influencing judgment and decision-making.³⁵ When memes serve as the first form of political knowledge, they can become sticky frameworks that shape how youth interpret politics. Over time, this rigidity aligns with what Dweck terms a fixed mindset, in which both self and politics are viewed as unchangeable.³⁶ As scholars have noted, early exposure to hostile discourse risks creating lasting cognitive frames that persist into adulthood, transmitting distrust and hostility across generations.³⁷

Such conditions may not only reflect cultural malaise but also constitute emotional and structural violence, as Galtung defines it: “Violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations.”³⁸ True peace, therefore, is not merely the absence of war but the presence of trust, empathy, and mutual recognition—qualities made

fragile by meme-driven hostility. When citizens cannot imagine coexistence across political lines, society falls short of positive peace even in the absence of physical violence.

Recommendations for Better Youth Participation in Politics

The internet lowers political barriers, allowing memes to flourish within this openness as reflections of contemporary culture. However, when these reflections become distorted, they risk misinforming rather than educating. Studies in Korea show that rumor sharing can boost participation while leaving political knowledge unchanged. Stripped of context, memes may function as viral tools of ridicule and polarization. During the 2017 presidential election, more than one in five respondents reported using KakaoTalk to circulate political rumors, illustrating how easily such content spreads.³⁹ This underscores the need to use memes more thoughtfully—enjoying them as entertainment while reducing their potential to function as political weapons.

In an environment shaped by memes, the ability to critically recognize and structure emotions becomes essential. As Platt shows, beyond the immediate feelings political attacks provoke, how people perceive and interpret the temperature of “public emotions” influences assessments of national well-being and problem-solving capacity.⁴⁰ Emotional framing without reflection can lead to misjudgment, misperception, and political hopelessness, reducing the ability to view politics as a dynamic process rather than a hostile battlefield.

It is critical to shift from emotional consumption to reflective consumption, a process Lunenborg describes as political emotional literacy.⁴¹ Galtung’s peace framework similarly emphasizes that structural and emotional violence must be addressed alongside physical violence.⁴² Mindset theory further warns that a fixed mindset treats intelligence and character as static, while a growth mindset encourages change and resilience.⁴³ Applied to politics, when youth first encounter political life through mocking memes, they risk adopting a fixed and cynical perspective in which change feels impossible.

Verifying information remains crucial. To prevent ridicule and cynicism from becoming entrenched, political awareness training should encourage reflection, analysis, and appropriate distancing from emotional reactions. As Platt emphasizes, unchecked anger undermines sound judgment and democratic decision-making.⁴⁴ Such training can help youth recognize emotional triggers rather than be manipulated by them, fostering

action-based engagement instead of passive meme consumption. This is because political trust is essential for democracy, particularly when decisions are complex, and community-based communication must be gradually rebuilt.⁴⁵ Without trust, civic participation risks becoming hollow and polarized.

A deeper challenge is that youth often rely on memes because meaningful channels of political communication are lacking. As Kriesi shows, populist mobilization thrives when mainstream politics fails to engage disillusioned citizens, particularly the young.⁴⁶ Memes provide an outlet, but they often frame politics as something to be mocked rather than changed. To avoid distorted political socialization, Korea must develop healthier pathways rooted in dialogue rather than emotion.⁴⁷ Youth should grow into participants rather than consumers, becoming active, aware, and emotionally literate citizens capable of critical thinking and constructive engagement in support of social peace. Addressing these challenges requires not only individual awareness but also institutional leadership at the local and academic levels, where cities such as Incheon and academic institutions can play a transformative role.

Incheon, as a global port city with strong digital infrastructure and international networks, is well-positioned to lead this shift. Its diverse population of migrants, students, and professionals offers a living laboratory for examining how digital culture shapes political discourse. By investing in digital literacy programs, hosting exhibitions, and promoting civic dialogue, Incheon can help transform memes from trivial entertainment into tools for democratic engagement and social awareness.

Academic institutions in Incheon, particularly George Mason University Korea and its Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution, can complement these efforts by critically analyzing memes as both satire and disinformation. Through interdisciplinary research, peace education, and civic training, universities can integrate meme analysis into conflict resolution and democratic education. By equipping students to interpret, critique, and responsibly produce political content, academia can elevate memes from fleeting cultural artifacts to meaningful texts that shape civic identity and political life.

Conclusion

Political memes have emerged as powerful cultural artifacts that both entertain and polarize, shaping how young people first encounter politics. While they can reflect social realities, they often do so through ridicule,

simplification, and emotionally charged narratives that deepen cynicism and distrust. When memes become a primary lens through which politics is understood, they risk hardening fixed mindsets and reinforcing patterns of exclusion and hostility, further weakening democratic dialogue and contributing to forms of structural and emotional violence.

The Korean case highlights how early exposure to meme-driven politics among youth can create enduring cognitive frames that blur the line between humor and hate. Repeated encounters with emotionally charged memes normalize ridicule, foster group conformity, and reduce sensitivity to discrimination. These dynamics underscore the need to shift from emotional consumption to reflective political engagement, grounded in the idea of political emotional literacy. Only through critical awareness can memes be reimagined as tools for constructive participation rather than corrosive cynicism.

In this context, the city of Incheon and academia have vital roles to play. Incheon, with its global connectivity and diverse population, can pioneer digital literacy initiatives, civic dialogue, and public programming that redirect meme culture toward democratic awareness. At the same time, universities and programs in Incheon, such as George Mason University Korea and its Conflict Analysis and Resolution Program, can support these efforts by contextualizing memes through interdisciplinary research, peace education, and conflict analysis. By equipping students with tools to interpret and responsibly shape political narratives, these institutions can help transform memes from fleeting jokes into opportunities for civic learning and reconciliation.

Ultimately, peace in a digital society is not achieved by removing memes from political life, but by learning to engage with them critically and responsibly. By combining emotional literacy, community trust-building, and academic innovation, society can help ensure that political humor becomes a pathway to participation rather than a barrier to cooperation.

Moving forward, sustained collaboration between local governments, academic institutions, and civil society will be required to develop models of digital citizenship that address both the risks and opportunities of meme culture. Future research should expand comparative studies across contexts, test interventions in media literacy and peace education, and evaluate long-term impacts on youth political engagement. In this way, this paper seeks to contribute to ongoing scholarly and policy debates

while encouraging further efforts to build democratic resilience in an era where politics and humor are increasingly intertwined.

Notes:

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