

## Discourses of Flexible Learning in Internet Memes

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### ABSTRACT

Mememes, known for their relatability and shareability, were commonly observed within the social media landscape. In the context of COVID-19 and the flexible learning setup, internet mememes depicted social commentaries that were contextually relevant to the students' learning experiences during the pandemic. Against this backdrop, this study was conducted to shed light on the discourses of flexible learning in the internet mememes generated in 2020 to 2021. These mememes were classified into themes to arrive at an organized understanding of how flexible learning was defined and communicated, the perceived tone of the mememes, and the underlying issues related to flexible learning. Results revealed that these mememes described flexible learning as full of external distractions, emotionally taxing, resulting to information overload, and telling of mismatch in student assessment and outcomes. Though the perceived tone of the mememes was generally humorous, they reflected various issues concerning student learning in academic preparation and enthusiasm, low retention power in learning, lapses in instruction materials, unmet desired competencies, and poor time management among students. The study highlighted the ubiquitous nature of mememes and their various communicative roles in the current digital culture and provided implications to review and uncover current learning conditions, pedagogical styles, and the underlying issues in flexible learning embedded in these mememes.

**Keywords:** *blended learning, COVID-19, flexible learning, internet meme, meme*

### INTRODUCTION

Mememes are very rampant within the varieties of social media posts. Internet mememes have evolved from a trivial form of an image establishing a new mode of communication to a complex, intriguing, and unique type of social interaction behind them. In addition, they have prevailed to be highly influential, generating lasting impact, and often become persuasive.

As the meme culture dominates media sites, a sense of mutual understanding is formed between those who joined such culture, having the memes themselves considered their common language (Holland, 2020). Similarly, memes are widely used to express one's thoughts and consist of various images and text, usually in the context of entertainment or represent other functions such as sharing information or presenting an idea. Internet memes are known to be a rapidly prominent discursive tool to allow an online conversation to get through, contrary to merely humorous or trivial contributions. Thus, memes can be tools to permit discussion for specific societal issues. Through the unprecedented access to public conversation brought upon by these memes, an increasing number of personal voices are being heard. Likewise, memes can enunciate deeper meaning and can be understood through thorough scrutiny of their social context.

In the Philippines, using memes can jumpstart a conversation or initiate online interactions. With the rise of social media memes, these have become a standard tool people use today to convey information or messages, either to target particular issues or to indirectly express what is in their minds (Soriano, 2021). Memes have provided an avenue for sharing various types of content and are particularly observable among Gen Zs; these memes enabled social media users to be more aware of the current issues and trends in society.

The transition to flexible learning due to COVID-19 has significantly changed the teaching-learning delivery systems of schools and universities. The pandemic has brought positive and challenging aspects to this new learning mode as teachers, learners, and administrators adapt various education methods to accommodate multiple learning styles, preferences, and needs. COVID-19, as an epidemiological phenomenon, has spawned what Miller (2016) referred to as “the variety of views and opinions shared through polyvocal memetic discourse” and has demonstrated that memes are a constitutive microcosm of this rapid evolution. As such, this prompted the researchers to explore memes as an intriguing lens through which they view and analyze flexible learning in the context of a pandemic by seeking answers to the following research questions: (1) how do these memes define flexible learning; (2) in what tone do these memes on flexible learning are presented; and (3) what underlying issues are presented in the memes?

## **METHOD**

The researchers used a descriptive research design to analyze the discourses of flexible learning in internet memes. They also employed criterion sampling to gather flexible learning-related memes. The memes included in the study were primarily about flexible learning in an image format posted within the timeline of January 2020 to December 2021. Additionally, they were taken from Facebook pages with over 100 thousand followers. A total of 62 memes were considered enough to support the analysis and produce the result based on data saturation. These collected memes were analyzed through content analysis method to help understand how they form discourses on flexible learning. Thematic analysis was also employed to link texts and images towards their commonality, coming up with categories that

would be beneficial to establish a framework and thematic ideas about the data (Gibbs, 2007). Proper credits to the page sources (Facebook pages) were given and taken into account as a prime ethical consideration of the study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Flexible Learning as Communicated in Internet Memes

Flexible learning opened up various spaces for communication to ponder. As such, an internet meme is one facet to engage ideas and welcome perceptions, enabling elements to determine the substance of a flexible learning setup.

Table 1 shows the distribution of flexible learning as communicated in internet memes. Based on the study, flexible learning is defined via internet memes based on its effect on the students.

**Table 1**

*Distribution of Flexible Learning as Communicated in Internet Memes (n=62)*

<b>Facebook Pages</b>	<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
Full of external distractions	16	25.8
Emotionally taxing	15	24.2
Results to information overload	10	16.1
Reveals mismatch in student outcomes	13	21.0
Initiates changes in learning routine	5	8.0
Others	3	4.8
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 1 showcases that flexible learning is communicated as full of external distractions (f=16, 25.8%), emotionally taxing (f=15, 24.2%), results to information overload (f=10, 16.1%), reveals a mismatch in student outcomes (f=13, 21%), and initiates changes in learning routine (f=5, 8%).

Students are mostly distracted during flexible learning due to external distractions. Representative memes in this category show students checking online shopping sales, getting distracted with other students during virtual on-cam classes, and relaxing in their homes while online meetings are conducted.

A flexible learning setup is also emotionally taxing, with representative memes showing students feeling pressured to meet unexpected changes and expectations from course tasks and teachers' expectations. According to Clabaugh, Duque, and Fields (2021), flexible learning amid COVID-19 disruption have tremendously afflicted the entire learning

mechanism. Students were not assured of their future, which amplifies their stress, ultimately affecting their emotional well-being.

One of the emerging themes of flexible learning is that it leads to information overload among learners, which can be attributed to the vast array of school work and learning activities within a period. Wigmore (2022) posed that information overload is the instance of being overwhelmed with much information presented to one's attention or processing.

Some representative memes also depicted a mismatch in student outcomes in flexible learning. Some expected competencies from course tasks and assessments are difficult to attain because of the limits of the flexible learning setup. Memes from this category also include challenges in ensuring that learning assessments are done by the students (not parents, siblings, or anybody else), inadequacy of learning resources, and incongruencies of objectives and assessments in learning modules. This is supported by Bustillo and Aguilos (2022) in their study, which highlighted that students' performances are significantly constrained by multiple challenges, making them unproductive in getting their tasks done.

Finally, the pandemic also caused changes in the learning routines of the learners. Memes depicted in this category show a new normal learning setup that limits social interactions among students and other huge adjustments in daily habits that students have to adhere to.

### **Identified Tone in Flexible Learning Memes**

Flexible learning is represented in the memes with various definitions that are predominantly negative on first impression. However, these memes convey different tones that communicate distinct meanings or blur the lines on our attitude about a subject or topic. They can be delivered in different ways and are composed of qualities such as dark, humorous, serious, objective, or chaotic.

The memes analyzed in this study convey two primary tones that significantly affect how a reader, a sharer, or a social media user interprets the content or the message of the meme. Memes are depicted with a humorous tone, and in the context of the study, flexible learning is displayed in a clever and fun way.

According to Aslan (2021), humor results from the release of painful built-up emotion, and a person displaying humor can laugh at their shortcomings and difficult circumstances despite the emotional intensity of the negative experiences. Internet meme humor is also distinguished by imaginative and playful language with verbal and aesthetic appeal and social aspects. More specifically, when users engage in memetic humor, they signal themselves as individuals playing a game and having fun and a sense of belonging. From these definitions, the researchers can understand that the primary function of humor is to release emotions, sentiments, and feelings.

Memes are also depicted as sarcastic. The presence of sarcasm is often overshadowed by the general impression of considering all memes to be humorous. Das (2019) noted that sarcasm is attributed to various misconceptions and is hard for others to identify. Moreover, according to Anssari and Hadi (2021), the utterance of sarcasm on the way it should somehow convey a different meaning towards another purpose compared to what it should. Still, sarcasm remains a vital notion in both spoken and written languages.

### **Issues Reflected in Flexible Learning Memes**

Whether memes on flexible learning are depicted in humorous or sarcastic tones, the underlying issues in this new learning setup during the pandemic cannot be downplayed. The study reveals five issues on flexible learning as represented in the memes: (a) academic preparation and enthusiasm; (b) low retention power in learning; (c) lapses in instructional materials; (d) unmet desired competencies; and (e) poor time management among learners.

One prevailing theme is the issue of *academic preparation and enthusiasm*, which is an essential component of any educational undertaking. The atmosphere in a virtual classroom differs considerably from that of a traditional face-to-face classroom. Turner (2020) stated that for many, the new format for their classes had left them with a lack of motivation that may affect their academic performance throughout the term. This effect can have many roots, including the need for a physical space to designate as a work zone like the classroom, which, once offered, can leave one with a lack of focus due to the many distractions that can come in an average household. In addition, some meme examples of external disturbance that gets in the way of students' academic preparations include extracurricular activities, work and financial situations, family problems, and social and emotional problems. Knowing this discussion, one can assert that this underlying issue can significantly affect students' academic performance.

Another issue depicted in the memes is the *low retention power in learning*. Concern over the low retention power in learning in many online courses and programs has grown along with the sharp increase in online course enrolment. Muljana and Luo (2019) stated that online learning has been suffering from low retention rates, and with the advent of digital technology and the lasting changes in online and open learning, educational researchers and practitioners have become increasingly interested in student retention as it has been an ongoing challenge for all educational stakeholders. Similarly, Seery et al. (2021) asserted that as more institutions expand online course offerings, the issue will likely grow, and retention power in online students' learning is a global higher education concern. This highlights one of the biggest concerns in fully online programs compared to regular or traditional classes.

Another issue covered is the *lapses in instructional materials*. Representative memes have depicted multiple lapses in the delivery and production of learning materials. These lapses are attributed to misleading, inconsistent, and errors in the learning modules. Also, these factors can be connected to the limited time of course preparation. However, challenges

are still emerging, such as the lack of guidance in accessing such materials, making it harder for some learners to do preparations and study (Rice & Ortiz, 2021). Through this perspective, one can express the significant contribution of learning materials during the conduct of flexible learning setup, and it is crucial to ensure its quality and efficient delivery to ensure effective learning flourishes.

*Unmet desired competencies* also emerged as an identified issue in flexible learning memes. Ashok and Jain (2021) noted the uprooting effects of the pandemic and how the latter afflicted almost everyone, especially students. The setup may have induced a significant harsh effect and created hurdles for their learning skills to flourish. As this crisis created an intense universal challenge, it is saddening to reflect and attest to how students are left with unmet needs, which result in ineffectual competencies. The rise of the pandemic has made this particular issue a staple among internet memes, and most of them has depicted academic normalcy as far from reach. Realizing such issue definitely signifies ample cumulative impacts in terms of basic learning skills that are deemed to be affected as the pandemic emerges (Kuhfeld et al., 2022).

Finally, *poor time management* among learners remains a distinctive theme embedded among the memes analyzed. Time management helps learners manage different tasks. However, much of the memes depict flexible learning setup as a hotbed full of distractions, and this makes time management among learners very challenging. Alfonso et al. (2018) also elaborated on how time management is linked to the issue of procrastination. In this sense, students are still entangled with poor time management no matter the period allotted for doing assignments, both short and long periods, and this illustration is highly observable among the memes. Sari, Ilhamdaniah, and Megayanti (2020) highlighted that since students are left to study on their own during the pandemic, it has become an additional burden for them to handle and manage their time as well. As a result, they may realize that they may succumb to poor time management since they are in charge of disciplining their selves. Efficient time management is hardly established even if no self-discipline is administered. Being able to ground oneself with how to attain effectual time management is beneficial, particularly in the field of learning as a student, more so during the setup of flexible learning.

The findings suggest that memes offer a group of collective ideas, including issues that are rampantly existing. The rise of memes, specifically on flexible learning, generates further implications regarding how the current learning setup tries to uncover gaps related to learning due to the pandemic and the changes that has to be done in teaching and learning.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings entail that flexible learning is communicated in internet memes as full of external distractions, emotionally taxing, resulting to information overload, revealing a mismatch in student outcomes, and initiating changes in learning routines. Having these

results activates an assumption that flexible learning negatively impacted learners throughout the process. However, these memes were also classified according to the tones they were situated at, and it turned out that most memes were humorous. The study suggests that these presented memes are just a slice of the whole, and they do not entirely validate that there is no good in flexible learning.

On the other hand, issues reflected in these memes include academic preparation and enthusiasm, low retention power, undeniable lapses in instructional materials, unmet desired competencies, and poor time management among learners. This could suggest that the humor and relatable context of internet memes at the core of flexible learning generate significant inclination as an avenue for deeper discussion and a more comprehensive understanding of the existing issues in society. This also implies that flexible learning memes are just an outlet for creative expression with the sole purpose of going viral and sharing relatable content that reflects one's point of view. After all, learning must continue despite this very challenging time of COVID-19.

It is the hope of the study that the findings can widen perspectives on flexible learning setup to review and reflect the learning experience of the students. The results can be an eye-opener for the administration and other educational sectors to reassess what to improve and how to strengthen the production and delivery of educational services in the new normal.

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