

Greenpeace Memes for Communicating Climate Change

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Abstract

Based on a mixed-method research design, this paper offers insights into visual communication strategies developed by Greenpeace in France, Belgium, and Canada (Quebec). The aim is to understand the role of humor in memes for environmental communication to French speaking publics on Instagram.

Keywords 1

Meme, Greenpeace, Instagram, humor, multimodal analysis

Extended abstract

Across different cultures, humor takes a significant part in the development of communications (Taecharunroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015). Humor has been examined in the context of “traditional” media (Meraz, 2011) content, such as TV commercials and newspapers’ advertisements (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004; Catanescu & Tom, 2001). Some of more recent research focused on investigating humor techniques in PhD-related thematic memes with reference to emotional analysis (Papapico & Mininni, 2020). Less research has been done on humor introduced in environmental communication and, therefore, this field demands further investigations (Zhang & Pitto, 2021).

Numerous studies have examined the role of new media in creating and disseminating messages about the environment and climate change (Anderson, 2015; Fløttum, 2010; Holmes & Richardson, 2020; Wamsler et al., 2020). Some investigations address Greenpeace communication practices. Doyle (2007) identified representational phases of Greenpeace public campaigns in the UK by conducting historical analysis of the photographs published by the organization. This allowed to make visible the problematics of environmental discourse. More recent research showed how semiotic approach can be applied for investigating the communication campaigns of environmental NGOs, for instance Greenpeace (Catellani, 2018). These works argued the problematics of environmental communication and opened new horizons to investigating Greenpeace’s visuals disseminated by different media channels. Nevertheless, more research is needed for understanding the NGOs’ communication about climate change via more recent multimodal platforms, for instance Instagram. This paper extends previous research by focusing specifically on Greenpeace’s *memes* spread on Instagram in French-speaking countries.

With the invention and the continuous updating of Instagram, visual modes of media content have become more and more popular. Since visual messages are often clear without any explanation, Instagram has become the means for sharing and creating entertaining content, for example memes. Memes can be defined as the propagation of content such as jokes, rumors, videos, or websites from one person to others via the Internet (Shifman, 2013). A common attribute of memes is their tendency to “mock and deride, often through the utilization of *humor*” (Ross & Rivers, 2019: 976). According to the principle of variability, each meme should give birth to a number of different versions (Bertin & Granier, 2020). This process defines the circulation of the meme. Representing multimodal user-generated content (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), memes are interconnected with previous texts and graphic features involved in the meme. This allows the meme to be recontextualized into a new discursive context.

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According to Knobel & Lankshear (2007), memes are increasingly used in environmental campaigns in order to engage people with environmental issues. Moreover, memes can be used as a form of protest or activism, as demonstrated by Davis, Glantz, and Novak (2016). Their research was focused on a series of memes by Greenpeace produced to parody the campaign of Shell Oil. Nevertheless, the memes for the analysis were mostly spread on the Arctic Ready website, which does not fully represent memes' characteristics of circulation. After considering some work that has been done in the area, analyzing memes recently published and spread by Greenpeace in French-speaking communities remains relevant. In this context, our research questions are the following: what is the role of Greenpeace's memes for communicating climate change on Instagram? More precisely, do memes inform citizens about climate change, its causes, impacts, and possible solutions or do they achieve a ludic function and thus participate unconsciously to dedramatization and banalization?

We investigate memes as a part of communication strategy employed by Greenpeace in French-speaking countries. In order to answer the research question, we examined 2862 publications of Greenpeace France, Greenpeace Belgium, Greenpeace Quebec. In total, 67 memes construct the main corpus of this research. The criteria to selecting the memes were the following: humor component or tendency to mock and deride, repetition and variability of meme's structure, longevity of the meme, circulation between different accounts and platforms. In order to address our research questions, the work was based on a mixed-method approach. Firstly, we implemented quantitative methods on posts' metadata to identify trending memes and their place in Greenpeace communication campaigns. Secondly, qualitative methods were applied for multimodal content analysis (Rose, 2016) of visual and textual components of the memes. We identified types of humor that make the meme humorous, two main elements represented in memes, their second meanings, if there were some, and the main themes of the meme. This helped us distinguish potential meanings of the memes and their role in Greenpeace's communication campaigns.



Figure 1: This is fine meme, by @greenpeacequebec

First results show that climate change memes are circulating actively between three countries. They do not only repost successful publications, but also adapt the forms of the memes according to particular contexts, for example the meme «This is fine». See Figure 1 and Figure 2.

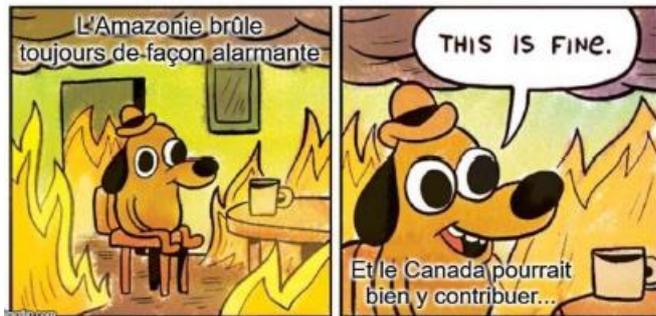


Figure 2: This is fine meme, by @greenpeacefrance

The other most common and most popular memes are Drake Hotline memes. In France, the meme Drake Hotline got over 15000 likes and 326 comments. This meme is often associated with bad tastes, or bad choices, or even deprecating tendencies on the part of the user. In our corpus, it is used to mock climate inaction, contribution to plastic pollution, or corporations which do not follow sustainable strategies, in particular Amazon company. See Figure 3.



Figure 3: Drake Hotline meme, @greenpeacequebec

The memes presented in the corpus can be interpreted as part of an informative strategy. They remind the audience about eco-friendly lifestyle, inform about greenwashing policies of big corporations (See Figure 3), and provide some general information about climate change. Finally, memes use irony and sarcasm as humor types in their visual and verbal modes to criticize corporations for greenwashing and politicians for contributing to climate change aggravation.

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