

Commentary article

“EU got that rizz”: discursive contestation in comments about the European Commission’s use of memes for government communication

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Abstract

This commentary article explores audience responses to the European Commission’s use of memetic content on its Instagram page. Using inductive thematic analysis, this study explained how discursive contestation was manifested in commenters’ opposing views about the institution’s use of memes. The discourse historical approach elucidated how comments drew upon contextual factors, such as: (1) the humorous and juvenile nature of memes; (2) current events and Europe’s role in them; and (3) erroneous understandings about the EU’s structure and capabilities. In terms of its contribution to the academic literature, this commentary article’s focus on memes as a form of government communication is distinctive. Although internet memes have existed since the 2000s, their use in EU government communication is relatively new. Consequently, minimal scholarly attention has been directed towards the examination of the regional bureaucracy’s use of memetic content. Even less has been written about audience responses to the use of memes. This study hopes to address that gap in the academic literature, and encourage further research into EU institutions’ use of memetic content in their official communications.

Keywords: humour, discursive contestation, European Commission, government communication, memes

1. Introduction

On 17 March, 2023, the official Instagram page of the European Commission (EC) published the following meme to commemorate the single market’s thirtieth anniversary.



Figure 1. Meme Content Commemorating 30 Years of the EU Single Market

Accompanying the image was a caption that said:

As we mark the 30th anniversary of the Single Market, this cornerstone of European integration remains as relevant as ever. Since its launch in 1993, the Single Market has transformed citizens' lives, streamlined business operations, and delivered significant economic benefits. Today, with almost 450 million EU (European Union) consumers, it stands as the second-largest GDP market in the world. And as we face new challenges in areas such as energy, climate change and digitalisation, the Single Market is the ultimate trendsetter thanks to its agility and competitiveness.

Essentially, the post was a form of “government communication”, a term used by scholars to describe transmissions by public sector institutions that communicate or legitimise government decisions (Canel and Sanders, 2013; Hansson, 2017; Johansson & Raunio, 2019). In this case, the Commission, the EU's executive agency (Nugent & Rhinard, 2016; Ludlow, 2018), created an Instagram post to communicate the benefits of the single market. As the institution tasked with implementing and explaining policy and legislation, the EC is one of the bodies involved in government communication at an EU level.

What makes the Zoolander meme distinctive, however, is that it is one of the Commission's first attempts at using memetic content. In the academic literature, memes are defined as “units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users” (Shifman, 2013, p. 367). Previously, the EC's Instagram page was more conventional in its use of images, publishing photographs about current events, completed projects, or officials in action. However, by using the meme format, the Commission deployed a form of communication that is more associated with humour, unseriousness, and youth culture (Penney, 2020; Piata, 2020; Vásquez & Aslan, 2021). Instead of showing images of shopping, manufacturing, or a graph of the EU's GDP to commemorate the three decades of the single market, Figure 1 followed the conventions of memetic content, and employed familiar images from the 2001 movie *Zoolander* as “hooks” to convey its message (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Shifman, 2014). The EC's use of memes for government communication is arguably part of a

broader trend among public institutions to use humorous and informal media to make themselves appear relatable, while simultaneously allowing them to convey information to their constituents. Examples of similar activities were reported in case studies about Singapore (Matwick & Matwick, 2022), Ghana (Sabbi, 2024), and Sweden (Stjernholm, 2022).

The Commission's unusual post received over 100 comments in response, with most of them expressing support and amusement for the use of memetic content. For example, one Instagram user wrote, "Quality content, am impressed", while another responded with, "Great job communication team". On the other hand, there were four commenters who expressed opposition to the format. One of them said, "Cringe" and another wrote "It's not very funny". Similar differences of opinion were found on the other sixteen memes that the Commission published on its Instagram page, with commenters either supporting or opposing the EC's production of memetic content. Although the number of supportive comments far outnumbered the negative ones, it is noteworthy that the Commission's memes became a site of discursive contestation (Oh, 2019; 2020) about whether or not the EU institution should be using memes in its official communication.

This debate among commenters is the central focus of this commentary article. Using inductive thematic analysis, it explores audience responses to the Commission's use of memes on its Instagram page. Quantitatively, the findings indicate that there are far more commenters who support the use of humorous content than those who do not. Looking at their articulations more deeply, however, one finds that supportive comments tended to commend either the EU or its social media content creators, while opponents expressed concern over the Commission's use of an informal, even facetious, form of communication, when EU policies seriously impacted people's lives.

In terms of its contribution to the academic literature, this article focuses on a distinctive empirical phenomenon in European Studies and humour research. Although internet memes have existed since the 2000s, their use in EU institutions' government communication is new. Consequently, minimal scholarly attention has been directed towards the examination of the EU's use of memetic content. Even less has been written about audience responses to the use of memes. This commentary article hopes to contribute to that gap in the academic literature, and encourage further research into EU institutions' use of memetic content in their official communications.

2. Literature review

The European Commission's use of memes is understood in this commentary article to be a form of government communication. There is an extensive literature on the concept, but it generally refers to the manner in which governmental agencies convey information (Pasquier, 2012). In particular, this study aligns with the definition of government communication articulated in the work of Johansson and Raunio (2019), which describes the concept as follows:

The activities of public sector institutions that are aimed at conveying and sharing information, primarily for the purpose of presenting and explaining government decisions and actions, promoting legitimacy of these interventions, defending recognised values and helping maintain social bonds

(Johansson & Raunio, 2019, p. 129-130).

The Zoolander meme exemplifies several characteristics enumerated in the definition. First, as a post published by the EC, it is a form of public sector communication that conveys information. Second, by highlighting the benefits of the single market, it legitimised an EU measure that was enacted thirty years earlier. The final point about maintaining social bonds is

arguably accomplished through the use of the meme format, which serves as a humorous and relatable form of communication between the Commission and its audience. Although the definition was applied to the meme in Figure 1, it is argued that the characteristics enumerated by Johansson and Raunio (2019) are valid for all the EC's memetic content.

There are numerous approaches that scholars have taken in the study of government communication. For example, there are some who emphasise that it is an instrument of policy implementation, with facts being shared or withheld to realise specific outcomes (Hood & Margetts, 2007; Howlett, 2009). For example, during times of pandemic, the dissemination of information is crucial to curb the spread of a virus (Hyland-Wood et al., 2021; Lee & Basnyat, 2013; Lerouge et al., 2023). Another approach to studying government communication is to examine how press officers and bureaucrats craft messages and manage flows of information for public consumption (Canel & Sanders, 2016; Johansson & Raunio, 2019). Studies of this sort have also been done for EU institutions, as exemplified by the work of Laursen and Valentini (2013, 2014). They examined the work of press officers in the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers.

As an article about commenters' responses to the EC's use of memes, this study is situated in the subset of government communication literature that is concerned with social media engagement. Scholars have remarked about the increased use of online platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), and YouTube as channels for government communication (Kavanaugh et al., 2012; Panagiotopoulos et al., 2016; Mergel, 2017; Harrison & Johnson, 2019; Nicomedes & Avila, 2020). However, due to its novelty, there is still relatively little research on how social media users engage with government communication (Graham, 2014). What research exists has tended to focus on responses to the online activities of national or local government agencies (Hofmann et al., 2013; Bonsón et al., 2015; Graham et al., 2015). Research on social media engagement with the EU appears to be minimal, though some extant scholarly works include those of Krzyzanowski (2018) and Müller (2022). This commentary article hopes to augment the existing literature on the topic.

Discursive contestation is another significant concept for understanding audience reactions to the EC's use of memes in its official communications. In this study, commenters' responses to the Commission's memetic content are understood to be discursive, representing "ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena" (Hajer and Versteeg, 2005, p. 175). Discourses are shaped by the context in which they are produced, and in a dialectical manner, attempt to transform the social realities in which they are uttered (Duranti & Goodwin, 1992; van Dijk, 2008; Wodak, 2009; Flowerdew, 2017). As such, discourse analysts advise looking beyond the apparent meanings of texts, and examining the contextual factors that underpin them.

The Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) is used in this article to analyse the underpinnings of Instagram comments. Proponents of this perspective (Wodak, 2009; Reisigl and Wodak, 2001; 2016) prescribe examining texts in terms of four levels: (1) the immediate language or text; (2) the intertextual and interdiscursive underpinnings of the utterances; (3) the extralinguistic social variables and institutional frames of a particular context; and (4) the broader socio-political and historical environments in which the discourses are embedded. By examining comments with reference to context, this article also dovetails with the literature on the metapragmatics of humour (cf. Verschueren, 2000; Ruiz-Gurillo, 2016; Sinkeviciute, 2019; Tsakona, 2020), and its concern with how speakers or writers use language to navigate, the social, cultural, and situational context of communication, particularly in terms of tone, intent, and the expectations of their audience. Viewed through the lenses of DHA and metapragmatics, the Instagram comments analysed in this article are not just utterances produced in a vacuum. They are underpinned by commenters' views about the nature of memetic content, their

understanding of the EU's structure and functions, and the broader social and cultural narratives influencing their communication.

As instruments for maintaining or transforming their context, discourses are ultimately tied to power relations, and will often clash with one another (Foucault, 1977; Cohen, 1993; Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002). Oh (2019; 2020) refers to the conflict among utterances as discursive contestation. The concept has been applied to case studies of political activism (Chan, 2018), intellectual property regimes (Oh & Matsuoka, 2016), and EU digital diplomacy in the Philippines (Enverga, 2021). As the introductory section alluded to earlier, discursive contestation is exemplified in commenters' opposing positions on the EC's use of memes on Instagram.

One final concept that is relevant to this commentary article is the meme. The term refers to videos, images, or text that have familiar textual "hooks", which make them readily appreciated by audiences. Memetic content gains popularity by being shared from person to person, through a process that is colloquially termed "going viral" (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Shifman, 2014). Scholars have remarked about the different purposes that memes have been used for. At times, they are intended to be simply humorous, with no deeper messages embedded in them (Nooney & Portwood-Stacer, 2014; Silvestri, 2016). However, they can also be significant for creating awareness of social issues or constructing identities online (Jenkins et al., 2013; Shifman, 2014).

The concepts of government information, memes, and discursive contestation do not often get combined in one study. However, they are particularly useful in this article. There is a gap in the literature about the EU's use of memetic content. Consequently, scholars may want to consider exploring the topic further, since memes are likely to continue appearing on the EU's social media channels.

3. Methodology

This commentary article employed a qualitative methodology, which allowed for the examination of a relatively understudied phenomenon in a flexible and inductive manner. The data collection process necessitated building an archive of comments written in response to memetic content on the European Commission's official Instagram page. To do this, I first identified posts that had the recognisable "hooks" that characterise memes. After examining every post from the time the account was created on 13 February 2013 until 31 December 2023, I managed to identify seventeen posts that were memetic in nature. These were all published between 2022 and 2023, indicating that the EC's use of memes on Instagram was a relatively recent phenomenon. The table below provides details about each of the posts, including the meme template used, and their topic or purpose.

Table 1. Descriptions of the meme posts

Meme Number	Meme Template	Topic or Purpose
1	Zoolander Stare	Commemorating 30 years of the Single Market
2	Seal of Approval or Satisfied Seal	Publicising the “right to repair” as part of the EU Green Deal
3	Hey, you going to sleep?	Inviting applications for the EU Traineeship
4	Drake Hotline Bling Meme	Publicising the USB Type C common charger in the EU
5	Bill Hader Dancing	Announcing a summer Spotify playlist
6	Problems, Stress, Pain	Publicising EU Passenger Rights
7	Peter Parker’s Glasses	Raising awareness about disinformation, and informing about how to identify it
8	Inhaling Seagull	Publicising EU Consumer Rights
9	Relief	Inviting applications for the EU Traineeship
10	Home Alone	Publicising EU Passenger Rights
11	This Little Maneuver’s Gonna Cost Us 51 Years	Promoting non-motorised transportation
12	Black Cat Zoning Out	Publicising the EU Pet Passport
13	Hey, you going to sleep?	Publicising the State of the EU address
14	Nicolas Cage Looking at Pedro Pascal, or Make Your Own Kind of Music	Alerting about the deadline for applications for the 2025 Discover EU Program
15	We’re X, Of Course We Y	Publicising the Erasmus+ programme, and its benefits
16	Surprised Joey	Raising awareness about customs processing reforms
17	Thug Life Glasses	Publicising the State of the EU address

Once all meme posts were identified, the succeeding step was to examine commenters’ feedback about them. I archived all of the comments responding to each of the seventeen posts. There were 1,392 items collected in total. These were all in textual form, though some included emojis. Most, but not all, were written in English. For those that were written in languages I could not understand, I used Instagram’s auto-translation feature to make comments comprehensible. With the archive completed, I then performed inductive thematic analysis on the data (Frith & Gleeson, 2004; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process entailed identifying recurring patterns among the comments, without imposing predetermined categories onto them. Applying this analytical method allowed the findings to be grounded in commenters’ articulations. Several themes emerged from the data. However, for the purposes of this article, the most salient theme was expressions of support or opposition to the Commission’s use of memetic content. Of the 1,392 comments archived, 326 were about this topic. The other 1,066 responses did not remark about the EC’s use of memes. In analysing comments under this theme, I divided them into either: (1) expressions of support or (2) opposition. Viewing the data quantitatively, more commenters supported the EC’s use of memes. Despite the disparity, this study’s qualitative approach necessitated looking beyond numerical differences, and focusing more on the contextual factors underpinning commenters’ articulations.

The Discourse Historical Approach (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; 2016; Wodak, 2009), with its prescription to examine texts using four levels was a useful heuristic for bridging discourse and context. Apart from identifying support or opposition for the EC’s use of memes, I also analysed how commenters’ knowledge of the EU, current events, and their beliefs about the appropriate use of memetic content shaped their utterances. The analysis uncovered three contextual factors that underpinned their articulations. The first has to do with the humorous and juvenile nature of memes, exemplified in comments like: “We the people, want more EU actually funny memes

like this one”. The quote expresses support for the Commission’s use of memetic content by highlighting their facetiousness. The second contextual factor underpinning comments are intertextual references to current events and Europe’s role in them. This is found in articulations, such as: “Eu (*sic*) can’t afford proper PR agency?! is eu (*sic*) so poor 🤔 🤔 #ceasefirenow”. In expressing their dissatisfaction with memes on the EC page, the commenter included a hashtag supporting an end to violence in the Gaza War. Presumably, they believe that the European Union has the influence to bring about a ceasefire in the region. Finally, there are comments that are informed by erroneous understandings about the EU’s structure and capabilities. For example: “I don’t give a damn about bicycle, fight inflation instead”. The commenter expressed dissatisfaction with the Commission publishing a meme about bicycles, while highlighting that it needs to do more to address the rising prices of commodities. Underpinning the quote is the assumption that the EC or other European institutions can actually address inflation. In reality, dealing with the matter is more complex, and entails collaboration and consultation with member states. The three quotes shared in this paragraph illustrate how discursive articulations were considered in terms of their assumptions and associations. However, further discussion about the three contextual factors can be found in the succeeding section.

In terms of the ethical conduct of my research, I made sure that the procedures followed the ethical guidelines outlined in the Association of Internet Researchers’ manual (Franzke et al., 2020). The data I collected came from Instagram and was publicly accessible. However, I took precautions to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the commenters by omitting their account names from both the data archive and the manuscript. It is also important to note that since my study focused on analysing the content of comments, I did not collect any data on the authors themselves. My analysis was more concerned with what was being said than who was saying it.

4. Findings and discussion

Comments either supported or opposed the EC’s use of memetic content. Of the 326 articulations about the Commission’s use of memes, 304 indicated encouragement. One example of such a comment stated: “I love these types of posts. Congratulations on trying a different approach. 🙌”. Another said, “We the people, want more EU actually funny memes like this one”. A third supportive comment read: “damn (*sic*), the EU got that rizz”, which is a quote used in the title of this commentary article. The term “rizz” comes from youth colloquial language, and is a contraction of the word *charisma* (Grady, 2023). The comment expresses that the Commission’s use of memes to communicate makes it charismatic.

A subset of supportive memes expressed commendations for the content creators and social media managers of the Instagram page. For example, one comment remarked: “Madame Von Der Leyen, Please can you increase the income of the social media manager”. Another commenter wrote: “Good job, chief meme officer. Good job”. Finally, there was a response that said, “Whoever makes these memes deserves a raise! Absolutely made my day 😄”.

It is noteworthy that the comments cited here refer to the EU, rather than the EC. The conflation between the two is evident in many of the comments, and indicates a lack of nuance in differentiating the European Union and one of its institutions. This conflation of the EU and EC is explored further in the succeeding section.

Regarding comments opposing the use of memes, 22 out of 326 comments disapproved of the Commission’s use of memetic content. Although they are fewer than the supportive commenters, they are still worth considering, since they offer a different perspective on the EC’s memes. Opponents of the memetic content appeared to be concerned about the Commission’s use of an informal, even facetious, form of communication. They viewed memes as

inappropriate, arguing that the EU had to maintain a serious reputation. The following comment is a case in point: “Is (*sic*) not an appropriate image for an EU institution, you can bear the communication gap by better more institutional image. Thanks”. Apart from image management, other commenters expressed that EU communication should emphasise substantive issues rather than memetic content. One commenter put it as follows: “Stop your memes and stop funding to Ukraine”. Another response stated: “post (*sic*) out of place in the times, shame on you”. Both comments imply that memes are inappropriate, citing current events, such as the Ukraine invasion or “the [presumably hard] times”.

The comments examined in this commentary article were understood to be discursive in nature. As such, the analysis went beyond categorising the surface meaning of utterances, which revealed a discursive contest between supporters and opponents of the Commission’s use of memes. A deeper analysis of the texts indicated that comments were underpinned by: (1) the humorous and juvenile nature of memetic content; (2) Europe’s role in current events; and (3) erroneous understandings about the EU’s structure and capabilities.

Beginning with the first point, academic literature has indicated that memes are associated with both humour and youth culture (Piata, 2020; Penney, 2020; Vásquez & Aslan, 2021). This view appears to be shared by commenters on both sides of the discursive contest. However, they diverge in their judgment of whether humour and juvenility are beneficial or detrimental. Supporters of the EC’s use of memes emphasised how memes’ comical nature made them relatable. Put in the language of the metapragmatics of humour, supportive commenters asserted that the EC’s use of memetic content detaches it from the more formal and bureaucratic image typically associated with EU institutions. On the other hand, opponents argued that the silliness diminished the Commission’s credibility, or distracted from more serious topics. Commenters’ concern stems from the social perception that humour might diminish the EC’s perceived authority and professionalism. Both sides present valid arguments about the nature of memetic communication, but it is noteworthy that their opposing views are rooted in similar assumptions.

References to current events are another aspect of context that inform commenters’ articulations. However, these were most apparent among opponents of the use of memes. As two comments in the previous section stated, the EU should be less focused on memes, and pay more attention to issues such as the Ukraine invasion or “the times”. Similar comments referenced other contemporary issues, such as: climate change, member states’ reluctance to condemn Israeli military activities in Gaza, perceived inaction towards reducing inflation, and the need to combat right wing extremism in Europe. Commenters’ dissatisfaction with EU and member state policy was expressed alongside their opposition to the Commission’s use of memetic content.

A third aspect of context that underpins commenters’ articulations is their erroneous understanding of the EU’s structure and functions. This is manifested in two ways. First, it can be observed in commenters’ aggregation of the EU and the Commission. When commenting about memetic content, supporters commended the European Union as a whole, or its social media content managers, in particular. Although the memes appeared on the EC’s Instagram page, they did not nuance their utterances to differentiate the Commission from the EU. As such, the comments are underpinned by the view that the European Union is one singular entity, rather than a complex bureaucracy composed of institutions and member states. Their unfamiliarity about the different agencies may also explain why supportive commenters directed their congratulations towards individuals who they felt represented the EU, such as Commission President Von der Leyen, or a fictitious bureaucrat they called the “Chief Meme Officer”.

Apart from having a flawed understanding of the European Union’s structure, commenters also seemed to misunderstand its capabilities. When referencing current events, commenters called upon the EU to take action, but did not consider the limits of what it can do. For example, comments overlooked the fact that foreign policy is an intergovernmental area of competence

(Brethe, 2006; Zanardi, 2022), and the EU lacks the ability to dictate how its member states should comment on the Gaza War or the Ukraine invasion. Nevertheless, commenters called upon the regional organisation to act more assertively on those issues. The EU, through the European Central Bank, is likewise constrained in its ability to deal with inflation in all member states (Canepa, 2024). Comments responding to the EC's use of memes, thus, indicate a lack of familiarity about the Union's institutions and its areas of competence. Although this implies the need for more education about the EU, the findings indicate the value of social media comments as a possible data source for understanding the level of knowledge that audiences have about the structure and capabilities of the European Union.

To summarise this section, there are two main findings that emerged from analysing the Instagram comments. First, contestation was exemplified by the presence of opposing discourses articulated in response to the EC's use of memes. While the majority of commenters expressed support, praising the relatability and humour of the memes, a smaller group raised concerns about the appropriateness of such content in the context of serious political and global issues. Second, analysing the data in terms of discourse and context revealed that comments were underpinned by assumptions about the nature of memetic communication, the EU's role in global affairs, and commenters' unfamiliarity with the Union's institutional structure and competencies. Ultimately, this study highlights the complexity of communicating through digital platforms, where humour and informality can both strengthen and challenge the perception of an institution like the European Commission.

5. Conclusion

This commentary article explored audience responses to the European Commission's use of memetic content on its Instagram page. The subject matter is distinctive in the academic literature on European Studies and humour research because it examines a hitherto understudied form of government communication. Using inductive thematic analysis, this study explained how discursive contestation was manifested in commenters' opposing views about the use of memetic content. The application of the discourse historical approach elucidated how comments drew upon contextual factors, such as (1) how memes are both a humorous and unserious form of communication; (2) current events and Europe's role in them; and (3) erroneous understandings about the EU's structure and capabilities.

The study is an initial attempt at understanding a relatively new form of EU government communication. However, it is inherently limited, considering that data came from only seventeen social media posts, and the author had no access to information about commenters' identities. The choice of a qualitative methodology, combining inductive thematic analysis and the Discourse Historical Approach, was useful for elucidating the relationships between texts and their contexts. However, other methods such as public opinion surveys, focus group discussions, or organisational ethnographies would reveal other insights about the production and consumption of EU memes that could not be captured by the methods used in this article. As such, further research is needed to expand this relatively underexamined empirical area.

One possible research lead is to explore EC memes on Instagram that have been published after 2023. It is plausible that commenters in 2024 and beyond draw upon different aspects of context to frame their articulations. In addition, it is possible to look for memetic content produced by other EU entities, such as the European Parliament, Council, individual Commissioners, or heads of government. Future research could also consider memetic content in other platforms, such as Facebook, TikTok, or X (formerly Twitter).

Another useful area of research looks at the production, rather than the consumption, side of meme publication. Organisational researchers can examine how memetic posts are

conceptualised, revised, and approved. Considering their straightforward and humorous nature, it would be worthwhile to understand how communications officers strike a balance between conveying information and appearing facetious or relatable.

A third avenue for research involves measuring the direct impact of memetic content on public engagement in a more quantitative manner. In this study, memetic posts were found to have received an average of 81.8 comments. This is higher than the average of all posts, which is 63.3. Although this can be taken as evidence that using memes in government communication gains more engagements than using traditional posts, the data in this article lacks a large enough sample to make definitive conclusions. It would be beneficial to further investigate whether memes drive other forms of interactions, such as shares, likes, or even shifts in public opinion. A quantitative analysis using metrics such as engagement rates and sentiment analysis would allow for a clearer understanding of how effective memes are in shaping public perceptions. Additionally, longitudinal studies could offer valuable insights into whether the novelty of memetic content wears off, or if memes continue to resonate with audiences as part of broader communication strategies.

There is plenty of potential for the study of memes in the EU context. The hope is that this study encourages further exploration into the topic. More research would not only expand scholarly knowledge about the nature of EU communication, but it could also have implications on the regional bloc's communications policies and practices. More findings and insights will certainly help with the calibration of the volume and types of memes published by European institutions in the future.

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