

Mememes as Mobilizational Rhetoric: Emotion, Circulation, and Resistance in the July Uprising

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the rhetorical and circulatory dynamics of internet memes in the July Uprising in Bangladesh, focusing on how these dynamics contributed to political mobilization. Drawing on existing scholarship on multimodality, shared emotional registers, humour, and in-group identification, the paper analyzes three widely reproduced meme forms that emerged from protestor communities: the shooting of protestor Abu Sayed, the SuperVan girl, and the “Natok kom koro pio” meme. Each meme is examined in relation to its physical protest event, visual composition, subsequent recontextualization, and circulation across digital platforms. The results of these analyses demonstrate how memes mobilize through empowering the exchange of emotions. Memes will only become widely reproduced if the viewing community connects with them, which in these cases, occur through identifying with Abu Sayed’s martyrdom, SuperVan girl’s victor narrative, and the collective contempt for state authority. Understanding the emotional needs of participants becomes important to meme creators, as the memetic circulation functions as a form of collective and democratic authorship. These circulations also illustrate the reciprocal relationship created between the online communities and offline protest events. The paper argues that memes do not only reflect political reality, they actively become a means through which physical events are shaped, interpreted and remembered, redistributing controlling power over political narratives. The physical events and artifacts become symbols in internet culture while pieces of pre-existing internet culture become integrated into the physical reality of protests.

INTRODUCTION

Mememes. Studies in rhetoric have offered robust coverage of these digital artifacts in social movements as multimodal discursive units, tools for identity creation, and fuel for circulation. Mememes condense complex layers of political ideas through multimodality, enabling viewers to actively participate in the construction and circulation of ideological fragments. As such, mememes are found to circulate affect and generate emotional resonance immediately and highly effectively. They are also notable for their ability to foster in-group identities among participants. One recurring question concerns how mememes, a high-velocity circulating unit of media, produce political meaning and mobilize participation beyond online communities. This paper advances the understanding of such dynamics by examining these effects at work in the July Uprising in 2024 Bangladesh. Through analyzing three widely circulated mememes in

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protester communities, this paper situates the role of memes act as a condensed symbolic container for complex narratives to enable members of the movement to identify as both victims of injustice and victors over their opponents.

The July Uprising, also known as the Monsoon Uprisings, were a series of student-led demonstrations against the Bangladeshi government. These protests of civil disobedience began in July of 2024, originally calling for the abolition of quotas in civil service jobs (Ethirajan & Ritchie, 2024). The protests took a turn, however, after the government-backed Chhatra League used force on unarmed student protestors. It soon transformed into a wider fight against the government's corruption, authoritarianism, human rights abuses, and economic recession under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasin's rule (Human Rights Watch, 2025). To demand change, protestors organized "Bangla Blockades, Complete Shutdowns and Marches, alongside symbolic actions like changing Facebook profile pictures to red" (Hushen 2024, p. 145). Students and youth, which make up over half of the country's population (Islam et al., 2025), took this protest to social media platforms such as Facebook due to the lack of government control over such forms of media. They created pages called "Baishammo Virudhi Chhatra Andolan" (Anti-Discrimination Student Protest) (Hushen 2024, p. 145) as a way to circulate protest information, gather support, and challenge the government narrative on events through visual documentation.

During the protests, pro-student memes were one of the core strategies employed in online spaces. Scholars found that memes played a vital role in spreading awareness, encouraging participation in the movement, and building a sense of shared resilience and identity among protestors (Afrin 2024). By giving form to shared emotions like grief and hope, memes in the July Uprisings unified members. They also relied on registers of humor and satire along with heavy images of oppression to alleviate frustration and subvert state narratives without direct confrontation. Research of pro-movement memes found that five common themes were embedded within these artifacts, including criticism and mockery of authority, call for action, inspiration for resilience, local trends and historical reference, and memes expressing grief as a coping mechanism (Afrin 2024). Surveys for students in protest Facebook groups showed that the recurring pattern of appearance that these themes presented in the circulation of memes contributed to the dynamics of the protest groups by sustaining participation and promoting core messages of the movement.

For scholars studying rhetoric and social movements, this revolution was significant as an example of a meticulously strategized effort at digital mobilization where protestors built their own communicative domain on social media. It demonstrates how contemporary protest movements are increasingly moving to digital media for organizing, framing narratives, and constructing collective identity. This case therefore offers an opportunity to examine how images, videos, and other forms of media are circulated, and how, through circulation, these forms of raw media are recontextualized to become carriers of political meaning, impacting processes of mobilization and participation. Critically, the memes of the July Uprising emerge from photographs and videos of physical, terrestrial moments in protest and response, then circulated online where they both take life of their own and reintegrate into a cycle of call and response where memes encourage activism, and activism encourages memes.

Building on the existing scholarly interest in the digital mobilization during the July Uprisings (Islam et al., 2025), this paper examines the rhetorical strategies and circulation of memes that shaped participation and identity in the movement. Through three case studies of widely posted meme iterations – the shooting of Abu Sayed, sister vs van, and mocking of Sheikh Hasina – this analysis will demonstrate how these artifacts condensed complex political events into symbolic narratives, mobilized affect through both humor and grief, and constructed identities that positioned protestors both as victims and victors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past two decades, internet memes have been increasingly recognized by scholars as a unique yet prominent form of communication in political and cultural discourse. From reaction GIFs to image macros, memes have become one of the most visible and participatory forms of digital communication. Scholarly interest can be attributed to memes' multimodal nature, their creation of meaning through circulation, and their emotional appeal as political messages.

A fundamental communicative attribute of memes that scholars widely agree upon is their multimodality. Memes combine visual, textual, contextual, and occasionally other semiotic elements, such as audio or video, in their expression (Milner 2013; van Leeuwen 2004; Bülow & Johann 2023; Hoppmann 2025; Tassadiq et al. 2025). Tassadiq et al. (2025) articulates how “memes rely on multimodality” (p. 867), by holding that meaning is generated through “the interaction between text, imagery, typography, and contextual knowledge” (p. 867), not the components alone. Each semiotic sign of the meme carries different meanings, and by referring to one another in their combination, they create layers of meaning that invite the opportunity for varying interpretations (van Leeuwen 2004; Hahner 2013; Bülow & Johann 2023). Occupy Wall Street memes exemplify this quality, as Milner (2013) describes. “Text is overlaid on a close-up of Wall Street’s Charging Bull statue. A censored face sits over a hashtag. A play on a Jay-Z lyric is paired with instructions to Google the OWS movement” (p. 2364). From the charging bull, the censored face, to the Jay-Z lyric, each layer of references have their inherent meanings. In these memes however, they diverge from their original meanings through interaction with one other as well as other textual layers to produce commentary. For example, the layering of the charging bull with the definition of the phrase ‘take the bull by the horns’ creates a sense of confrontation and acts as a call to action to defy the capitalist system represented by the wall street bull statue. These interactions often involve juxtaposition and play on meaning to amplify the message or call to action communicated.

Thus, scholars have argued that memes produce multiple and, at times, competing meanings through enabling different recontextualizations. Along with multimodality, scholars studying memes have also stressed the importance that circulation plays in enabling recontextualization and their rhetorical power. Just as a musical score anticipates playing or choreography precedes performance, memes presuppose circulation. As Chaput (2010) puts it, circulation is an affective process in which “affect acts as an energy between human beings...that inspire behavior instinctively” (pp. 7-8). In such a framework, affect circulates through communal social spaces to influence groups and create collective reactions. Scholars have argued that the action of sharing memes through networked platforms itself functions as a means of

meaning-making by infusing content with affective relations. Jenkins (2014) argues that images acquire iconic or meme status upon its recognition and circulation, and that its iconicity is not inherent through production but rather developed through sharing, repetition, and imitation within specific cultural spheres. A meme is therefore best understood not as a static artifact but as a performative artifact materialized upon sharing. Milner (2013) adds that internet memes exist only through public participation. Particularly, that their meaning emerges from how various users construe, modify, and pass on shared texts. The sharing of memes constitutes more than transmission, rather, it is the medium through which meaning is generated. Furthermore, critical discourse analysis describes a transfer of discourse through social settings as recontextualization, in which new meaning is produced, which Jäger and Maier (2009) also described as “entanglements of discursive strands” (p. 47). These processes are exemplified by memes and how they accumulate layers of meaning shaped through cycles of remix.

The multimodal composition and circulatory nature of memes not only shape how meaning is produced but also how memes are put to use. Due to their ability to condense various signs into highly remixable sharing forms, they are especially well-suited for use in political discourse. A large body of scholarship examines memes as political messages. Some scholars argue memes’ ability for political persuasion, that they are able to mobilize and divide online communities for particular political causes. Shifman (2013) argued this through “the extensive use of memes in recent election campaigns” (p. 112). Looking at Obama’s 2008 US Presidential Campaign, Shifman found that meme videos produced by nontraditional actors attracted far more views and support than campaign-produced ads. This persuasive capability is in part due to the accessibility of memes as a tool for expressing political opinions, as it is humorous (Penney 2019), culturally comprehensible (Milner 2013), and readily shared (Jenkins 2014). Some scholars (Paz 2021; Al-Rawi 2021; Johann 2022), such as Mihăilescu (2024), warn that this persuasive power is unregulated, and could enable the rapid spread of harmful ideologies without any accountability. However, at the same time, this lowers the barrier for engagement and allows more users to articulate commentary or critique in meme format. Rather than forming a strict divide, scholarship often recognizes memes as simultaneously tools of persuasion and participation. Therefore, scholars have also argued that memes are a form of participatory media, that memes facilitate coordinated action in grassroots political movements. The shared format of memes allow personal opinions to be expressed as part of a larger discourse. Milner (2013) furthers that image memes function as a populist means of expression which allows diverse perspectives to coexist within a shared mode of language.

Scholarship since the 2010s have increasingly examined memes as a tool of the oppressed, particularly in the context of alt-right and conservative movements. Shifman and Milner have already emphasized memes’ roles in grassroots movements such as Occupy Wall Street and Los Indignados, where memes enabled “the people” to fight against “the institution,” with both populations defined through recurring meme narratives. On the other hand, Hahner and Woods (2020) investigated this use of memes through analyzing the 2016 presidential elections, where they found alt-right communities promoting Donald Trump’s election through strategic proliferation of memes. Central to Trump supporter’s strategy was an “attempt at trolling to create a social backlash” (p. 104), which drew increased attention and normalized extreme political discourse. This strategy has become common among alt-right or conservative memes,

which have served as an effective recruitment tool in recent years. Rather than merely challenging dominant perspectives, these memes employ strategies of irony and humor to obscure ideology extremity while expanding the boundaries for acceptable discourse. Many such meme accounts use memes as symbolic violence which construct collective identities deeply rooted in white supremacy and hateful ideologies. Scholars (Price 2025; McSwiney & Sengul 2024; Winter 2019) have noted that memes make alt-right users political chameleons, allowing their content to be dismissed as “trolling” when challenged. In this manner, they “widened the “Overton window” of acceptable political discourse”(Greene 2019, p. 36). In this context, the same capabilities of memes that enable grassroots participation also allows for the spread of propaganda. Memes operate as “bite sized” pieces of political information or ideologies that are easily digestible and designed for rapid circulation.

Beyond the employment of memes in political messaging, scholars have also found memes to be a mechanism for in-group communication. Mihăilescu (2024) and Miltner (2014) have found that participation in the circulation of memes builds a sense of belonging and group identity as actants find comfort in expressing themselves through shared localized vernacular. Particularly within online subcultures such as fandoms, politically aligned communities, and gaming cultures, memes act as adhesive mechanisms that bind individuals through shared norms. Beyond mere participation, since the process of meme creation and sharing also often depends on shared cultural knowledge, their interpretation often requires prior familiarity with specific discourse contexts or social positions. As such, this process enables signaling shared values which go towards constructing collective identities. Sharing seemingly trivial memes can encode norms of taste, legitimacy, and belief to reinforce group identity in a shared interpretive framework. Newton et al. (2022) describes memes under this context as bonding icons, or “semiotic artifacts which have accrued shared interpersonal meaning beyond their original experiential meaning” (p. 3). Such memes draw upon and encode shared values in a community to generate belonging through alignment. When users recognize and resonate with these values, their bond with the group is reinforced. Edwards (2022) on the other hand characterizes memes as “condensation symbols” which create in-groups through “instigating emotional reactions and provoking choric responses” (p. 30). Through condensing complex emotions into singular signs, memes orient audiences towards particular social identities and align them with specific communal positions.

MEMES OF THE MONSOON

Methods

This paper analyzes three widely circulated memes from the July Uprising, looking at their rhetorical functions and impacts on the movement. In the context of this analysis, widely circulated refers to three different measures of reach or visibility: (1) individual meme posts that have over 10 thousand views, (2) over 10 reproduced versions of the same image or event, or (3) repeated appearance in secondary literature through which they become important entry points where international audiences encounter and interpret the movement.

The relevant memes for analysis were identified by cross reviewing existing scholarly research on digital media and memes in the July Uprisings as well as news articles which highlighted protest art, memes, slang, and slogans that emerged from the movement. The search was conducted between December 2025 and February 2026, for “protest art July Uprisings,” “July Uprisings memes,” “Bangladesh protest memes,” and related terms. This initial search did not involve direct searches on social media platforms. Instead, memes were identified through secondary sources that documented or discussed their significance within the movement. Across approximately 30 news articles and studies – including Abir et al. (2025)’s study, Afrin (2024)’s study, The Daily Star Newspaper, Al Jazeera Newspaper, Prothom Alo Newspaper, The Contrapuntal Magazine, and the Know Your Meme digital encyclopedia website – three memes (the shooting of Abu Sayed, Sister vs Van, and Mocking of Sheikh Hasina) were frequently noted. Their repeated appearance across independent sources provided the initial indication of their prominence within the movement’s digital and meme culture and thus their relevance as case studies for this analysis. The pairing of these three memes is also intentionally selected to represent different rhetorical functions found in the memes of this movement: martyrdom, collective empowerment, and humorous ridicule of authority.

After identifying these three memes, their circulation was found across various digital platforms, including Facebook, X, online blogs, TikTok, Instagram and Reddit. When searching for these memes on different platforms, different iterations and remixes of each meme were found, often recontextualized in different media formats due to differing natures of each platform. This search was conducted until additional findings and cross-platform comparisons of remixes no longer produced meaningfully different examples or iterations that were just as if not more widely circulated or relevant to the movement, since this analysis focuses on examining representative high-circulation examples through which broader patterns of rhetoric can be observed.

Each meme is analyzed in relation to the original physical event from which it emerged, its visual or textual composition, the emotions and identities it carries for the movement, as well as its subsequent reproductions and circulation.

“Shoot me, I bare my chest”

On July 16th, 2024, Abu Sayed was leading a peaceful student protest in front of the Begum Rokeya University in Rangpur. As the police, shielded and wielding firearms, came out of the university gates, many students scattered away with fear. Sayed, however, stood right in front of the gates, across the street from the approaching police officers who physically battered him minutes ago. He stood still, spread his arms open, and exposed his chest, as he was shot at least 3 times (Corea & Erum, 2024).

Figure 1

Abu Sayed, Arms Open Facing Shooting

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Note. From *Abu Sayed killing: ICT prosecution plead to frame charges against 30 accused*, by The Daily Star, 2025.

<https://www.thedailystar.net/news/world/news/israeli-warns-turkey-against-dangerous-adventures-syria-syria-says-no-turkish-build-planned-4252331>

This was the moment captured on video by news media that quickly circulated across the internet. The freeze-frame image of Sayed's last moment of defiance was shared by members of the protest, and attached to the slogan "Buk petechi guli kor" (Shoot me, I bare my chest), which first emerged in a national movement against sexual violence in 2020 but gained a new meaning in light of this movement (Forensic Architecture, 2024).

The meme's effectiveness stems from its reproductions, which allow anyone on the internet, including ordinary participants who are not journalists or powerful political organizations, to play a role in the commemoration and remembrance of Sayed's death. Among these reproductions, only those that struck resonance with a broader general audience became widely circulated. These popular iterations are common in their articulation of a shared emotion.

One of such emotions symbolized is bravery and defiance. Its rhetorical functions that it serves for the movement can be seen in its composition: Sayed, a vulnerable student, stands alone, against the force of the state. This conveys courage and defiance in face of authority by evoking the imagery of a "powerful David-and-Goliath narrative" (Abir et al., 2025, p. 5) in which Sayed is clearly the victim or the underdog. This appeals to the "protestors' sense of moral righteousness" (Abir et al., 2025, p. 5) as they are fighting to correct an unfair balance of power, and is particularly effective in this movement because the oppressive nature of the government which they are fighting against fits perfectly into the "villain" narrative. Billah (2025) reports that "Sayed's death fuelled the public anger that led to intensified protests," and in a survey of participants from the digital groups through which the movement was organized, one respondent stated, "When I saw him in the video bravely exposing his chest, he became a great inspiration" (Hossain et al., 2026). Since Sayed's depiction demonstrates how real people are being

harmful by that injustice, which creates more moral outrage and motivation for citizens who see themselves in the collective identity of “protestor” that Sayed carries.

Figure 2

Meme video commemorating Abu Sayed



Figure 2. Screenshots from *Abu sayed bhai, We haven't forgotten you* [Video], by Depressed People Making Shits · Absolute Memes, July 16, 2025, Facebook.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/3002043970102427/posts/3789397338033749/>

Sayed's position in the meme serves another function: martyrdom. Another popular iteration of the meme places heavy emphasis on how Sayed stretched his arms wide by his sides, a position that often is related to sacrifice. It mimics the images of the crucifixion, evoking the imagery of historical figures or saints sacrificing their lives for others. Indeed, that is what Abu Sayed did for his fellow student protestors. This meme communicates his selfless sacrifice for others to communicate a sense of a cause towards the protestors who might identify themselves with “others” (Miotto, 2022). Martyrdom is a demonstration of true believer status, a symbol for authenticity. This authenticity mobilizes protestors and creates a shared solidarity against this common enemy (Lewis, 2019), instilled with a mission to ensure that Sayed's sacrifice was not in vain. Here in this meme, the martyr is profaned (Sacred and the Profane), turning him back to a man for the purpose of circulation. The martyr is supposed to be unreachable and to be held sacred. But to enable the identification of man to martyr (Ibrahim, 2020), the image of Abu Sayed is profaned through his relation to cultural products.

Beyond these rhetorical functions for the in-group, the mass circulation of Abu Sayed's meme also communicates the message of resilience and defiance. The image is replicated abundantly by activists on both Facebook and in real life, and even appeared in news coverage, protest posters, and digital artworks. The proliferation of the image in large quantities speaks on behalf of the extent that the protest group is willing to endure violence for their goals. The action of reproducing the video itself acts as a signal to the government that protestors will not back down against their silencing techniques of violence. The

circulation of Sayed's image transforms his act into a representation for the willingness of collective sacrifice outwards to the state. At the same time, it challenges the narrative pushed by the official government's reporting of the incident. While the government has attempted to frame Sayed's death as an accident in the protest, the videos clearly reframe his death as an instance of state violence, presenting visual evidence for this counter-narrative.

This dynamic also reflects a shift in power between physical and online domains. Through controlling physical force and traditional media, the government has seemingly overwhelming control over the physical reality of the protest. However, the protestors increasingly dominate internet discourse. Abu Sayed's passing, a moment that was supposed to suppress the protest, was transformed into a moment that further fueled future demonstrations. Through challenging the state's control over the protest's narrative, the protestors' internet power has created tangible consequences for the control of the media. The circulation of these memes bypasses the traditional media monopoly held by the government and the journalism industry to allow information to be disseminated directly to the public according to their own interpretations. In doing so, protestors gain more power to shape public discourse beyond the online community.

Superman girl, SuperVAN girl

Among other footage captured in the protests is a video of an unidentified girl pushing back the police van carrying her arrested brother yelling that they have to let him go.

Figure 3

Sister Blocking Police Car to Protect Brother



Note. From *Sister stands in front of police vehicle to save her brother in Bangladesh*, by luczade, 2024, Reddit.

https://www.reddit.com/r/pics/comments/1ehae9q/sister_stands_in_front_of_police_vehicle_to_save/

Her brother is among the more than 2500 protestors and students arrested for participating in the movement. In response to the protests, the government has sent a series of police crackdowns, including lethal firearms – such as in the case of Abu Sayed, tear gas, and grenades. As the police tried to arrest her brother, the girl grabbed him and protected him behind her, telling them that they “can’t arrest him wrongfully.” In a moment that may have almost seemed a miracle, she managed to free him (Hussein, 2024). Like the footage of Sayed, her video became viral among protestors and the moment when she pushed back the van with her bare hands became reproduced as a still image.

Figure 4

Meme Comparing SuperVan Girl to Superman



Note. From চব্বিশের প্রীতিলতা ওয়ান্দের! ❤️, by Gen Z Republic, 2024, Facebook.

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=433918102984450&set=a.424170157292578>

The image became a meme symbolizing similar values of the movement – bravery and defiance – but with different rhetorical functions than that of Abu Sayed. Looking at the meme, it is also composed of an unarmed vulnerable student facing the formidable force of the state. The difference is: in this meme, the emphasis is on her strength and agency. She is positioned at the forefront of the frame, her hands are pushing against the van. Rather than depicting vulnerability, the image captures an act of direct resistance. The angle of the meme further reinforces this emphasis. Rather than placing the audience opposite her, the

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memes often captures her act from her side or behind her. This amplifies her representation of the idea of agency instead of presenting her as a passive subject.

This sense of agency creates this heroic framing, contrary to the underdog narrative in Sayed's memes, particularly in the remixed versions of the meme. Her ability to free her brother places her as the "victor" in the story (de Saint Laurent et al., 2021), and in one particular reproduction, a parallel is drawn explicitly between her and Superman, the superhero, through their similar actions of pushing back the van. Superman is transnationally associated with the rhetoric of exceptional strength, courage, and power. Through this memetic parallel, the same rhetorical qualities become attributed to her.

Yet unlike the fictional superhero, she is just an ordinary citizen who is a part of this movement, someone that anyone could identify with. In this meme, protestors gain solidarity from the collective identity as the "victor." This collective identity is represented in another popular iteration of the meme, where members of the protest stand are pictured to be standing behind her which creates a rhetorical function similar to the framing of the camera angle. Interestingly, this image almost represents the meaning behind participants' choices to reproduce the image. Not only does the image itself represent empowerment of ordinary citizens through glorifying a "victor" that anyone could relate with, it also allows empowerment to directly happen through the familiar digital actions of recognizing, remixing, and sharing.

Figure 5

Drawing of SuperVan Girl in Protests



Note. From *More revolutionary art from #Bangladesh* [Image attached], by Perspective Asia, 2024, X. <https://x.com/PerspectiveAsia/status/1818982085584986160>

The circulation of this manner of empowerment extends the impact of this image in the physical protest as well. The original act of the girl pushing back the van created an emotional response for those who witnessed it in person in that specific moment. Its subsequent circulation made it possible that this same emotional experience could be continually recreated for audiences far away from that specific moment in space. The message that her image represents can be carried on in protests in the future, and continue to exist in posters, slogans, and even just the protestors' minds. Thus, through circulating the meme on the internet, its emotional impact is in turn perpetuated in the real life actions of the protest.

“Oh dear, don’t do drama”

“Natok kom koro pio!” This phrase, meaning “Oh dear, don’t do drama,” [translation by Murad, 2024] is a popular Gen-Z slang that originated from a TikTok video. This phrase is sarcastic, often said in a mocking tone towards someone’s fake or overly dramatic reactions (Murad, 2024).

Figure 6

Original TikTok of Natok Kom Koro Pio



Note. নাটক কম কর বোঝাছ#CapCut [Video], by atabor_2500, 2024, TikTok.
https://www.tiktok.com/@atabor_2500/video/7396897556531367186

In the July Uprisings, social media users employed this same phrase to mock Prime Minister Hasina. The prime minister was often criticized for being authoritative and corrupt. During the protests, she ordered violent crackdowns on citizens and restrictions on expression. She has also often been accused of phoney or that she often cries “crocodile tears.” For instance, she once wept dramatically while visiting a train station that had been destroyed as a result of the protests. Many called this act hypocritical, since the country has “lost [hundreds of] students. But PM Sheikh Hasina had the time to go “cry” for a metro rail, not for the people who won’t return ever again” (Ng, 2024, para. 8). So, whenever Hasina cried, showed emotion at press conferences, or defended herself against the protestors, protestors reacted with the phrase *Natok kom koro pio*.

One specific iteration of the meme is particularly popular. It combines the phrase with pictures of Hasina crying while holding up a victory hand sign. This overlays the catchphrase with the reference to another meme, the “girl crying after winning tv show then sticking her tongue out” meme (Ouwerkerk, 2023). The interplay between the phrase, Hasina’s signature victory hand sign, and the tv show meme suggests that her emotional display and apparent care for the country or her citizens are only performative. It is “*natok*” [drama, translated using Google Translate], and not sincerity.

Figure 7

Meme Mocking Sheikh Hasina



Note. From *Exhibition going on at Drik! Go visit today!*, by Arts By Rats, 2024, Facebook.

<https://www.facebook.com/artsbyrats/posts/exhibition-going-on-at-drik-go-visit-today/1026436808938731/>

Figure 8

Girl crying after winning a TV show and then sticking her tongue out Meme



Note. From *Girl crying after winning TV show then sticking her tongue out*, Know Your Meme, by Pieter Ouwerkerk, 2023, Know Your Meme.

<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/girl-crying-after-winning-tv-show-then-sticking-her-tongue-out>

In contrast to the previous two memes, this one appears to target the out-group. This meme is able to dissect and destroy Hasina's political arguments about the protest simply. Avoiding having to respond with a lengthy argument, this meme attacks the person making the argument to imply that the argument is therefore also invalid. The meme is easily circulated as the original video and phrase are already widely recognized both online and in protest communities. Thus it functions effectively as a reaction that can be quickly deployed in conversations to deflect the government narrative. This interaction between an element of online culture and real life footage of Hasina once again reveals the aforementioned shifting dynamic between the power of the online and the offline. Here, the online reframes the narrative of the offline. Hasina's public appearances become subject to online meme responses and formats which cast her as insincere. The physical event's own meaning becomes determined by its circulation within the digital culture. A recognizable and familiar internet phrase has come to shape public interpretation of political reality, which, again, demonstrates how authority is becoming arranged differently in online spaces.

It also functions as a form of general political critique by employing the registers of irony and ridicule. It rhetorically attacks the legitimacy of the government through reducing them as nothing but meme material. By responding with "don't do drama" and addressing the government as "dear," these memes reduce the government to ordinary people, who are inherently fallible. Likewise, the relation of these governmental figures to pop culture material brings them down to an approachable level to citizens, which diminishes the seriousness and power that may have been previously associated with them. Thus, these memes create the ability for citizens to laugh and make fun of the government.

This helps foster a collective emotional register within the members of the movement, which is composed of reduced fear, and distrust of the government. Understanding these memes requires a further cultural understanding of multiple other meme formats and their contexts, through which their in-group identity

may be strengthened (Newton et al., 2022). Anyone sharing, commenting, or remixing these memes demonstrates their familiarity with the particular meme format and understanding of the mocking commentary. Particularly, they demonstrate their familiarity with the slang phrase “Natok kom koro pio,” which is trendy among Gen-Z internet users, as well as their understanding of the contexts behind the remixed videos or images of Hasina. An user’s interaction with these memes therefore signals their belonging to this digitally literate, political, and humorous group.

CONCLUSION

Discussion

The analysis of these three meme case studies have demonstrated the prominent role that memes and their digital circulation have played in the July uprising. Memes served as vessels of affect for protestors’ collective emotions, reframed narratives using simple recognizable online culture elements, and placed protestors in identity dynamics that reinforced their moral belief in the cause. These functions all work to mobilize protest. Abu Sayed’s image mobilizes through conveying emotions of defiance and bravery, reframing his shooting as a sacrificial action of martyrdom, and appealing to the “underdog” mentality of protestors. The SuperVAN girl meme mobilizes through a confident sense of agency and the heroic reframing brought through a comparison to Superman. The “Natok kom koro pio” memes mobilize through collective distrust of the government, internet slang which dismiss credibility of a government figure, and a common Gen Z internet-savvy humorous identity.

Their circulation, on the other hand, democratizes the movement. Unlike traditional means of media, the right to create and distribute memes doesn’t lie in a few publications’ hands. Anyone with knowledge of the movement could participate in the production or reproduction of such memes and contribute to the language of the movement. In this process, the movement’s rhetoric becomes far from centrally imposed. The accessibility of memes creates the conditions for in-group identification. Those who are uplifted by the memes become recognizable as members of the in-group, while membership in that in-group makes the memes themselves more emotionally meaningful. This functional form of tropological expression and energization is commonly described as “meme magic,” in which the circulation of memes creates porous but relatively stable affiliations between viewers through humorous associations. The July Uprising demonstrates how an associated in-group can leverage humor under conditions of violence and uncertainty as a form of empowerment. This empowerment is independent of negatively framed representations of an enemy. Positive identification with courage, resilience, and sacrifice in the Abu Sayed and SuperVan girl memes can independently energize the movement by providing shared emotional registers through which they understand themselves as a collective.

However, democratized memes shouldn’t necessarily be confused with decentralized rhetoric, rather, these memes might be better described as collectively authored. Indeed, anyone can make a meme, however, their circulation still depends on the extent to which they are able to resonate with a broader audience. Creators of these memes are then prompted to understand the emotional needs and experiences of the collective and use memes to speak on and to those needs. Rather than directly discussing these

emotions or directing them, memes use familiar visual and cultural references to recognize these emotions and make their exchange possible through emotionally evocative subtexts. Ultimately, this process lends the larger part of the movement's memetic language to evolve and speak for the collective.

This participatory circulation naturally produces a reciprocal relationship between the physical protest and digital spaces. The physical protests are the sources of the images, videos, and other elements that become meme content material, and the meme exchanges create a collective language for protestors which fosters an encouraging environment for participation. Beyond this reciprocal relationship, the memes in the July Uprisings also reveal a redistribution of political power between physical and online spaces. In the Abu Sayed and SuperVAN girl memes, the emphasis is placed on empowering the weak, while in the "Natok kom koro pio" memes, the emphasis is placed on disempowering the already powerful. Besides rhetorically redistributing power through humour and juxtaposition, their circulation also challenges the power dynamic in which protestors dominate the online space whereas the physical space is controlled by the state. Indeed, these memes are still circulated within the online community. However, as digital communication becomes increasingly influential in determining individuals' access to information and perception of real life events, having power within these communities holds more consequences in communities in the flesh. Both the Abu Sayed and "Natok kom koro pio" memes already prove the existence of such consequences as both combat state-backed narratives through their online circulation. In these cases, the government's power to control physical events become increasingly constrained by the protestor's ability to control their online meaning.

The collective meaning created through the circulation of these memes emerge from mixing pop culture with real life events. The use of pre-existing internet culture shapes the way that a real life event is remembered and through equivocation, these events and individuals become immortalized in a shared digital culture. The anonymous girl becomes a symbol of ordinary power and a counterpart for Superman, Abu Sayed is a digital icon representing sacrifice and martyrdom, and Hasina's public appearances become inseparable from the viral catchphrase and reaction meme "Natok kom koro pio." In each case, internet culture does not simply reflect and document political reality, but it becomes fundamentally entangled in the way that these realities are constructed and remembered. As online and offline worlds continue to intersect and blend into an ambiguous reality, the capacity to control meme culture becomes an increasingly consequential form of political power.

Limitations & Future Work

An important limitation of this analysis lies in establishing qualitative causality between circulation and mobilization. The analysis of the case studies was able to demonstrate how these memes constructed identities, empowered emotions, and produced political narratives that are conducive to mobilization, however, it is only an estimate of the probability and the extent to which participation in the July Uprising's meme culture directly increased protest participation. Future research could address this limitation through developing analysis methods that more directly measure that relationship of causality between meme engagement and physical participation, perhaps through surveys and participation data

over time. Future research could also evaluate whether the rhetorical framework established in this paper applies across movements that operate within different contexts.

One of the different contexts worth examining is different political or moral orientations. The July Uprising movement provides a useful case for this paper as the movement ideas that the memes examined were built around largely focus on values that could be seen as political progressive or morally righteous – opposing state violence, corruption, and injustices. Comparatively, it could be questioned whether or not the same mechanisms that were found in the memes of this movement operate within movements whose political claims are more morally controversial. Examining memes within the anti-vaccination movement (Coriasco et al., 2026), for instance, could reveal whether affect, humour, identity, and circulation of memes mobilize participants in similar ways even when the movement's claims are heavily disputed. As Coriasco et al. (2026) found, the power dynamics between the in-group and outside criticism might align more closely with mechanisms of political polarization compared to that in the July Uprisings.

This framework can also be applied to movements in other international contexts that could expand the study of memes in protests beyond movements that already receive substantial international attention. Researchers studying movements in their own regions could use the framework developed here to examine how memes originate and circulate within those movements. Such cross-geography research could help determine the relationship between the specific cultural and political conditions of a movement and the features of memetic circulation in protests.

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