



ADMM Cybersecurity and  
Information Centre of Excellence

# UPDATE ON THE INFORMATION DOMAIN

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## Memetic Warfare: The Influence and Danger of Memes

### INTRODUCTION

1. With the increased usage of the internet, memes have become increasingly popular and widely used online as they grow, spread and mutate. By definition, a meme is an idea, behaviour, or style that spreads by means of imitation from person to person within a culture, and often carries symbolic meaning representing a particular phenomenon or theme. The ability to translate complex feelings, experiences, ideas and opinions into simple and humorous content that resonates across generations, has made memes popular in today's digital age.
2. Memetic warfare, more commonly known as meme warfare, is a modern form of information and psychological warfare that has been around the fringes of the information warfare discourse for some time. It can be defined as the propagation of memes on social media, in which an individual, organisation, or a nation state can consciously or unconsciously engage. By progressively injecting small cultural elements relating to a matter or issue, such as an invasion or military operations, messages in the form of memes can be spread unwittingly and reach a wide group of audience within a short period of time.
3. For many decades, memes have been a double-edged sword as they were either used to convey useful information or to spread misinformation. As *Straits Times* reported, memes can be effective as a communication tool to convey official announcements as they can bring forth boring, factual information in a humorous manner. However, they can also be used as weapons in culture wars

to further political agendas, extreme ideologies, and social issues. As *Psychology Today* reported, memes were created and spread across social media in order to imbue audience with a sense of collective efficacy to affirm shared beliefs.

### *Using Memes to Influence*

4. Memes tend to tap into the collective consciousness of audiences online and are mostly constructed based on recent or important events that appeal to many. Those that spark a stronger emotional response among the audience are more likely to be shared and become viral. As such, memes could be “weaponised” in response to a major event, fomenting conflict. It can also take the form of a disinformation or trolling campaign, deployed to pursue a strategic goal.

5. For example, the rise of Black Lives Matter protests<sup>1</sup> in the United States in 2020 triggered a spike in the use of racist memes about race war<sup>2</sup> and civil war. According to *Asia Online*, the memes that were developed in response to Black Lives Matter caused negative feelings, worsening the race war in general. In another example, a terrorist attack<sup>3</sup> at a Tops supermarket in Buffalo, New York in May 2022 was assessed, by various experts, to be motivated by the spread of hateful ideologies via online memes. As reported by *GNET Research*, the Buffalo shooter’s supposed belief that equality will never work<sup>4</sup> were some of the narratives that had been circulating online (see [Figure 1](#) for examples of the memes that were circulating online which incited violence). The memetic culture that arose in response to the Black Lives Matter protests appears to glorify and trivialise violence by challenging users to achieve ‘high scores’ by committing acts of real-world violence.

<sup>1</sup> Black Lives Matter (BLM) is an international social movement formed in the United States that is dedicated to fighting racism, discrimination, and racial inequality towards Black people.

<sup>2</sup> A ‘race war’ is a racial conflict between two or more racial groups.

<sup>3</sup> In May 2022, a gunman named Payton Gendron killed 10 people and wounded three at a grocery store in a predominantly Black neighborhood of Buffalo, New York.

<sup>4</sup> Gendron claimed that White Americans were at risk of being replaced by immigrants or people of colour.

Figure 1: Examples of Memes that Incite Violence



6. Far-right groups have also used social media platforms such as Instagram to populate memes that promote extreme ideologies. Malicious groups or actors can also make use of memes as a tool to spread disinformation, attract the attention of the younger generation and slowly accustom them to become more tolerant of radical ideologies through prolonged exposure. *Insider* reported that many radicalised groups like neo-Nazis and ISIS have used memes to push far-right propaganda and recruit vulnerable teenagers. Memes are easily consumable and are also an effective way to cloak sinister views under a layer of humour or irony (see [Figure 2](#) for example of inoffensive memes to articulate controversial sentiments).

Figure 2 Example of Inoffensive Memes

1940: "I will gleefully lay down my life to protect my country and children."



2020: "I was fired from my job for saying my life mattered."



## ASSESSMENT

7. Memes should not be underestimated as they conceal complexity and culture beneath their simple exterior. Memetic campaigns, when effectively executed, can unite and/or divide people on issues of interest at the same time; this can be dangerous. For instance, it is possible for something innocuous to also act as an oblique, unintended wake-up call. According to *The Verge*, memes can act as ‘moral guides’ for a society. In other words, memes help people to understand political concepts, social ideologies, or opinions that many may not be familiar with. As such, researchers or social media analysts could develop counter-meme memes to combat malicious memes.

8. Memes can also have negative impacts on society – as apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic – if they are used to spread disinformation, misinformation, and conspiracy theories. Even though memes are often depicted as harmless – with humour as a core feature – it has also become very easy for malicious actors to create memes without it being suspected as part of information warfare. Besides, with many participating in the making and spreading of memes, it has become more challenging in determining the originators of questionable memes. For instance, *Modern Diplomacy* has reported that memes can be used to propagate extreme ideas, such as terrorism, and recruit young, vulnerable individuals to their cause. As evidenced from past events, the speed at which memes can be generated and the virality of memes make them effective vessels for the transmission of ideas and promotion of chaotic social movements.

9. Raising awareness about memes may reduce the proliferation of memetic campaigns by malicious actors. As *The Strategist* reported, there needs to be a concerted effort to make people aware that memes can be harmful. The public should be educated and informed about how malicious actors use memes to amplify the ‘loudest voices in the crowd’ as an attempt to deepen the divisions within the society. Investments in media literacy and education could better equip the population with the necessary tools to identify disinformation and coded language. Educating the public could also minimise the spread of malicious content and the normalising of extremist views.

## CONTACT DETAILS

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