Analyzing Memes from Online Sports Betting X Accounts

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Abstract
This study examines 60 memes from BetMGM, DraftKings, and FanDuel posted on their primary X (formerly Twitter) accounts in January 2024. Using a mixed methods approach, grounded theory was applied for qualitative analysis, and quantitative methods identified common themes. The findings reveal that the memes are predominantly humorous, often mocking, and reference recent events and sports figures. This humor contributes to a masculine digital persona and fosters a participatory culture, engaging users by reflecting shared interests and emotions such as frustration and celebration, thereby creating a collective social identity. Memes also incorporate popular culture and non-sports celebrities, broadening their appeal while maintaining a brand-conscious tone by avoiding foul language. Despite the small sample size and focus on just three companies, the study demonstrates the importance of memes in building community among sports betting consumers. Future research should include larger samples, more researchers, and a wider range of social media platforms to validate and expand these findings. Memes are shown to play a key role in shaping digital engagement and community in the sports betting industry.
Keywords: Memes, Digital culture, Sports betting, Social media marketing, Sport communication

Over the past thirty years, digital communication has significantly fostered the development and proliferation of memes, widely shared by individuals and businesses alike, contributing to a booming digital marketing and advertising industry valued at $2.3 billion in 2020 and expected to more than double by 2025 (Djulich, 2023). With approximately 5.35 billion internet users and over 5 billion social media users as of January 2024 (Statista, 2024), businesses have ample opportunities to integrate memes into their marketing strategies, especially since the average millennial views between 20 and 30 memes daily (Djulich, 2023). The 2018 Supreme Court case Murphy v. NCAA legalized sports betting in many states, leading to rapid industry expansion, and by February 2024, 31 states had legalized online sports betting, with millions of new accounts created during the 2023-2024 NFL season (Parry, 2024). Companies like BetMGM, DraftKings, and FanDuel leverage memes in their social media interactions to attract and engage customers, using them as cultural conduits and tools for participating in internet trends (Benveniste, 2022). This study examines memes posted by these companies on their primary X accounts to uncover the cultural, social, and political messages they convey, highlighting their substantial followings and competitive presence in the American online sports betting market (Powell, 2024; Powell, 2024a; Powell, 2024b).

Literature Review

Richard Dawkins (1989) originally defined memes as units of cultural transmission or imitation, functioning as vehicles for spreading cultural information through a population, akin to genes in a gene pool (Fazal, 2018). However, this definition does not account for the ease with which memes spread in the digital

age. Roy Christopher (2019) argues that the internet enhances meme propagation due to its connectivity, while Limor Shifman (2013a, 2013b) notes that memes, starting as individual units, can evolve into widespread social phenomena, reflecting participatory culture and diffusing through competition and selection. Memes' humorous nature invites audience participation, leading to further creative development (Shifman, 2012). Pian (2022) emphasizes memes as products of communal coordination, resonating both globally and locally. Blackmore (2000) supports this by highlighting memes as true replicators necessary for a new Darwinian evolutionary process. The interpretation of memes is influenced by individual perspectives and contexts (Boyd & Richerson, 2000; Taylor et al., 2022), with generational differences in understanding affecting meme perception and interpretation within meme pools.

Satire, Humor, and Carnivalesque in Memes

Memes function as satirical and humorous expressions of civic engagement, critiquing public figures, protesting policies, influencing media attention, and raising awareness on various topics (Barton et al., 2020; Msimanga et al., 2022; Pian, 2022; Tay, 2014; Zhang & Pinto, 2021). Geniesa Tay (2014) describes memes as rapidly spreadable units of information that permeate society and culture. During the 2012 U.S. Presidential race, political memes allowed ordinary individuals to criticize candidates and influence the news agenda (Tay, 2014). Modern memes, compared to traditional political humor, resonate within communities and often resemble propaganda due to their anonymity and rapid spread (Gallagher, 2020; Pian, 2022). Huntington (2013) views memes as public discourse resisting dominant media messages. Memes also play crucial roles in environmental campaigns, as seen in Greenpeace's Let's Go! Arctic campaign and climate change activism, acting as powerful media tools fostering activism and circulating digital images influenced by societal events (Davis et al., 2015; Ross & Rivers, 2019; Jones et al., 2022). Memes further express public opinion on cultural events, using carnivalesque tactics to facilitate public discourse and debate, as evidenced in reactions to Kevin Spacey allegations and COVID-19 policies (Barton et al., 2020; Msimanga et al., 2022).

Memes and COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic, memes were used globally to question, protest, and criticize policies while providing a humorous escape from the pandemic's stress. Research shows that people turned to memes to cope with COVID-19-related stress (Dynel, 2020; Fafowora & Salaudeen, 2022; Kerevičienė, 2022; Msimanga et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2022). Msimanga et al. (2022) analyzed 58 COVID-19 memes from South Africa and Zimbabwe, finding that memes served as coping mechanisms, protest tools, and awareness-raising devices. In Lithuania, Kerevičienė (2022) studied 75 memes over seven months, concluding that memes humorously helped individuals manage stress. In Nigeria, Fafowora and Salaudeen (2022) found that social media users posted memes to increase COVID-19 awareness, address misinformation, and represent societal responses. Myrick et al. (2022) discovered that viewing COVID-19 memes reduced related stress, while non-COVID memes only boosted positive emotions. Dynel (2020) observed that COVID-19 memes about masks often led to misinterpretations, enhancing their entertainment value through multimodal discourse.

Memes in Marketing

Businesses frequently use memes in consumer interactions, and research indicates positive results when memes are used appropriately (Gearhart & Maben, 2022; Malodia et al., 2022; Yang, 2022). A study with 258 participants found that brand-related Twitter posts with humorous memes were more likely to be shared than those with serious images, although serious images led to greater brand recognition (Yang, 2022). In India, research concluded that brands achieve better results by remixing existing viral memes rather than creating original content, and should select memes aligning with their brand's personality (Sharma, 2018). Melodia et al. (2022) found that relevance, iconicity, humor, and spreadability significantly impact meme virality, especially when humor is unexpected and timely. However, brands must use memes appropriately, as a study with 299 respondents, averaging 52 years old, indicated memes were the least appropriate type of organizational response on social media, highlighting the need for careful consideration in meme-based marketing (Gearhart & Maben, 2022).

X aka Twitter

X, formerly known as Twitter, defines itself as a service for friends, family, and coworkers to communicate through quick, frequent messages (New User FAQ, n.d.). In 2023, X ranked fourth among U.S. social media sites, with 95 million of its 415 million users based in the United States (Topic: X (Formerly Twitter), 2024). The Pew Research Center found that 23% of Americans used X in 2023 (Pew Research Center, 2024). Most posts on X are reposts or replies, with less than 25% being original content (Dinesh & Odabas, 2023). Sharma (2018) describes X as a 'superego' platform that supports user idealization, where brand memes often show efforts to support larger causes.

The review of the recent literature and contemporary research methods in

communication led to the formation of the following research questions:

RQ1: What types of content trends and phenomena are reflected in memes posted on social media by online sports betting organizations?

RQ2: What does the content of memes posted on social media by online sports betting organizations identify about the organizations and the consumers of the information?

RQ3: What does the content of memes communicate to those who interact with them?

Method

The grounded theory qualitative method, developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and elaborated in their work "The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research," is a process for developing new theory based on data analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Strauss and Corbin (1998) argue that theory derived from data closely resembles reality. Grounded theory involves four steps: data collection and analysis, open coding to conceptualize data into units, selective coding to organize data into representative categories, and defining categories with illustrative examples (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Memos are used to depict relationships among concepts and keep research grounded (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This research used grounded theory to evaluate the content of the most popular memes posted by BetMGM, DraftKings, and FanDuel on four days in January 2024, with popularity defined by the amount of interaction a post received.

The sample texts were compiled from the X accounts of BetMGM, DraftKings, and FanDuel on January 13, 14, 20, and 21, 2024, coinciding with NFL playoff games, excluding posts discussing betting odds or game footage to focus solely on meme content. A mixed methods approach, primarily using grounded theory and incorporating quantitative data, was employed to identify the numbers and frequencies of findings. After identifying the most popular posts, screenshots were taken, data was coded, and posts were numbered and analyzed individually. Recurring themes were categorized and refined through multiple evaluations. A Microsoft Excel spreadsheet listed the 14 representative categories across the x-axis and the texts along the y-axis, marking each text for all categories it represented. This process ensured the uniqueness and significance of each category, with the final analysis confirming their validity, aiding in the discussion and ensuring meaningful categorization.

Results

This study evaluated the 60 most popular memes posted by three online sports betting companies over four dates in January 2024. Fourteen categories and phenomena were discovered during the grounded theory evaluation. Multiple categories were often present on a single text. Nearly half (N=25) of the texts included humor that did not mock or ridicule another individual or group. Even more (N= 32) used humor that mocked others, while few (N=3) presented no humor. One text presenting humor that ridiculed others includes an attached video from a football video game of a kicker attempting a field goal but the ball is kicked wildly out of bounds. The comment in this text reads "Huge kick for Carlson and the Packers!" (FanDuel [@FanDuel], 2024d). This text references a missed kick by Packers kicker Andres Carlson who, just minutes before, missed a field goal attempt. The text is meant to mock Carlson for the missed kick. Another example of humor with ridicule pokes fun at Jordan Love following a wild throw down field (FanDuel [@FanDuel], 2024e). This text includes the comment "Jordan Love: "F**k it. There's a PI down there somewhere" and includes an attached photo of Connor McGregor, a professional fighter, throwing a football unconventionally. One text presenting humor with no ridicule includes an attached video of men dancing and enjoying themselves; the comment in this text reads "Nobody: John Harbaugh" (BetMGM [@BetMGM], 2024f). This text presents the idea that John Harbaugh is excited and celebrating after the team he coached, the Baltimore Ravens, defeated the Houston Texans 34 to 10 (Associated Press, 2024). The message and the attached video make no negative references or ridicule towards others in the text.

Multiple texts (N=51) identified a specific person by name, such as referencing John Harbaugh, Andres Carlson, or Jordan Love (BetMGM [@BetMGM], 2024f; FanDuel [@FanDuel], 2024d; FanDuel [@FanDuel], 2024e). CJ Stroud's name was referenced in a post on X by BetMGM (BetMGM [@BetMGM], 2024a). This text reads "CJ Stroud in the first half" and included an attached image of Stoud's face superimposed on a photograph of Wilt Chamberlain and a record of Chamberlain's achievements (BetMGM [@BetMGM], 2024a).

Commonly (N=55), the texts referenced recent events, those occurring on the same day the post was made. For example, one text from January 14, 2024 referenced the frigid weather in Buffalo, New York that led to the game being

rescheduled included an attached video of a snowstorm covering the football field in Buffalo and, to mock the people in Buffalo, included the comment "The weather in Buffalo right now" (DraftKings [@DraftKings], 2024b). The text mocking Andres Carlson was also created in response to a recent event (FanDuel [@FanDuel], 2024d). One additional example text references a play where Desmond King tackled Joe Flacco (DraftKings [@DraftKings], 2024a). Shortly after the tackle was made a post with an attached video of a wrestler performing clothesline takedown was posted on X with the comment "Desmond King on Joe Flacco's back" (DraftKings [@DraftKings], 2024a). A small collection of texts (N=4) referenced events from different days. One text that referenced events from the same day of the post, also from an event that occurred months prior; the text reads "TOUCHDOWN NELSON AGHOLOR Never forget this moment" and included an attached video of a man being interviewed, speaking about a moment he never forgot, when a football player named Aguilar made mistakes that led his team to lose the game (FanDuel [@FanDuel], 2024c).

Very few texts used foul language (N=2). One text described earlier using foul language substituted two letters to avoid spelling the entire word; the comment for this text reads "Jordan Love: "F**k it. There's a PI down there somewhere" (FanDuel [@FanDuel], 2024e). Representations of popular culture were also found in the texts (N=10). One post that mocked Cowboys fans, posted after their loss in a wildcard playoff game, attached an image of a four-part comic strip featuring Homer Simpson (BetMGM [@BetMGM], 2024d). In the first image, the cartoon character is shown wearing a Cowboys jersey, in the second image he is shown sinking into the hedges behind him as if he was ashamed, in the third and fourth images he is shown reemerging from the hedges wearing a Lakers jersey and a Yankees baseball cap respectively (BetMGM [@BetMGM], 2024d). Another text with a popular culture reference included an attached video clip of popstar Taylor Swift whispering with a friend; the comment in this text reads "I told you, the Dolphins can't play in the cold or beat good teams" (BetMGM [@BetMGM], 2024b).

Frustration was also expressed in texts (N=7). Frustration was always presented in texts responding to recent events. One text expressing frustration includes an attached video of a man talking on a phone who angrily throws the phone at the end of the clip. The caption for this meme reads "me after spending the last 30 minutes explaining to my dad that the Chiefs–Dolphins game is only on Peacock" (FanDuel [@FanDuel], 2024c). This text expresses humor that mocks the Peacock streaming service,

referring to an event from the same day of the post. This meme in this text references the Kansas City Chiefs and Miami Dolphins NFL game that was made exclusively available on the Peacock network, leaving many fans frustrated because they could not watch the game unless they had access to Peacock (Mangione, 2024). Another text exhibiting frustration ridiculed disappointed Dallas Cowboys fans, attaching an image of visibly disappointed and distraught fans during the Cowboys Packers game while the Cowboys were down 18 points (DraftKings [@DraftKings], 2024c). Some texts express celebration (N=12) Celebratory texts expressed celebration, often showing players or fans celebrating victory. One text identified expressing the theme of celebration was posted on January 21 and included an attached video of Jason Kelce and Taylor Swift dancing after the Kansas City Chiefs scored a touchdown in their game against the Buffalo Bills (DraftKings [@DraftKings], 2021). This text, displaying Jason Kelce, also functions as an example of a text featuring a sports celebrity, a phenomenon that occurred at a similar rate (N=13). One example of celebratory text also expressed ridicule (BetMGM [@BetMGM], 2024c). This presents an attached video of an NBA basketball player from the Denver Nuggets celebrating after winning the league's title, but the comment for the post teases an individual by name and identifying his absence as the reason for celebration, "Watching football without Scott Hanson" (BetMGM [@BetMGM], 2024c).

Expressions of masculinity were identified in a significant number of texts (N=13) texts. One text reads "THIS GAME," includes a five second video of a boxing that focuses on the referee who makes a comical facial expressions right before he intervenes to stop the two from fighting (BetMGM [@BetMGM], 2024g). The boxers in this text, participating in a combat sport, represent masculinity. This text also presents humor with no ridicule (BetMGM [@BetMGM], 2024g). All texts featuring professional wrestling were categorized as masculine. One example text features an attached video of two wrestlers standing face to face in the ring with one announcing "party's over grandpa" and the comment, which reads "CJ Stroud and Joe Flaco," compares the two quarterbacks to the wrestlers (FanDuel [@FanDuel], 2024a). Masculinity was also expressed in a text featuring an attached image of a rugged Mr. White from Breaking Bad, played by Bryan Cranston, with the comment "I Won," (BetMGM [@BetMGM], 2024e). Celebrities not affiliated with sports, like the previous text featuring an image of Bryan Cranston, also appeared in texts (N=7). One text features an attached video of Hollywood actor Michael B. Jordan (FanDuel [@FanDuel], 2021). The video shows Jordan

nodding his head in approval and is meant to show approval of the post's comment "The Panthers watching CJ Stroud be a generational QB" (FanDuel [@FanDuel], 2021). Few texts avoided referencing or mentioning sports (N=2). One text shows an attached video of a clip of Heath Ledger as the Joker saying "it's not about money, it's about making a message" while the comment read's '"Just buy Peacock.' My grandpa" (FanDuel [@FanDuel], 2024b). This meme addresses fan frustrations with Peacock. Even though the frustration with Peacock was rooted in the subscription service having exclusive access to a playoff game, no mention of sport is referenced in the text.

Discussion

This study revealed identifiable trends in memes posted on X by three American online sports betting organizations operating in the United States. The analysis revealed that the content featured in memes posted by these organizations shows efforts by the companies to create specific digital personalities that promote the existence of a participatory culture that fosters the development of a digital community, leading consumers who view this material to develop a specific social identity. The content of the memes also presents information about the consumers who view and interact with them on the X platform.

RQ 1: What types of content trends and phenomena are reflected in memes posted on social media by online sports betting organizations?
RQ 2: What does the content of memes posted on social media by online sports betting organizations identify about the organizations and the consumers of the information?
The content of the memes posted by these organizations almost always referenced sports, with non-sports content being about topics of little consequence. This indicates that both the organizations and their consumers expect a primary focus on sports-related content, avoiding significant non-sports topics. Most memes employed humor, with more than half using ridicule or mockery. This shared appreciation for humor, including humorous ridicule, suggests that the community engaging with these memes views each other as equals, not taking the ridicule as an insult or a means to establish dominance.

Memes regularly referenced recent events, which helps drive viewer interest toward important topics identified by the organizations. This consistent engagement strategy supplies companies with more opportunities to post and provides consumers with more content to interact with. The temporary nature of these references supports the concept of memes as units of information for immediate, rather than permanent, commentary. This promotes the idea that memes can be used within a participatory community to discuss minor, timely topics.

Memes often identified people by name and referenced specific topics, implying that organizations expect consumers to share an interest and knowledge of the individuals and events mentioned. This shared awareness fosters the development of a digital community. Emotional expressions in memes, such as frustration or celebration, further build this community by showing empathy and understanding from the organizations. These emotional connections demonstrate that the organizations are aware of their consumers' experiences and contribute to a sense of communal support.

Including celebrities not affiliated with sports and popular culture content broadens the appeal of memes, showing that consumers are comfortable bridging these elements with sports. The minimal use of foul language suggests companies are cautious about its potential negative impact on brand image. The frequent expression of masculinity in memes indicates that both the organizations and their consumers prefer a masculine digital persona for the X accounts. Overall, these content strategies help build a cohesive digital community around shared interests and humor.

RQ 3: What does the content of memes communicate to those who interact with them?
The content of memes fosters a sense of community among those who interact with them. This community is formed because these memes often require specific knowledge to fully understand and interpret their meanings. The sports betting organizations' communities can be identified as meme pools, where members have the deepest understanding and are best at interpreting the memes' meanings (Taylor et al., 2022). Memes reflect a participatory culture and communal coordination (Pian, 2022; Shifman, 2013b). The popularity of the memes in this study shows that consumers resonate with the content and support the organizations' use of these memes. By expressing emotions through memes, organizations show care and empathy, fostering a sense of support. When consumers like, repost, or comment on these memes, they enhance their popularity and reinforce the community bond. This process aligns with the social identity theory by Tajfel and Turner (2000), which suggests that individuals develop a collective identity based on group membership, leading to a sense of belonging, purpose, self-worth, and identity (Coombs, 2022). Participation in the digital communities on X created by these organizations supports the

building of these digital communities.

Most memes posted by these organizations are best understood when viewers have knowledge of recent events referenced in the memes. Similarly, consumers will better understand memes that identify people by name if they are familiar with the individuals mentioned. This requires consumers to have relevant knowledge, or they risk misinterpreting the memes. Understanding the context of memes leads consumers to stay aware of activities and topics that may later be featured in memes. This process gives consumers a sense of purpose and a higher sense of self-worth as they successfully interpret the memes. These concepts contribute to a sense of belonging, helping build identity and developing meme pools.

Conclusion

This study analyzed 60 popular memes posted by BetMGM, DraftKings, and FanDuel on X (formerly Twitter) in January 2024, revealing that these memes typically used humor, often through ridicule, and frequently referenced recent events and specific sports figures. The memes aimed to foster a participatory digital culture, engaging consumers by reflecting shared interests and knowledge, thereby developing a collective social identity. By addressing emotions such as frustration and celebration, the organizations demonstrated empathy and support, reinforcing the communal bond. The inclusion of popular culture references and non-sports celebrities broadened the appeal, while minimal use of foul language indicated a cautious approach to brand image. However, the study's small sample size and focus on primary accounts of only three companies limited the comprehensiveness of the findings. Future research should involve larger samples, multiple researchers, and posts from additional accounts and social media platforms to enhance accuracy and depth. Additionally, further studies could test the representative categories across different dates and other organizations within the online sports betting industry to validate and expand these findings.

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