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Fandom and activism: Experimenting with memetic communication appeals about human rights issues during the 2022 winter Olympic games

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Fandom and Activism

Experimenting with Memetic Communication Appeals About Human Rights Issues during the 2022 Winter Olympic Games

Alicia Mason, Elizabeth A. Spencer, Tricia Combs, Tanner Glenn, Isaac Lewis, Brooklyn Peterson, and Emerson Tice

Introduction

Memetic communication, or communication with memes, is a form of visual communication routinely recognized as an integral part of a participatory digital culture. The number of memes circulating on the Internet is enormous. In December 2020, Instagram alone reported that 1 million memes were shared daily on their social networking site (SNS) (Ahmed, 2020). Digital platforms have empowered individuals with access to tools such as *ImgFlip*, *Meme Generator*, and *Make a Meme* to quickly recreate, remix, and repurpose digital content that can be easily distributed and shared in Web 2.0 environments.

Spitzberg (2014) maintains that the replication and variation of Internet memes are a typical “form of innovation diffusion” (p. 316). Given this, diffusion of innovation is a popular theoretical frame for examining the spread and virality of memes. Diffusion theory posits that memes are an “innovation communicated through certain channels over time among members of a social system” (Rogers, 2003, p. 5). Viral and memetic diffusion processes have been found to be complex and distinct based on meme type and genre (e.g., political, humor, among others). Johann and Burlow (2019) characterize political memes as referring to myriad societal interests, social conflicts, and political actors. Political memes have been studied as mechanisms for social activism (Bebic & Volarevic, 2018; Harlow, 2014) and social criticism (Cepeda, 2018; Mielczarek, 2018).

In the sports context, activism is popular. In fact, scholars have posited that sports present an ideal platform for human rights and political activism and protest (Agyemang, Singer, & DeLorme, 2010; Coombs & Cassilo, 2017; Kaufman & Wolff, 2010). For the purpose of this analysis, social advocacy memes about human rights issues are experimentally tested using quantitative data analysis techniques in a global sports context (e.g., 2022 Winter Olympic Games). The aims and purpose of this experimental investigation