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Rapport Management and Disparagement in Internet Memes: A Pragmatic Analysis of Selected Political, Social, and Religious Memes

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ABSTRACT: Internet memes have become an important form of digital communication through which users express criticism, ridicule, ideological positions, and negative social evaluation. One important function of such discourse is disparagement, which may undermine the worth, credibility, identity, or social value of a target. This study examines how disparagement is relationally constructed in selected political, social, and religious internet memes through Spencer-Oatey's Rapport Management Model. It explores how meme-based disparagement threatens Quality Face, Social Identity Face, Equity Rights, and Association Rights, and whether thematic context affects the type of relational attack. A qualitative pragmatic approach is adopted using three purposively selected image-text memes, one representing each thematic category. The analysis shows that Social Identity Face is the most consistent dimension across the selected samples, whereas Quality Face becomes salient when a meme attacks competence, credibility, morality, or seriousness. Equity Rights emerge when a target is represented as undeserving of equal consideration or dignity. The study argues that Rapport Management provides a focused framework for explaining how meme-based disparagement operates not merely as insult or humor, but as an attack on personal and collective social value.

1. INTRODUCTION

Internet memes are now widely used as condensed forms of digital communication through which users circulate humor, criticism, social attitudes, and ideological positions. Their combination of concise verbal expressions with recognizable visual material enables complex evaluations to be communicated in forms that are easily reproduced and shared. Shifman (2013) argues that memes are not merely isolated digital objects but groups of related texts that circulate through imitation, modification, and user participation. Memes can therefore function as resources for public evaluation as well as entertainment.

One significant evaluative function performed by memes is disparagement. In this study, disparagement refers to an explicit or implicit negative evaluative representation that lowers the perceived worth, credibility, status, legitimacy, competence, or social acceptability of an identifiable or reasonably inferable target. Such a target may be an individual, group, institution, belief, ideology, practice, or social behavior. Disparagement may occur through ridicule, derogatory comparison, stereotyping, devaluation, or other forms of negative representation and does not necessarily depend on overt humor.

Previous studies have commonly examined disparagement in relation to prejudice, humor, gender stereotyping, and online backlash. Ford and Ferguson (2004), for example, demonstrate that disparagement humor can create a temporary social environment in which prejudicial responses become more acceptable. Iqbal et al. (2020) show that humorous representations

of wives on social media can sustain gender-based stereotypes and denigration. Bae et al. (2021) demonstrate that online discourse can circulate disparaging narratives that undermine collective movements and identities.

Although such studies explain important social consequences of disparagement, comparatively less attention has been given to what aspect of a target's relational value is attacked. A disparaging meme may damage an individual's competence or moral character, devalue a collective social identity, or imply that a target is undeserving of equitable treatment. This study therefore focuses on the relational construction of disparagement through Spencer-Oatey's (2000) Rapport Management Model. Rather than applying a broad multimodal framework, the present article adopts Rapport Management as its sole analytical lens in order to compare political, social, and religious examples within a focused pragmatic account.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Disparagement in Digital Meme Discourse

Disparagement may be realized directly through insulting or derogatory language, but it can also operate indirectly through stereotypes, symbolic associations, negative comparisons, irony, or context-dependent evaluation. Rossolova (2020) relates disparagement or discrediting to communicative behavior that undermines a target's reputation and produces negative evaluative effects.

Digital memes provide a particularly productive environment for such representations because targets may be evaluated both as individuals and as members of broader social categories. A political figure, for example, may be mocked not only because of personal qualities but also because of the authority associated with a political role. Similarly, memes targeting gender, religion, class, or ideology may devalue whole groups rather than individual persons.

Ford and Ferguson's (2004) work on disparagement humor shows that negative group evaluation may be normalized through humorous framing. Iqbal et al. (2020) likewise demonstrate that social-media humor can reproduce gender-based denigration, while Bae et al. (2021) show that disparaging narratives may undermine collective social movements. These studies indicate that disparagement is not simply an individual insult; it frequently involves social positioning and group-based evaluation.

2.2 Spencer-Oatey's Rapport Management Model

Spencer-Oatey's (2000) Rapport Management Model was developed to explain the relational dimensions of communication. Instead of treating interpersonal communication solely through traditional politeness, the model focuses on the management of harmony and disharmony in social interaction. It distinguishes between face management and sociality rights management.

Face management includes Quality Face and Social Identity Face. Quality Face concerns the desire to be positively evaluated in terms of personal characteristics such as competence, credibility, morality, appearance, or judgment. A disparaging representation threatens Quality Face when it portrays a target as incompetent, dishonest, irrational, immoral, ridiculous, or otherwise deficient. Social Identity Face concerns the positive social value associated with recognized roles, identities, affiliations, and memberships. It is threatened when a meme devalues a target specifically as a politician, member of a social class, religious group, gendered group, or other socially recognizable category.

Sociality rights include Equity Rights and Association Rights. Equity Rights concern expectations of fair and appropriate treatment and may be threatened when a target is represented as undeserving of equal consideration or dignity. Association Rights concern appropriate levels of interactional and affective involvement. In the present article, these four dimensions are used to identify the particular aspect of relational value damaged by each disparaging meme.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative pragmatic design. The data are drawn from the larger dissertation corpus, but only three purposively selected image-text memes are used here in order to provide focused and detailed analysis. One meme represents each thematic category: a political meme, a social meme, and a religious meme.

The selected samples are Political Meme 4, "Vladimir Putin"; Social Meme 7, "The rich be like 'sacrifices for thee but not for me'"; and Religious Meme 5, "Muslim Women as Garbage Bags." The samples were selected because each provides a clear instance of disparagement and allows comparison across different Rapport Management dimensions.

The analysis asks whether the disparaging representation threatens Quality Face, Social Identity Face, Equity Rights, or Association Rights. More than one category may be identified in the same meme when the evidence supports overlapping threats. The visual material is considered only when necessary to interpret the relational meaning of the meme; no separate visual, appraisal, presupposition, metaphor, or discourse theory is applied.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Political Disparagement: “Vladimir Bootin”



Figure 1. Political sample: “Vladimir Bootin”

Source: Immvay2fried (2026), Reddit; reproduced as presented in the dissertation.

The political sample represents a recognizable public political figure whose face is visually combined with a boot, while the caption modifies the name into the pun “Vladimir Bootin.” The combined verbal-visual representation transforms political authority into an absurd object of ridicule.

From the perspective of Rapport Management, the meme threatens both Quality Face and Social Identity Face. Quality Face is threatened because the image and wordplay attack the target’s dignity, seriousness, and personal public image. Social Identity Face is also threatened because the target is recognizable through a public political role. Reducing the political figure to an inanimate and comic object undermines the social value associated with that role.

This example demonstrates that political disparagement may operate simultaneously at the personal and role-based levels. The individual is mocked, but the attack also reduces the dignity attached to a socially recognized position of authority.

4.2 Social Disparagement: “The Rich”



Figure 2. Social sample: class-based disparagement of “the rich”

Source: freibad-pommes (2026), Reddit; reproduced as presented in the dissertation.

The social sample contrasts two reactions. In the first, “the rich” are represented as comfortable with asking ordinary people to reduce spending on groceries. In the second, the same social group reacts negatively when asked to reduce expenditure on luxury yachts.

Rapport Management analysis identifies both Social Identity Face and Quality Face. Social Identity Face is central because the target is explicitly defined as “the rich,” a social class rather than a particular individual. At the same time, Quality Face is threatened because the meme attributes negative moral characteristics to members of the group, representing them as hypocritical, selfish, and unwilling to accept the sacrifices they expect from others.

The example illustrates how social disparagement can combine collective categorization with character evaluation. The social identity establishes the target, while the attribution of hypocrisy and self-interest intensifies its devaluation.

4.3 Religious Disparagement: “Muslim Women as Garbage Bags”



Figure 3. Religious sample: “Muslim Women as Garbage Bags”

Source: J. Piva (2026), Facebook; reproduced as presented in the dissertation.

The religious sample places Muslim women and black garbage bags in direct comparison and verbally characterizes them as “disposable garbage.” The disparagement is directed toward Muslim women collectively as a religious and gendered social group.

The strongest relational attack concerns Social Identity Face because the group is devalued on the basis of collective identity. The comparison lowers the social and human value associated with that identity and reduces group members to disposable objects. The meme also threatens Equity Rights because the term “disposable” implies that the targeted group is undeserving of equal consideration or humane treatment.

A distinct Quality Face threat is not necessary in this sample because the meme does not evaluate an independently identifiable woman’s competence, honesty, or personal morality. Instead, the negative evaluation is attached directly to group membership. The example therefore illustrates a strong form of identity-based disparagement in which social-group membership itself becomes the basis for devaluation.

4.4 Comparative Discussion

Comparison of the three samples shows that disparagement does not threaten relational value in a uniform way. The political meme combines an attack on individual qualities with an attack on the public identity associated with political authority. The social meme likewise combines collective identity with negative moral evaluation, but its target is a social class rather than an individually identifiable person.

The religious sample differs more strongly because its derogatory force is directed primarily toward collective identity and equal social worth. Across the three samples, Social Identity Face is therefore the most consistent dimension. Quality Face becomes relevant when disparagement attributes negative characteristics such as ridiculousness, hypocrisy, or lack of seriousness, while Equity Rights become relevant when devaluation implies denial of equal moral consideration.

Association Rights do not play a central role in these examples because the memes are not mainly concerned with interpersonal closeness, involvement, or participation. Their principal function is evaluative: they lower the personal or social value of their targets. This supports the broader observation that meme-based disparagement is frequently identity-oriented and that Rapport Management can distinguish the specific relational dimension under attack.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the relational construction of disparagement in three selected political, social, and religious internet memes through Spencer-Oatey's Rapport Management Model. The analysis shows that disparagement may operate through overlapping threats to personal quality, social identity, and equitable treatment.

Social Identity Face is the most consistent dimension across the selected samples because each meme devalues a target in relation to a socially recognizable role or group membership. Quality Face becomes salient when the meme additionally attributes negative personal characteristics such as ridiculousness, hypocrisy, or moral inconsistency. Equity Rights become relevant when the representation suggests that a target is undeserving of equal consideration or dignity.

The findings suggest that meme-based disparagement should not be understood simply as insult or humorous mockery. It can function as a relational act that damages the personal or collective social value through which targets are publicly recognized. Rapport Management is useful in this respect because it distinguishes what is being undermined: individual quality, collective identity, equitable treatment, or relational association.

Because the present article uses only three purposively selected examples, its conclusions are analytical rather than statistically generalizable. Nevertheless, the focused comparison demonstrates how Rapport Management can be applied to digital meme discourse and provides a basis for broader future studies across larger, multilingual, or cross-platform datasets.

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