

# A Relevance Theoretic Analysis of English Image Macro Memes on Drugs and Addiction

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## Abstract

This paper discusses how humour and meaning are created in English image macro memes on drugs and addiction. The memes that are referred to in this paper are internet image macro memes which are supported by texts, usually satirical or funny, and that are found on social media platforms. Twenty memes were collected from the internet and analysed using Yus's (2021) incongruity-resolution model. This model is based on Relevance Theory by Sperber & Wilson (1995); it is a pragmatic theory that claims that people's minds tend to select the most relevant information while exerting the least mental effort. The present study aims to observe how these memes make people laugh, and more significantly, how they also carry deeper or hidden messages. The analysis focuses on how each meme generates a certain cognitive frame, then breaks it in a surprising or funny way, and how viewers mentally resolve that surprise (incongruity). The findings show that this model helps explain how people understand and enjoy memes, especially when the message depends on both language and image. The paper concludes that this kind of humour can raise awareness of serious topics like drug addiction, while also entertaining the audience. Additionally, internet users share memes to comment on sensitive topics without being directly responsible for what they say.

**Keywords:** cyberpragmatics, digital culture, drug-related memes, image macro memes, implicatures, incongruity-resolution, relevance theory.

## Introduction

Memes have recently become a major component of online communication among internet users. They are shared on Instagram, Facebook, and other social media platforms, often for the sake of spreading humour. But memes are not just for entertainment; they reflect social opinions, personal attitudes, ideologies, and even sensitive issues like addiction or criminal behaviour. Memes about drug use or addiction might seem funny at first glance; however, many of them contain deeper meanings or hidden messages. These meanings can relate to how people feel about drugs, how society sees addiction, or how drug users cope with their experiences. This makes memes a valuable subject of study, especially when humour and serious topics come together (Shifman, 2014).

Previous studies on memes have focused on different aspects of memes. To name a few, the study *Internet Memes and Desensitization* (Sanchez, 2020) focused on the negative impact of memes on their viewers in terms of trivialising serious matters. Another important study is the article *EFL Students' Interpretation of Implicature and Gender Representation in Memes* (Nugroho & Liemantara, 2024); this article explores how EFL students interpret the implicatures that conceal hidden messages and ideologies within memes. Another study is *Meme language, its impact on digital culture and collective thinking* (Petrova, 2021); this study discusses how meme language influences digital culture, identity, and collective thinking. It argues that memes are not mere jokes; they act as cultural symbols that shape how people communicate online.

While many studies examine meme formats and templates, social trends, gender-related humour, or the ideologies that memes carry, this study offers a deeper look into how internet memes use humour to communicate ideas about drugs and addiction among internet users. Furthermore, it explores how the seriousness of drug use is trivialised through memes. It also demonstrates the strength of Yus's model, which is based on Relevance Theory, in explaining meme comprehension from a pragmatic perspective. To the best of the researcher's current knowledge, there is no study that focuses on image macro drug-related memes and the incongruity-resolution model. Thus, the present study seeks to fill this gap in the body of literature. This paper seeks to answer the following questions: 1- How does humour in drug-related image macro memes rely on incongruity and its resolution? 2- What kinds of implicit or cultural meanings do these memes convey? 3- How does the incongruity-resolution model help explain the structure and interpretation of these memes?

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## Literature Review

### Pragmatics, Cyberpragmatics, and Implicatures in Memes

Pragmatics is a subfield of linguistics that focuses on how meaning is produced and interpreted in a specific context (Levinson, 1983). According to Mey (2001), a pragmatic implicature is something that is implied (hidden) in a conversation or text that should be inferred to be understood. Grice states in his Cooperative Principle (1975) that for a conversation to be effective, speakers should follow four maxims: the maxim of quality (be truthful), the maxim of quantity (provide the needed amount of information), the maxim of relation (be relevant), and the maxim of manner (be clear and orderly). When these maxims are flouted in a conversation, for example, when the speaker gives irrelevant or obviously false information, the listener naturally starts searching for the implied meaning behind this apparent violation of the maxims. This violation creates a conversational implicature. Thus, in internet memes, such a violation generates an ironic or sarcastic effect when the viewer recognises the hidden message behind the implicature in the meme.

In 2001, Francisco Yus introduced *cyberpragmatics*, which is the adaptation of traditional pragmatic principles in online communication. According to Yus (2011), in online communication (except for video calls), most of the non-verbal communication cues are missing, such as body language, tone of voice, and hand gestures. On the internet, users depend heavily on inference and shared knowledge. According to Alsabbah (2020), when people communicate online and want to convey sympathy or sincere emotions, they tend to write lengthy messages to compensate for the absence of non-verbal cues in online settings. The human brain is naturally designed to focus on what is most relevant in the message we process. Thus, netizens should access as much contextual information as they can in order to infer the intended message. It should be noted that cyberpragmatics is primarily based on Relevance Theory, which is one of the foundational theories in pragmatics (Yus, 2011).

Memos rely heavily on implicatures; they are full of hidden meanings that require good pragmatic competence and cultural knowledge to interpret them. That is, if someone fails to decode the implicature of a meme, they will not find it funny. To effectively interpret a meme, one should understand its visual and textual features, cultural references, and any hidden meanings or background information that contribute to the understanding of its ultimate message (Nugroho & Liemantara, 2024).

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## Relevance Theory and Cognitive Effects

Relevance Theory (RT, henceforth) is a theory in pragmatics that was proposed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson in 1986. It builds on Grice's Cooperative Principle to explain how and why people seek the most relevant information with the least mental effort. According to Sperber and Wilson (1995), a message is considered relevant to a person if it provides a positive cognitive effect; that is, it adds something new to their knowledge or confirms what they already know with as little effort as possible. RT argues that human cognition is naturally designed to seek relevance; it is geared to select the most relevant stimulus available that requires the least cognitive effort to process.

RT is based on one of Grice's central claims in pragmatics, which states that utterances that people produce yield expectations in the listeners' minds. These expectations lead listeners to the speaker's meaning, i.e., what piece of information the speaker intends to convey with their utterance. To interpret an utterance, the listener must choose the most likely interpretation that satisfies the expected meaning of the speaker's utterance. In other words, for an utterance to be considered relevant and interpreted effectively, it should generate precise expectations in the listener's mind that lead them to the intended meaning.

Memes are multimodal discourses that require their viewers to understand both their visual and textual elements to interpret them effectively. According to Jameel (2022), in multimodal discourses, the meaning does not rely solely on the linguistic and semiotic elements of the discourse, but also on the cultural, social, and ideological background information implied in that discourse. Thus, to achieve a positive cognitive effect and understand the implied message of a meme, the viewer should be aware of all of this background information.

As previously discussed, memes are full of implicatures that require their viewer to infer the meaning by relying on their linguistic and pragmatic competence. Since memes normally do not provide explicit details, the viewer should embark on a journey of searching for relevance to fully interpret the meme. In relevance-theoretic terms, this journey is called *ostensive-inferential communication*. If the viewer understands the hidden meaning or the joke behind the meme, a positive cognitive effect is achieved, and the meme is found funny, clever, or insightful. If the viewer fails to do so, they will be puzzled and will not grasp the intended message.

## Internet Memes as Cultural and Communicative Tools

In recent years, memes have become an integral part of the content shared online. Netizens<sup>1</sup> create and share memes online as digital jokes. However, memes are not shared solely for the sake of humour; people also use memes to express ideologies, criticise governments or social groups, or hint at sensitive topics without accountability. According to Shifman (2014), internet memes are groups of digital items that share common characteristics and are created with awareness of each other. While being transmitted, internet memes may be remixed or reshaped to target different audiences and align with various cultural features. It should be noted that image macro memes are a specific kind of meme that consists of upper and lower texts and an image in the middle.

Despite the recent popularity of internet memes, the concept is not new at all. In 1976, Richard Dawkins, the British biologist, coined the word “meme” to describe a unit of cultural transmission that spreads from person to person through imitation. In his book *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins introduced “meme” as the cultural analogy of “gene” (Dawkins, 1976). In this respect, memes can refer to various cultural nuances, such as clothing style, catchphrases, and even abstract beliefs (Shifman, 2014).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The main analytical framework used in this paper is Francisco Yus’s Incongruity-Resolution Model (2021), which was developed specifically to analyse humour in image macro memes. This model builds on the foundations of Relevance Theory and Incongruity Theory and focuses on how memes create cognitive effects by generating an incongruity (contradiction) between the image and the text of the meme. To interpret the meme, the viewer should infer the implied message and resolve the incongruity by relying on their linguistic knowledge, pragmatic competence, meme literacy, and background knowledge. The analysis of the data in this study aims to uncover the inferential processes and the exerted mental effort that make each meme relevant and humorous to its intended audience.

Yus (2021) proposed a taxonomy to analyse the humour in memes. This taxonomy is based on two key parameters, namely the type of incongruity and the role the image of the meme plays in resolving the incongruity. The types of incongruity in this model are:

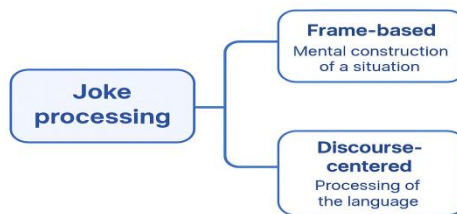
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<sup>1</sup> According to Cambridge English Dictionary, a netizen is a person who uses the internet. The word is a blend of the two words “internet” and “citizen”.

**Frame-based incongruity:** This type relies on the mental frame that the viewer of the meme builds up while viewing the meme. The incongruity is resolved when the viewer realises that the mental frame, i.e., the general idea, they adopted about the meme was wrong and should be altered.

**Discourse-based incongruity:** The type of incongruity here is totally text-driven. That is, it plays on linguistic features, such as pun, ambiguity, homophony, etc., to manipulate the viewer. To resolve the incongruity and achieve the humorous effect, the viewer should recognise these linguistic features. It should be noted that the incongruity in this type stems from the contradiction between the upper and lower texts; the image usually aligns with either the top or the bottom text.

**Discourse-image-based incongruity:** This type combines both of the previous two; the incongruity arises due to a clash between the texts and the image of the meme, rather than between the upper and lower texts. The viewer should rely on their background knowledge and derive some implicatures to resolve the incongruity and achieve the intended humorous effect. According to Yus (2021), this type is the most common one in image macro memes, which is reasonable since image macro memes generally encompass both visual and textual elements.



*Figure 1.* Joke processing in the incongruity-resolution model

The other parameter in this model is the role that the images of the memes play in the incongruity-resolution (IR, henceforth) strategy. The role the image plays ranges between: no role, the image aids, and the image is essential. Note that this distinction applies only to types (a) and (b) above, since in type (c) the image is always essential (Yus, 2021). Below is a table that summarises the combination of these parameters.

**Table 1***The IR Strategy in Image Macro Memes* (Yus, 2021, p. 6)

|   | <b>Type of incongruity</b> | <b>Role of image</b> |
|---|----------------------------|----------------------|
| 1 | Frame-based                | Image plays no role  |
| 2 | Frame-based                | Image aids           |
| 3 | Frame-based                | Image is essential   |
| 4 | Discourse-image-based      | Image is essential   |
| 5 | Discourse-based            | Image plays no role  |
| 6 | Discourse-based            | Image aids           |
| 7 | Discourse-based            | Image is essential   |

As indicated earlier, Yus's model is based on Relevance Theory: a theory that is concerned with how human beings exert mental effort to make sense of every single piece of information they encounter. Yus's model posits that memes usually rely on incongruity that arises from the clash between the verbal and visual elements of the meme to make the viewers surprised, and hence laugh, when they exert the needed mental effort to resolve that incongruity.

### **Methodology**

This paper adopts a qualitative approach, supported by counts and percentages of how many times each category has emerged, to examine how humour functions in drug-related image macro memes. Through a relevance-theoretic lens, the paper aims to investigate the relationship between cognitive effects and incongruity as an essential strategy in meme production. The data for this paper consists of 20 drug-related memes that are publicly available and were collected through a Google search using keywords such as drug memes and addiction memes, which generated a large number of results. The 20 memes were selected purposively, as the selection was made according to specific criteria: all of

them are in English and have a clear structure, good image quality, a humorous tone, and relevance to the topic of drugs and addiction. The selection was not affected by the analytical framework at this stage. The analytical framework was applied at the analysis stage only.

## Data Analysis

This section presents a qualitative analysis of 20 English image macro memes that deal with the theme of drugs and addiction. Using Yus's (2021) incongruity-resolution model, the analysis explores how the incongruity is resolved and the humour is achieved in each meme. Each meme will be analysed individually. That is, each meme will be followed by a breakdown describing the visual and textual elements in the meme and the IR strategy adopted to create the humorous effect. It should be noted that most of the memes analysed below might have more than one possible interpretation; each meme may be seen differently and attributed to different IR cases by different people. However, the analysis of each meme below was based on the researcher's best knowledge and opinion.

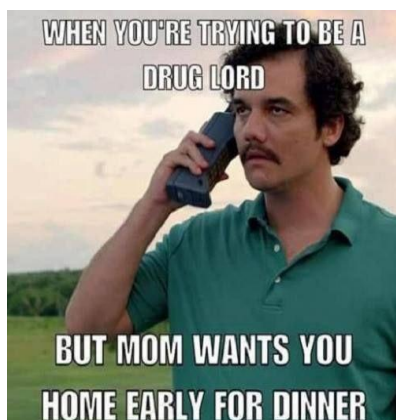
### Meme 1/



In this meme, the incongruity stems from the contradiction between the upper and lower texts. That is, the top text describes a serious situation that leads the viewer to build up a specific mental frame, concluding that the person in the meme will get arrested sooner or later. The lower text confirms the viewer's speculation; the person in the meme gets arrested, but for a much more trivial reason, which is downloading music illegally. This contradiction is the source of humour. Thus, the resolution of the incongruity relies on the viewer building up a new mental frame that matches the sarcasm of the situation to achieve the humorous effect. To resolve the incongruity, the viewer should recognise the irony

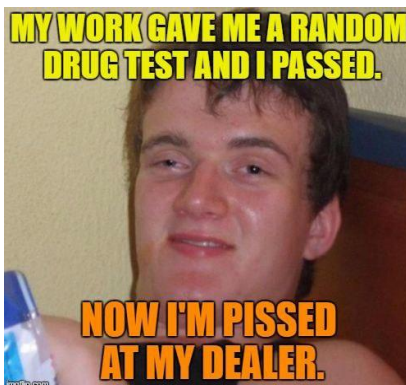
and the misplaced justice of someone living among drug dealers who has not been arrested for a drug-related crime but for a much less important reason, which is music piracy. Nevertheless, the image aids the viewer in resolving the incongruity, especially with the character's sarcastic smile. Despite that, the image is not essential here, and the meme is still understandable without it. Hence, this meme fits the category of frame-based incongruity where the image aids in the IR strategy.

### **Meme 2/**



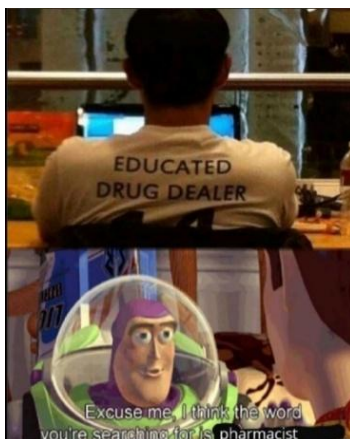
This meme shows a sharp contradiction between the two ideas stated in the texts. The upper text describes someone who is trying to be a drug lord, which leads the viewer to think of someone dangerous, autonomous, and powerful. Then, the lower text destroys the initial frame the viewer had in mind, suggesting that this person is still under parental control; an idea that is totally incompatible with being a drug lord. This incompatibility is the source of humour that the viewer should recognise to resolve the incongruity. Nevertheless, the humour is not only based on the two contrasting ideas; it is deeply linked to the image of the meme. The image is taken from the series *Narcos*, showing the actor who played the role of Pablo Escobar, the well-known Colombian drug dealer. To fully resolve the incongruity, the viewer should recognise the character and its cultural reference; otherwise, the absurd and incompatible upper and lower texts would not be effective enough to stand alone. Although some people may think that the image only aids in the IR strategy, I argue that this meme falls under the category of frame-based incongruity where the image is essential in the IR strategy.

### **Meme 3/**



Here, the incongruity, and hence the humour, arises from the unexpected reaction of someone who has just passed a drug test. The mental frame the viewer builds while reading the upper text is that the person should be happy that he passed the drug test. Despite that, the lower text violates this expectation, showing that this person is upset with his drug dealer. He thinks that since he passed the drug test, his dealer is deceiving him by selling him drugs of very low quality. This unexpected logic is the source of the incongruity. The image of the stoned person in the meme reinforces the frame of drug use; however, it is not essential, and the viewer may still be able to resolve the incongruity without it. Therefore, the case here is frame-based incongruity where the image aids in the IR strategy.

#### Meme 4/

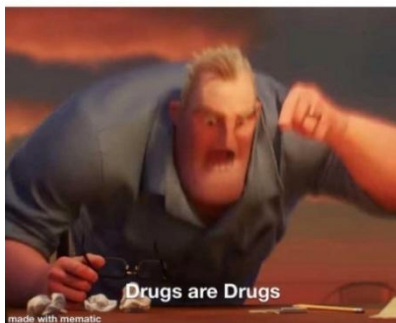


This meme consists of two panels, which is not the usual format of image macro memes. However, the two panels complete each other, so they may be considered as one. The upper panel consists of a person wearing a T-shirt that says "Educated Drug Dealer", and this phrase on his T-shirt functions as the upper text. The phrase obviously refers to the fact that he is a pharmacist, someone who sells

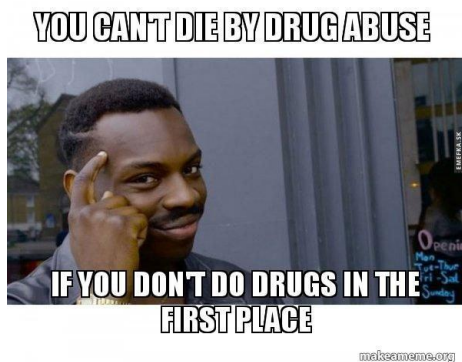
medical drugs, in a rather humorous way. This juxtaposition of two different frames is the source of incongruity. That is, the word “educated” is culturally and logically incompatible with being a drug dealer. The incongruity is resolved upon reading the punchline in the second panel, when the cartoon character Buzz Lightyear sarcastically corrects the phrase in the first panel. Considering the two panels as one image, the image in this meme is essential, since both the incongruity and its resolution depend on the visual elements in the two panels. Hence, this meme falls under the IR case of frame-based incongruity where the image is essential in the IR strategy.

### Meme 5/

Me: On my 5th coffee of the day  
 Mom: You know caffeine is a drug  
 Me: Its not a bad kind of drug  
 Mom:



The upper text of this meme is a conversation between a person and their mom, arguing about the possible harmful effects of excessive coffee consumption. The initial frame is a normal conversation between a person and their mom. The bottom text shows that the mother thinks that all kinds of drugs should be considered serious. This mismatch in frames and the radical change in tone are the source of incongruity. To resolve the incongruity, the viewer must rely on their background knowledge to derive an implicature: that parents usually adopt extreme judgments or opinions to protect their children. The image of the cartoon character is essential in this meme; it manifests the mother’s exaggerated reaction while saying “drugs are drugs”, and without it, the meme would lose most of its effect. Thus, this meme fits the category of frame-based incongruity where the image is essential in the IR strategy.

**Meme 6/**

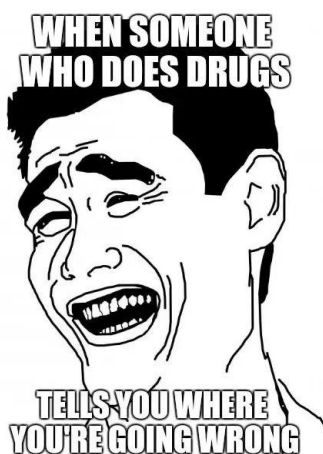
In this meme, the source of incongruity is the clash between two different cognitive frames described by the two texts. The upper text sets up a serious health frame, suggesting that drug use is a fatal path to follow. The viewer would expect a piece of advice in the lower text, yet not such a literal and oversimplified piece of advice. The humour is achieved when the viewer recognises the absurdity of the situation. That is, if you do not want to die because of drug abuse, do not consume them in the first place. Despite the fact that the image is not essential and the meme can be interpreted without it, it adds a lot to the humour of the whole meme. The gesture of the character reinforces the irony of an overly simplified logic. So, this meme fits the category of frame-based incongruity where the image aids in the IR strategy.

**Meme 7/**

The main source of incongruity in this meme is the contrasting frames of the two texts. The upper text suggests a standard mental frame of a police officer

asking a routine question. The lower text is a naive statement uttered by the driver, suggesting that he mistakenly interpreted the officer's question as an offer. The incongruity is resolved when the viewer realises this contradiction between the two frames, and how foolishly and innocently the driver confessed to the possession of illegal substances. The image is essential here; it provides the needed contextual frame for the conversation between the officer and the driver. If it were removed, most of the humour of the meme would be lost and the viewer may need to exert extra mental effort to grasp the humour. Thus, this meme fits the category of frame-based incongruity where the image is essential in the IR strategy.

### Meme 8/



The incongruity in this meme is a textbook case of frame-based incongruity. It relies on the contradiction between the idea of giving advice, which is naturally positive, and the kind of person who is giving the advice; generally, you would not expect a drug addict to offer life advice. The viewer may resolve the incongruity by noticing the sarcastic paradox between the two frames. In other words, a drug addict is not someone typically seen as wise enough to advise others about their lifestyle. The image is not essential; the viewer is able to notice the sarcasm by reading the texts only. However, the character's sarcastic smile may reduce the mental effort required to interpret the meme. In this respect, this meme aligns with the IR case of frame-based incongruity where the image aids in the IR strategy.

**Meme 9/**

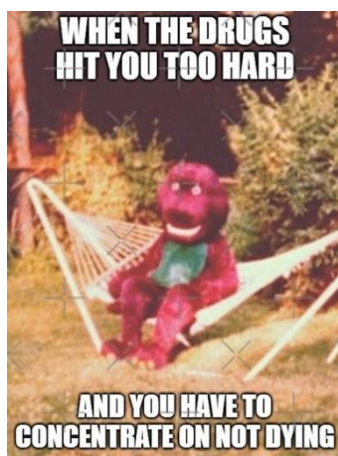
In this meme, the incongruity comes from the surprising idea of treating heroin consumption as a normal behaviour in everyone's daily life. The warning sign does not address something serious like drug use; it only cares about a much less serious issue, which is where the waste goes. There are not two texts; there is only one, but it is split into upper and lower halves to deliver the absurdity of the meme. The viewer recognises the incongruity upon reading the text and seeing the image simultaneously. The image is an integral part of the whole mental frame built upon viewing the meme. Without it, the text cannot deliver this surprising idea of normalising drug use on its own. Hence, this meme falls under the category of frame-based incongruity where the image is essential in the IR strategy.

**Meme 10/**

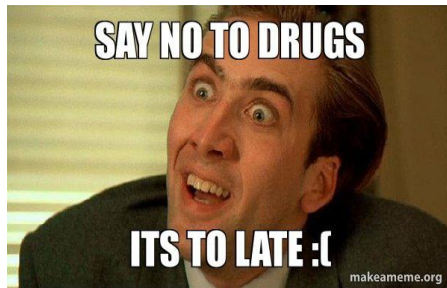
As previously mentioned, in a discourse-image-based incongruity case, the image is always essential. In this case, the incongruity and its resolution rely on the clash between the context of the text and the context of the image. That is, the act of

texting a drug dealer is neither funny nor surprising enough to be funny. What makes this meme humorous is the juxtaposition of the act of texting a drug dealer with the image of an innocent baby showing a victorious gesture. In other words, the creator of this meme is trying to say that they are happy or excited that they are going to buy some drugs. The viewer should recognise this bizarre juxtaposition in order to resolve the incongruity and achieve the humorous effect. Therefore, the image is essential for this meme to be humorous; without it, the text would be just a normal statement. Thus, this meme is a textbook example of discourse-image-based incongruity.

### **Meme 11/**



This meme exhibits a frame-based incongruity in which the image is essential for both the emergence of incongruity and its resolution. The upper and lower texts of the meme activate the mental frame of someone who is heavily under the influence of drugs. The blurry, strange image of Barney, the children's show character, visually showcases the case of overdosing. The contradiction between a dangerous experience like severe drug abuse and the presence of the children's character in this context is the source of incongruity. The incongruity is resolved when the viewer notices the silliness of this contradiction. In other words, using Barney as if he were the drug user undergoing such a serious experience is what makes this meme funny and disturbing at the same time. That is, the image is essential, and without it, the meme would not be as effective. Thus, this meme falls under the category of frame-based incongruity, where the image is essential in the IR strategy.

**Meme 12/**

This meme presents two conflicting cognitive frames. The first line suggests the frame of health advice, which is “say no to drugs”, a common slogan used in anti-drug campaigns. The second line, though misspelled, radically shifts the context. It reveals that the speaker is already an addict and past the point of avoiding drug use. The use of the emoticon “:(” reinforces the sad tone conveyed by the lower text. These colliding frames are the source of incongruity. The image of Nicolas Cage, the well-known American actor, is essential for the incongruity to be resolved. His exaggerated facial expression visually represents the manner in which the statement “It’s too late” is being said. That is, the viewer needs the image to understand that this meme represents dark humour, not just a fact about the speaker. The meme indirectly advises people to avoid drugs before it is too late. Hence, this meme may be subsumed under the category of frame-based incongruity where the image is essential in the IR strategy.

**Meme 13/**

Upon reading the top text and viewing the image, everything seems normal; both of them serve the same mental frame: a person seems to enjoy his morning coffee as a normal daily routine. When the viewer reads the bottom text, the whole mental frame previously adopted falls apart. That is, it is quite abnormal and unhealthy for someone to be awake for eight days; it is a clear indication of drug abuse, for which hyperstimulation is a common side effect. The clash between these

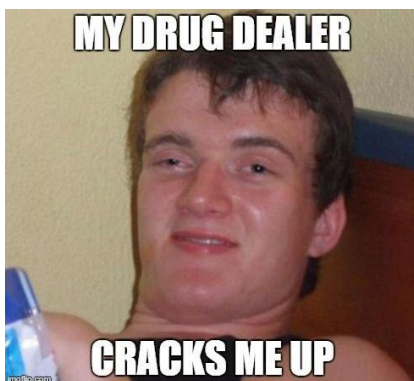
two frames is the source of incongruity. The viewer manages to resolve the incongruity by understanding the mismatch between the image and the upper text on the one hand, and the lower text on the other. The image of the person smelling coffee is needed for both the incongruity and its resolution; it is essential for the meme to work effectively. That is why this meme best fits the IR case of frame-based incongruity where the image is essential in the IR strategy.

#### **Meme 14/**



The humour in this meme is based on the misinterpretation of the setup phrase “Drug test?”; it typically suggests the frame of someone being tested to check for drug consumption. However, the bottom text evokes a different frame, as if the test is for the drugs themselves, not for a person who is possibly using drugs. The speaker is either unaware of the meaning of the question or deliberately misinterpreting it. This misinterpretation creates incongruity; it forces the viewer to rethink the idea of a drug test, looking for a less relevant interpretation. In relevance-theoretic terms, the viewer should ignore the first relevant interpretation and spend more mental effort to resolve the incongruity and achieve the humorous effect. The image of the obviously stoned woman is not essential for the viewer to get the joke, yet it reinforces the idea that the speaker is clearly under the influence of drugs. Thus, this meme falls under the category of discourse-based incongruity where the image aids in the IR strategy.

#### **Meme15/**



This meme follows almost exactly the same pattern as the previous one. The incongruity and its resolution are totally text-driven; both memes rely on linguistic features to create a humorous effect. However, in this meme, the incongruity arises from the ambiguity of the punchline “cracks me up”. This phrase has two possible interpretations: the first one suggests that the person in the meme is trying to say that his drug dealer makes him laugh, which is the most relevant interpretation. The second and less relevant interpretation implies that his dealer gives him drugs. This interpretation relies on the slang use of the word “crack”, which refers to drugs. The viewer is able to resolve the incongruity and achieve the humorous effect if they are familiar with the double meaning of the phrase “cracks me up”; they should access to the two interpretations simultaneously. This makes the image of the clearly stoned person helpful in guiding the viewer towards the intended interpretation, but not essential for the incongruity to be resolved. Hence, this meme may be subsumed under the category of discourse-based incongruity where the image aids in the IR strategy.

### Meme 16/



This meme represents a textbook case of discourse-image-based incongruity. The upper and lower texts are compatible with each other. That is, they both serve the idea of someone trying to say that he is not a drug addict and can

stop consuming drugs at any time he wants. Such a statement is a denial that is often used by people who are actually addicted and cannot control themselves. What makes this statement an obvious lie is the image of the meme, specifically the hand gestures of the character in the image. These hand gestures are usually associated with something ironic or insincere. The incongruity lies in the contradiction between the utterance and the hand gestures; this makes the image not only essential for the incongruity to be resolved but also for it to emerge in the first place. That is why this meme fits the category of discourse-image-based incongruity.

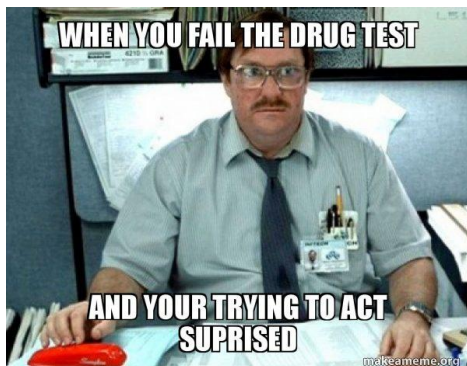
### **Meme 17/**

When my parents ask why I'm  
always gaming



The incongruous element in this meme lies in the clash between the cognitive frames depicted in the upper and lower texts. The upper text describes the problem of excessive gaming from the speaker's parents' point of view. The lower text represents the argument of the speaker, in which gaming is framed as the lesser of two evils. The speaker is making such an exaggerated comparison to defend her gaming habit, claiming that gaming is much less dangerous than drug use. This logical fallacy is the source of incongruity, which the viewer can resolve easily by noticing how silly such a comparison is. The image aids in resolving the incongruity; the facial expression of the speaker aids the viewer in realising that her statement is hyperbolic. However, it is not essential since the incongruity can still be resolved and the humorous effect achieved without it. Thus, this meme fits the category of frame-based incongruity where the image aids in the IR strategy.

### **Meme 18/**



In this meme, both the upper and lower texts serve the same idea and create one coherent scenario. The discourse activates the cognitive frame of someone who has just failed a drug test, which means he has been consuming drugs, and is trying to deny this fact by acting surprised. Shifting attention to the image reveals that the character obviously fails to act as if he were surprised. Instead, he looks like someone who is scared or speechless. This mismatch between the frame represented by the discourse and the one represented by the image is the source of incongruity; the viewer should recognise this mismatch in order to resolve the incongruity and grasp the humour. Otherwise, the viewer would be puzzled and would not understand why this meme is funny. Hence, this meme best fits the category of discourse-image-based incongruity.

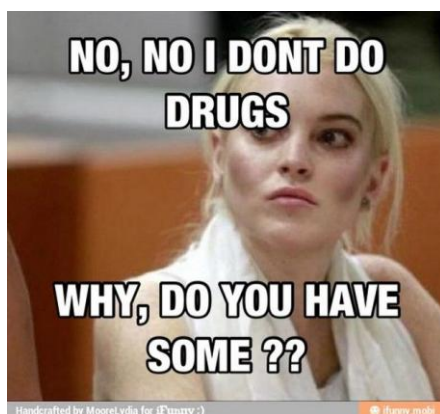
#### Meme 19/



The incongruity in this meme stems from a linguistic misunderstanding. The question “How high are you?” is another form of the question “Are you high?”, which is a slang question people use to ask if a person is under the influence of drugs. The speaker in this meme misinterpreted the question and thought it was a question about his height, i.e., how tall he is. Thus, he responded with “5’11”.

trying to tell his height in the American system of measurement (U.S. Customary System). This misinterpretation generates an incongruity that can be resolved by recognising the linguistic mismatch. The viewer needs to reanalyse the question and the response to understand the misinterpretation and achieve the intended humorous effect. The image of the meme aids the viewer in resolving the incongruity. That is, the character is obviously under the influence of drugs (he is high), which may be the reason why he misunderstood the question. However, the image is not essential, and the meme may still function without it. Thus, this meme falls under the category of discourse-based incongruity where the image aids in the IR strategy.

### Meme 20/



In this meme, the source of incongruity is the contradiction between two mental frames. Upon reading the top text, the viewer will adopt the frame of denial; that is, the woman in the meme is not a drug addict. This initial frame is disrupted by the lower text, a question that indicates her interest in drugs; otherwise, she would not ask such a question. The viewer needs to recognise these two contrasting frames to resolve the incongruity and grasp the humour. The image of the woman in the meme aids the viewer in resolving the incongruity; her dazed expression indicates that she is possibly a drug addict, but it is not essential for resolving the incongruity. Hence, this meme can be subsumed under the category of frame-based incongruity where the image aids in the IR strategy.

### Results

The analysis of the 20 chosen memes serving as the data for this study revealed interesting results in both the type of incongruity and the role played by images. As shown in Figure 1 below, the majority of memes (70%, or 14 out of 20) were assigned to the category of frame-based incongruity, while the discourse-

based and discourse-image-based categories each accounted for 15% (3 memes each). This suggests that frame clashes are the most dominant strategy used in the memes analysed.

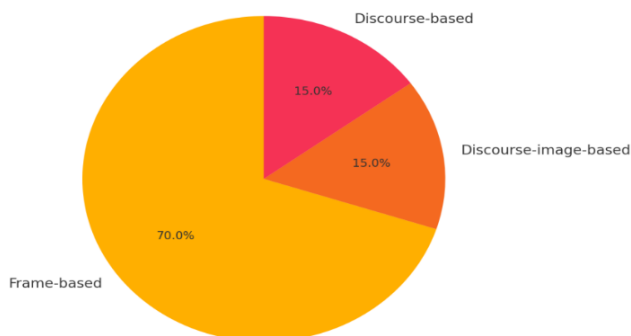


Figure 2. Type of incongruity in the IR strategy

Breaking this down further (as summarised in Figure 2 below), it has been found that frame-based incongruity with essential images accounts for the largest portion of the data at 40% (8 memes), followed by frame-based incongruity with image aids at 30% (6 memes). Interestingly, discourse-based incongruity only appears when the image aids the interpretation, covering 15% (3 memes), and discourse-image-based incongruity always involves the image as essential, also at 15% (3 memes).

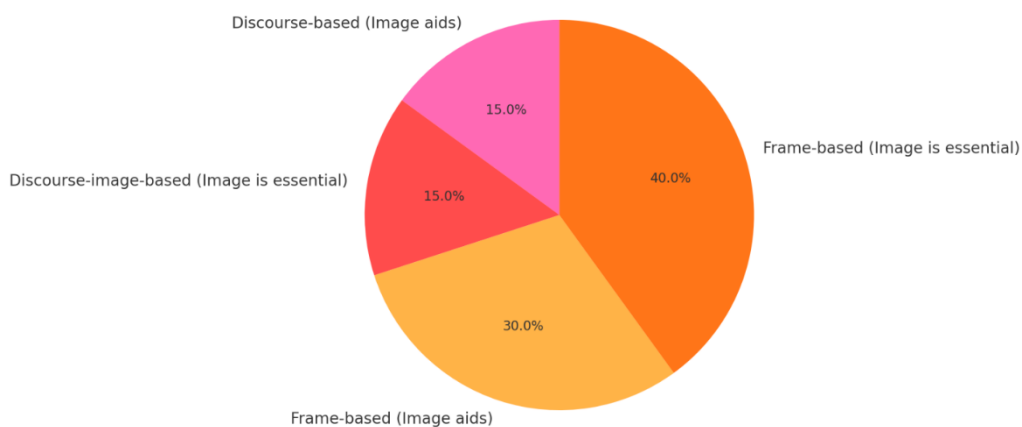
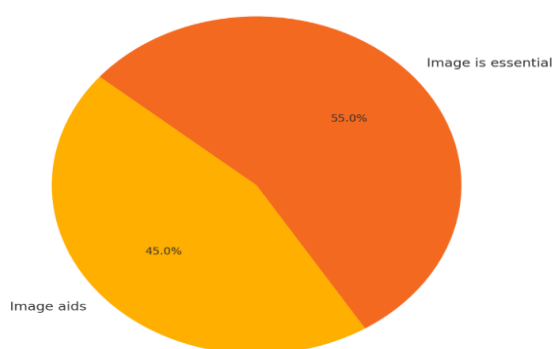


Figure 3. Incongruity Type and role of image in the IR strategy

Looking specifically at how images contribute to the interpretation of the analysed memes, Figure 3 below shows that in 55% of the cases (11 memes), the image is essential to understanding or resolving the humour, while 45% (9 memes) feature images that merely aid the interpretation. This overall distribution highlights the important role of visuals in meme-based humour, since none of the 20 memes were assigned to a category where the image plays no role in the IR strategy. These patterns suggest that while the text is the essential source of incongruity, images are an integral part of delivering the intended humour, especially in frame-based and discourse-image-based memes.



*Figure 4. Role of Image in the IR Strategy*

To provide a clearer view of how each meme was classified within the incongruity-resolution categories, Table 2 below lists the specific memes attributed to each category as summarized in the preceding pie charts.

**Table 2**

*Summary of findings*

|   | <b>IR Category</b>   | <b>Memes Numbers</b> | <b>Percentages out of 20</b> |
|---|--|----------------------|------------------------------|
| 1 | Frame-based incongruity where the image plays no role in the IR strategy |                      | 0%                           |
| 2 | Frame-based incongruity where the  | 1, 3, 6, 8, 17, 20   | 30%                          |

|   | image aids in the IR strategy  |                           |     |
|---|--|---------------------------|-----|
| 3 | Frame-based incongruity where the image is essential in the IR strategy      | 2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13 | 40% |
| 4 | Discourse-image-based (the image is always essential in this case)           | 10, 16, 18                | 15% |
| 5 | Discourse-based incongruity where the image plays no role in the IR strategy |                           | 0%  |
| 6 | Discourse-based incongruity where the image aids in the IR strategy          | 14, 15, 19                | 15% |
| 7 | Discourse-based incongruity where the image is essential in the IR strategy  |                           | 0%  |

## Discussion

This study examined how humour operates in 20 drug-related image macro memes, using Yus's (2021) incongruity-resolution model as the main analytical tool. The findings show that humour in these memes often comes from clashes between expectations and outcomes, which audiences mentally resolve. In particular, frame-based incongruity was the most common type, comprising 70% of the analysed data. The incongruities in these memes were either supported by the image (image aids in the IR strategy) or the image was essential to them. Discourse-based incongruity also appeared, often depending on double meanings or wordplay, with images either aiding or being essential for the humour to emerge. These patterns confirm that memes rely heavily on the interplay between language and visuals to create humour, which makes them an ideal multimodal type of discourse for applying pragmatic models of interpretation.

The findings of this study differ from Yus's (2021) claims regarding which type of incongruity is the most common in image macro memes. He claimed that discourse-image-based incongruity is the most common type in image macro memes. However, what has been found in this study is that frame-based incongruity

is the most common type; this could be attributed to the specific kind of memes examined in this study (drug-related memes).

Through the analysis of the memes in this study, it has also been found that drug-related image macro memes are not mere visual jokes; they may carry deeper meanings, implicit cultural messages, and hint at sensitive topics. For example, some of the analysed memes normalise the idea of drug use as if it were a normal, public behaviour. Trivialising such a serious matter in a funny way may have a very serious impact on the minds of the viewers of these memes, especially adolescents and young adults; they may subconsciously start adopting the idea of drug use as a common behaviour that they have to try. This point aligns with what Sanchez (2020) has discussed regarding how internet memes trivialise serious matters and desensitise the minds of such memes' viewers.

An interesting fact about memes is that there are memes that are accessible to more viewers than others. That is, some memes are accessible only to people who are familiar with a specific field of knowledge, such as medicine or engineering; I call such memes '*jargon memes*', since only people who are familiar with terms and concepts of those fields would be able to interpret them effectively.

Overall, the analysis answers the research questions. First, humour in these memes relies strongly on incongruity and its resolution, whether in frames, discourse, or image-text relations. The analysis demonstrates that humour in these memes is not a simple setup and punchline; rather, it is a cognitive process that relies on a specific "puzzle-solving" mechanism. In all cases, the humour is not in the incongruity itself, which is merely a contradiction or confusion, but in the resolution: the satisfying mental effort of finding the hidden link that makes the contradiction funny.

Second, the memes convey deeper meanings about drugs, sometimes trivialising them and sometimes warning against them, showing that meme humour can carry more than surface-level entertainment. These memes are far more than simple jokes; they function as cultural artefacts that carry significant implicit messages about drug use and addiction. For instance, they employ American slang expressions that could be hard for non-native English speakers to understand. According to Al-Zubaidi (2020), Iraqi learners of the English language have different pragmatic and linguistic skills compared to American native speakers. This difference could lead Iraqi learners to interpret these memes differently from their American counterparts.

Third, the incongruity-resolution model proved effective in unpacking both humour and meaning. These findings reinforce the idea that memes are cultural symbols that entertain while also transmitting certain values and perspectives.

## **Conclusion**

This study explored how humour operates in drug-related image macro memes through the lens of incongruity and resolution. Specifically, it investigated the types of incongruity used in these memes, how they are resolved, and the overall communicative and humorous impact they create. By analysing 20 memes using the incongruity-resolution (IR) model (Yus, 2021), the research uncovered the prevalent types of incongruity in these memes.

The study showed that most of the analysed memes fall under the category of frame-based incongruity, where the image either aids or is essential to the resolution. This category illustrates how incongruity, and hence humour, often stems from sudden shifts in contrasting cognitive frames across the whole meme that the viewer must reconcile to resolve the incongruity.

Additionally, it has been found that humour in memes often depends on both textual and visual elements. To resolve the incongruity and grasp the humour, viewers need to rely on their background knowledge and their cultural awareness. The reason for this is that these memes are not only meant to be funny; they implicitly comment on the problems associated with drug use. However, the downside of such a practice is that it somehow normalises and trivialises the seriousness of drugs and addiction.

The findings suggest that humorous online content, especially memes, can carry subtle yet critical messages. Specifically, netizens resort to memes to comment on sensitive topics implicitly in order to avoid accountability. Thus, memes have become an integral part of the online sphere, in which they are used to sarcastically address societal problems, share political opinions, and even comment on religious matters.

## **Study Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research**

Of course, this study has its limitations. With a sample size of only 20 memes, the findings may not reflect the full picture of meme humour on drug-related topics. Additionally, all memes were in English and selected by the researcher through a manual screening process of Google search results, which may be prone to selection bias and limit the generalisability of the findings. It should be

noted that all memes were analysed according to the best of the researcher's knowledge and judgment; some of the analysed memes may be interpreted differently by others and fall under different categories of the IR model.

For future research, it is suggested that researchers apply the IR model to memes on different topics, such as politics, video games, and academia. Another important direction is to incorporate audience interpretations to compare how people respond to these memes versus how a theoretical model classifies them.

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## تحليل في ضوء نظرية الصلة لميمات صور الماكرو الإنجليزية عن المخدرات والإدمان

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### المستخلص

تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية كيفية تكوين الفكاهة والمعنى في الميمات الإنجليزية من نوع ميمات صور الماكرو التي تتناول موضوعات المخدرات والإدمان، والمقصود بهذه الميمات هو تلك الصور المنتشرة على الإنترنت والمصحوبة بنصوص غالباً ما تكون ساخرة أو مضحكة ليتم تداولها على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، وقد تم جمع عشرين ميمًا من الإنترنت وتحليلها باستعمال نموذج "عدم الاتساق والحل" الذي وضعه فرانثيسكو يوس (2021). يقوم هذا النموذج على نظرية الصلة (سبربر & ولسون, 1995) وهي نظرية تداولية ترى أن العقل البشري يميل إلى اختيار أكثر المعلومات صلةً بالموضوع مع بذل أقل جهد ذهني ممكن، وتهدف الدراسة إلى معرفة كيف

تجعل هذه الميمات الناس يضحكون؟ والأهم من ذلك، كيف تحمل رسائل عميقة أو خفية؟ ويركز التحليل على الطريقة التي ينشئ بها كل ميم إطاراً إدراكياً معيناً، ثم يقوم بخرقه بشكل مفاجئ أو مضحك، وكيف يقوم المشاهد بحلّ هذا التعارض (عدم الاتساق) ذهنياً. أظهرت النتائج أن هذا النموذج يساعد في تفسير كيفية فهم الناس للميمات والاستمتاع بها، لاسيما عندما يعتمد المعنى على اللغة والصورة معاً. وتخلص الورقة إلى أن هذا النوع من الفكاهة يمكن أن يسهم في رفع الوعي حول قضايا خطيرة مثل الإدمان على المخدرات، وفي الوقت نفسه يُسلّي الجمهور. كما تشير الدراسة إلى أن مستخدمي الإنترنت غالباً ما يشاركون الميمات للتعليق على موضوعات حساسة دون تحمّل مسؤولية مباشرة عما يقولونه.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التداولية السيبرانية، الثقافة الرقمية، الميمات المتعلقة بالمخدرات، ميمات الصور الموسعة، المعاني الضمنية، عدم الاتساق والحل، نظرية الصلة.