

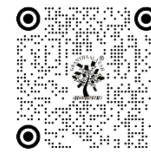
Original Article

INTERGENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN DECODING ENCODED MEANING IN MALAYALAM SOCIAL MEDIA VISUALS: A VISUAL COMMUNICATION STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Social media visuals have become an important part of communication in today's digital world. Memes, reels, troll images, posters, and short videos are widely used to express humour, emotions, opinions, and social messages. However, people from different generations often interpret these visuals differently depending on their age, media exposure, cultural understanding, and familiarity with internet culture. This study examines how Gen Z, Millennials, and Pre-Millennials decode Malayalam social media visuals. The research is based on Stuart Hall's Encoding and Decoding Theory along with concepts of visual semiotics, dual coding theory, and cognitive load theory. A quantitative survey method was used for the study, and data were collected from 105 respondents through image-based questionnaires using both online and offline methods. The findings reveal that younger audiences are more familiar with meme culture, symbolic meanings, and internet humour, while older generations often focus on direct or literal meanings. The study highlights the role of digital exposure and social media participation in understanding visual communication. It also explains how visual interpretation changes across generations in the Malayalam digital media environment.

Keywords: Visual Communication, Social Media Visuals, Malayalam Media, Meme Culture, Audience Interpretation, Encoding and Decoding

INTRODUCTION

Social media has changed the way people communicate in modern society. Today, communication mainly happens through visuals such as memes, reels, posters, GIFs, and short videos rather than long written texts. Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube have become spaces where people express opinions, emotions, humour, and social awareness through visual content. In Kerala, Malayalam social media culture has become highly active, especially among younger audiences. Malayalam memes, movie references, troll images, and political humour are now part of everyday online communication.

Even though these visuals are shared widely, not everyone understands them in the same way. Different generations interpret social media visuals differently depending on their experiences, digital exposure, cultural background, and familiarity with internet culture. Younger audiences are generally more connected to meme culture and online trends, which helps them understand hidden meanings, sarcasm, and symbolic references more quickly. Older generations, on the other hand, may focus more on the direct meaning of visuals and may not always understand internet-based humour or cultural references.

This study focuses on these intergenerational differences in decoding Malayalam social media visuals. The research is important because visual communication has become one of the strongest forms of communication in the digital era. Understanding how

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different generations interpret visual messages can help content creators, journalists, advertisers, and media professionals create more effective communication strategies.

The study also attempts to fill the research gap in Malayalam digital communication studies, as very few studies have focused specifically on audience decoding and intergenerational visual interpretation in the Malayalam social media context.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this study is to analyse the intergenerational differences in decoding Malayalam social media visuals. The research attempts to understand how audiences from different generations interpret memes, troll images, reels, posters, and other visual content shared through social media platforms.

The study also aims to examine whether younger and older audiences understand visual communication differently based on their age, digital exposure, and familiarity with internet culture. Another important objective is to analyse the influence of social media usage on audience interpretation and visual understanding. The research further focuses on identifying how audiences understand humour, symbolism, sarcasm, and hidden meanings present in Malayalam social media visuals.

In addition, the study seeks to explore the relationship between meme culture and visual communication among different generations. It also attempts to understand how cultural background, personal experience, and online participation shape the decoding process of social media visuals.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is important because visual communication has become one of the most dominant forms of communication in the digital era. Today, people spend a large amount of time on social media platforms where communication mainly happens through images, memes, reels, posters, and short videos. These visuals influence the way people think, react, communicate, and understand social issues.

Malayalam social media culture has grown rapidly in recent years, especially among younger audiences. Memes, movie references, troll images, and digital humour are now commonly used to express emotions, opinions, political criticism, and cultural identity. However, different generations do not always interpret these visuals in the same way. The meaning of a visual often changes depending on a person's age, digital exposure, social background, and familiarity with internet culture.

The study is significant because it helps in understanding how audiences from different generations decode visual messages differently. It explains the differences between younger and older audiences in understanding humour, symbolism, sarcasm, and hidden meanings in social media visuals. The findings of the study can help content creators, journalists, advertisers, filmmakers, and social media managers create visual content that is more understandable and relatable to different age groups.

The research also contributes to the field of visual communication and media studies by providing insights into audience interpretation in the Malayalam digital media environment. Since very few studies have focused on intergenerational decoding of Malayalam social media visuals, this study adds new knowledge to communication research and helps in understanding how digital media communication is changing in modern society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media and visual communication have become important areas of study in the digital era. According to Lev Manovich, digital media transformed communication by making visuals interactive and easily shareable. Images, memes, and videos became central elements of online communication. Similarly, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen explained that visuals communicate meaning through colours, composition, facial expressions, and cultural references.

Audience interpretation is another important concept in media studies. Stuart Hall introduced the Encoding and Decoding Theory, which explains that audiences interpret media messages differently according to their social and cultural background. Hall identified dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings to explain audience interpretation. This theory is highly relevant to social media visuals because memes and troll images often contain sarcasm, hidden meanings, and symbolic references that different audiences may decode differently.

Research on meme culture also explains how internet humour has become an important part of online communication. Limor Shifman stated that memes are cultural units that spread rapidly through digital platforms and are often used for humour, criticism, and social commentary. Studies conducted in the Malayalam social media context also show that younger audiences are more familiar with meme culture and symbolic communication styles.

Despite several studies on social media communication and meme culture, limited research has been conducted on intergenerational differences in decoding Malayalam social media visuals. This study attempts to address that gap by examining how different generations interpret visual content differently in the Malayalam digital media environment.

RESEARCH GAP

Several studies have been conducted on social media communication, visual culture, meme culture, and audience interpretation in digital media. Previous research has mainly focused on the popularity of memes, internet humour, social media usage, and the role of visual communication among younger audiences. Studies related to audience decoding and visual semiotics have also explained how audiences interpret media messages differently according to their social and cultural backgrounds.

However, very limited research has specifically focused on intergenerational differences in decoding Malayalam social media visuals. Most existing studies discuss social media usage patterns or meme culture in a general context, but they do not deeply analyse how different generations understand symbolic meanings, internet humour, sarcasm, and cultural references differently.

There is also a lack of studies that examine the relationship between age, digital exposure, and visual interpretation in the Malayalam social media environment. Very few studies have explored how Gen Z, Millennials, and Pre-Millennials decode the same social media visuals differently based on their familiarity with internet culture and online communication styles.

Therefore, this study attempts to fill this research gap by analysing the intergenerational decoding of Malayalam social media visuals and understanding how audience interpretation changes according to generational differences, digital literacy, and social media exposure.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is mainly based on Stuart Hall's Encoding and Decoding Theory. According to Hall, media producers encode meanings into media content, but audiences decode those meanings differently depending on their experiences, culture, age, and social background. The same visual can therefore create multiple interpretations among audiences.

The study also uses the concept of visual semiotics, which explains how visuals communicate meaning through symbols, colours, expressions, and cultural references. The ideas of denotation and connotation help in understanding both the direct and hidden meanings of social media visuals.

Dual Coding Theory and Cognitive Load Theory are also relevant to the research. These theories explain how audiences process visual information differently and why younger audiences may understand internet-based communication more quickly compared to older generations. Together, these theories help explain how social media visuals are interpreted differently across generations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study follows a quantitative research design to analyse intergenerational differences in decoding Malayalam social media visuals. A survey method was used for collecting data from respondents. The population of the study included Malayalam-speaking social media users belonging to three generations: Gen Z (18–25), Millennials (26–40), and Pre-Millennials (41–55).

A convenience sampling method was used for selecting participants, and the final sample size consisted of 105 respondents from different educational and social backgrounds. Data were collected through structured questionnaires containing demographic questions, social media usage questions, and image-based interpretation questions. Google Forms and offline survey methods were used during the data collection process.

The collected data were analysed using percentage analysis and graphical interpretation. Ethical considerations such as consent, privacy, and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study.

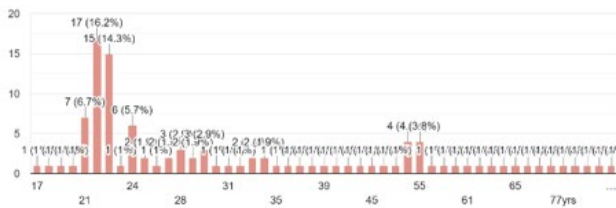
ANALYSIS

DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

The survey included 105 respondents from different age groups ranging from 17 to 77 years. However, the majority of participants belonged to the younger age category, especially those aged 21 and 22, indicating that most respondents were part of the youth population who are generally more active on social media platforms and more exposed to online visual communication. At the same time, the inclusion of middle-aged and older participants added diversity to the study and strengthened the reliability of the research, as the study focuses on intergenerational differences in decoding social media visuals. In terms of gender distribution, 61.9% of the respondents were female and 38.1% were male, showing slightly higher participation from female respondents. Although the participation was relatively balanced, this variation in gender may also influence the interpretation of visual content, as different audiences may respond differently to social media images, symbols, and meanings.

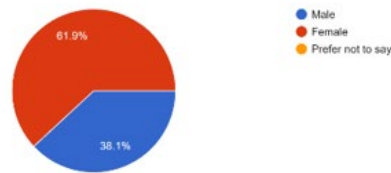
1. What is your age group?

105 responses



2. Gender

105 responses

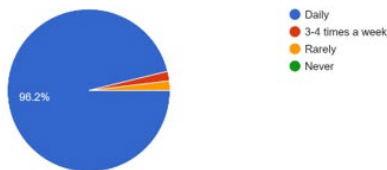


SOCIAL MEDIA CONSUMPTION PATTERNS

The survey results clearly show that social media usage is highly common among the respondents, with 96.2% of participants stating that they use social media daily, while only a very small percentage reported occasional or rare usage. This indicates that social media has become an integral part of everyday life, and most respondents are highly familiar with online visual content such as memes, reels, trends, videos, and digital symbols. Therefore, their responses are highly relevant for understanding how meanings are decoded from social media visuals. When respondents were asked about the platform they mostly use for visual content, Instagram emerged as the most popular platform with 61.9% responses, followed by WhatsApp (55.2%) and YouTube (53.3%), while Facebook had comparatively lower usage at 22.9%. These findings suggest that visually driven platforms such as Instagram and YouTube dominate current social media usage patterns, as they rely heavily on images, short videos, filters, and visual storytelling, which directly relates to the focus of this research. The comparatively lower preference for Facebook may also indicate a shift in audience interest toward newer and more visually engaging digital platforms.

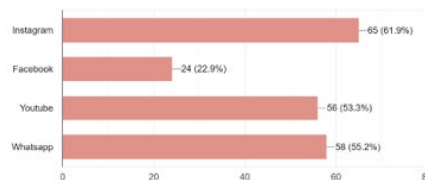
3. How often do you use social media?

105 responses



4. Which platform do you mostly use for visual content?

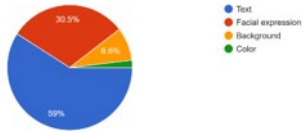
105 responses



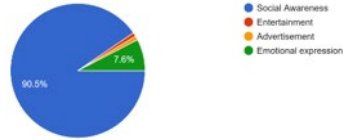
VISUAL INTERPRETATION (SECTION B)

The analysis of the visual communication graphs reveals how respondents interpreted and emotionally responded to the selected social media image. A majority of participants (59%) first noticed the text in the image, showing that written elements such as captions, quotes, or highlighted words play a significant role in attracting audience attention and helping viewers understand the context of the visual. Around 30.5% of respondents focused first on facial expressions, indicating the importance of human emotions in creating emotional connection and conveying meaning. Only a smaller percentage noticed the background or colours first, suggesting that decorative elements are less influential compared to textual and emotional features. When respondents were asked about the main message of the image, an overwhelming 90.5% identified it as related to social awareness, while only a small number viewed it as emotional expression, entertainment, or advertisement. This shows that the image strongly communicated a social or ethical message and successfully created awareness among viewers. The clarity of the image was also positively received, with 69.5% describing it as very clear and 25.7% considering it somewhat clear, indicating that the visual effectively conveyed its intended meaning with very little confusion among audiences. In terms of emotional response, fear emerged as the dominant feeling, reported by 66.7% of respondents, followed by sadness at 24.8%, suggesting that the image carried a serious and emotionally impactful tone. Very few respondents associated the image with happiness or anger, highlighting its reflective and awareness-oriented nature. Finally, when participants were asked whether the image targeted a specific age group, 45.7% believed it did not, while others either felt it targeted a particular group or were unsure. This indicates that the image's message was broad and could connect with audiences across different generations, even though opinions regarding its intended audience varied slightly. Overall, the findings demonstrate that social media visuals communicate most effectively when they combine meaningful text, emotional expressions, and socially relevant themes to create clear understanding and emotional engagement among viewers.

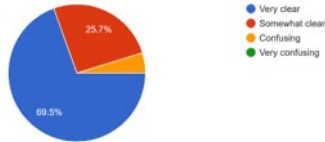
5. What is the first thing you notice in this image?
105 responses



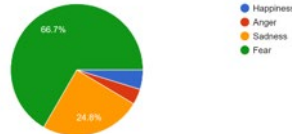
6. What do you think is the main message of this image?
105 responses



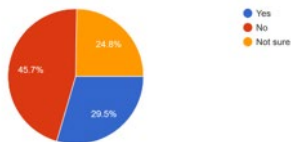
7. How clear is the meaning of the image?
105 responses



8. What emotion does this image create in you?
105 responses



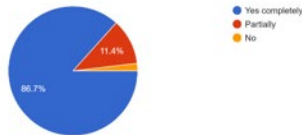
9. Do you think this image targets a specific age group?
105 responses



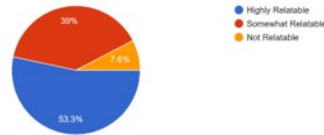
SECTION C

The analysis of these graphs highlights how respondents connected with the cultural and symbolic aspects of the selected social media image. A large majority of participants (86.7%) fully understood the cultural reference used in the image, while 11.4% understood it only partially. This indicates that the image successfully communicated culturally familiar symbols and meanings to most viewers, showing effective visual encoding through shared cultural understanding. Only a very small number of respondents were unable to understand the reference, which may suggest differences in cultural exposure or background. In terms of relatability, 53.3% of respondents found the image highly relatable and 39% considered it somewhat relatable, showing that the visual strongly connected with viewers' personal experiences and emotions. This demonstrates the ability of social media visuals to create empathy and emotional engagement among audiences. When asked about the most meaningful aspect of the image, 72.4% of respondents identified visual symbols as the strongest element, highlighting the powerful role of imagery in communicating deeper meanings and ideas. A smaller percentage focused on context, text captions, or facial expressions, suggesting that while these elements support interpretation, visual symbolism remains the most influential factor in meaning-making. The findings also reveal audience hesitation regarding public engagement with the image, as 51.4% of respondents answered "maybe" when asked whether they would share the image, while 25.7% said "no" and only 22.9% said "yes." This cautious response suggests that although the image was meaningful and relatable, its emotional seriousness or cultural sensitivity may have made participants uncertain about publicly sharing it. Overall, the findings demonstrate that cultural familiarity, emotional relatability, and strong visual symbolism significantly influence how audiences interpret and respond to social media visuals.

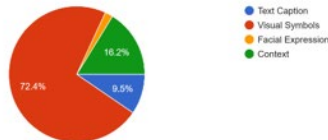
10. Do you understand the cultural reference in this image?
105 responses



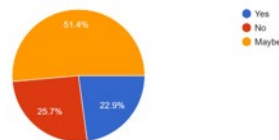
11. How reliable is this image to you?
105 responses



12. What makes this image meaningful?
105 responses



13. Would you share this image on social media?
105 responses



SECTION D

The analysis of these graphs highlights how respondents interpreted the promotional image and reacted to its visual and informational elements. A significant majority of participants (89.5%) identified the primary purpose of the image as promotion, while only a small percentage associated it with fashion, indicating that the image clearly communicated a commercial or persuasive intent through its design, branding, and messaging style. Interestingly, despite recognizing the promotional purpose, 60% of respondents stated that they did not trust the information presented in the image, while only 7.6% expressed trust and 32.4% remained unsure. This suggests that although the image was visually appealing and attention-grabbing, many viewers perceived it as exaggerated or lacking credibility, highlighting the gap between visual persuasion and audience trust. When respondents were asked about the element that attracted them the most, layout and design emerged as the leading factor with 34.3%, followed closely by the person featured in the image (31.4%) and bright colours (27.6%), while bold text received comparatively lower attention. These findings indicate that viewers are more influenced by the overall visual composition, aesthetic balance, and human presence rather than textual emphasis alone. Furthermore, 61% of respondents reported that they understood the image immediately, while 30.5% needed to read it carefully and only a small percentage required more time to understand it.

This demonstrates that the image effectively communicated its message in a clear and accessible manner. However, the coexistence of quick understanding and low trust suggests that clarity alone does not guarantee credibility in visual communication. Overall, the findings emphasize that promotional visuals can successfully attract audience attention and communicate messages clearly through effective design and visual appeal, but audience trust depends on how authentic and believable the content appears.

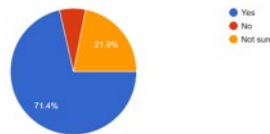
GENERAL VISUAL DECODING PATTERNS (SECTION E)

The analysis of these graphs provides important insights into how audiences interpret and respond to social media visuals. A majority of respondents (70.5%) stated that they focus on both text and images equally, while smaller percentages focused mainly on images or text alone, indicating that effective social media communication depends on the balanced combination of visual and verbal elements

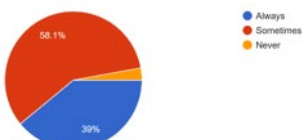
18. When viewing social media visuals, you focus more on:
105 responses



19. Do you think younger and older people interpret images differently?
105 responses



20. Do you usually read captions before interpreting an image?
105 responses

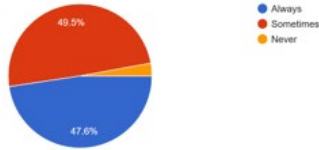


21. What influences your understanding the most?
105 responses

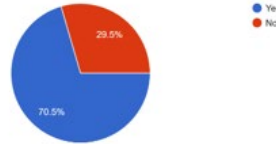


The findings also reveal strong awareness of intergenerational differences, as 71.4% of participants believed that younger and older people interpret images differently, suggesting that age, cultural exposure, digital familiarity, and life experiences influence the decoding of visual messages. In terms of understanding visuals, 58.1% of respondents reported that they sometimes read captions before interpreting an image, while 39% always rely on captions, showing that captions act as supportive interpretive tools that help viewers confirm or clarify meaning.

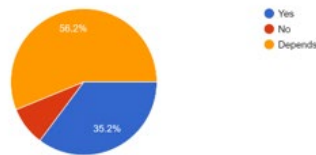
22. Do you verify information before believing a visual message?
105 responses



23. Have you ever misunderstood a visual message on social media?
105 responses

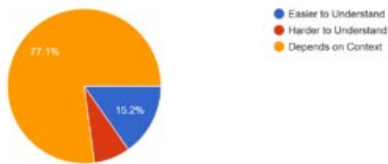


24. Do you think memes are easier to understand than informational posters?
105 responses

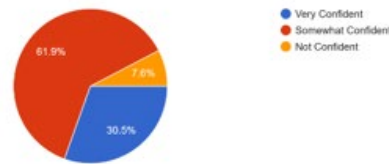


Personal experience emerged as the most influential factor in interpretation for 61% of respondents, followed by cultural background, social trends, and peer opinions, demonstrating that visual interpretation is highly subjective and shaped by individual experiences and cultural contexts. The findings also show that audiences are cautious when consuming visual information online, as nearly half of the respondents always verify information before believing a visual message, while a similar percentage do so sometimes, reflecting the growing tension between trust and skepticism in digital media environments. Furthermore, 70.5% of respondents admitted that they had misunderstood a visual message at some point, highlighting that social media visuals can often be ambiguous or context-dependent.

25. Visuals without text are:
105 responses



26. Overall, how confident are you in interpreting social media visuals?
105 responses



When asked about memes and visuals without text, most respondents stated that understanding depends on context, suggesting that cultural familiarity, background knowledge, and situational framing play an important role in meaning-making. Although memes are often seen as easier to understand due to humour and relatability, their meanings may vary across audiences. Similarly, visuals without text may lead to different interpretations when contextual cues are absent. Finally, the majority of respondents described themselves as somewhat confident in interpreting social media visuals, while a smaller group felt very confident or not confident at all. Overall, these findings demonstrate that interpretation of social media visuals is influenced by multiple factors including text, cultural background, personal experiences, age differences, and contextual understanding, supporting the idea that visual communication is complex, subjective, and deeply connected to audience perception.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study show that different generations interpret Malayalam social media visuals in different ways. Age, digital exposure, internet familiarity, and cultural understanding play an important role in shaping audience interpretation. Younger audiences, especially Gen Z, were more successful in understanding hidden meanings, internet humour, meme culture, and symbolic references used in social media visuals. Since they spend more time on platforms like Instagram and YouTube, they are more familiar with online trends and digital communication styles.

Older generations, however, often focused more on the direct or literal meaning of visuals. Many participants from older age groups found it difficult to understand sarcasm, meme formats, and internet-based humour. This difference clearly shows that social media exposure and digital literacy influence how audiences decode visual communication. The findings support Stuart Hall's Encoding and Decoding Theory, which explains that audiences interpret media messages differently according to their experiences and social background.

The study also found that text and facial expressions were the first elements noticed by most respondents while viewing visuals. This suggests that emotional expressions and written content are important in attracting audience attention and helping viewers understand the message. The concepts of denotation and connotation explained by Roland Barthes are also relevant because some audiences understood only the direct meaning while others identified deeper symbolic meanings.

Another important finding is that personal experience and cultural background strongly influence visual interpretation. Many respondents stated that context is important for understanding memes and social media visuals. The study also revealed that misunderstandings are common in digital communication because visuals can create multiple meanings for different audiences. Overall, the research proves that intergenerational differences significantly affect the decoding of Malayalam social media visuals in the digital media environment.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the intergenerational differences in decoding Malayalam social media visuals and explored how audiences from different age groups interpret visual communication differently. The findings show that social media visuals such as memes, reels, troll images, and posters are now an important part of digital communication and influence the way people understand humour, emotions, social issues, and cultural messages.

The research found that younger audiences, especially Gen Z, are more familiar with internet culture, meme formats, and symbolic communication. They were able to understand hidden meanings, sarcasm, and online references more quickly than older generations. In contrast, older participants often focused more on the direct or literal meaning of visuals because they were less exposed to digital communication styles and social media trends.

The study also highlighted that personal experience, cultural background, and social media exposure strongly influence audience interpretation. The findings support Stuart Hall's Encoding and Decoding Theory, which explains that audiences interpret media messages differently based on their experiences and social background.

Overall, the research proves that visual communication is interpreted differently across generations. As social media continues to grow, understanding audience decoding patterns becomes important for content creators, media professionals, and researchers to create more effective and culturally relatable visual communication.

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