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Remixing the Public: Bangladeshi Meme Culture as Digital Vernacular Art, Protest, and Collective Authorship

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Abstract
Internet memes have become a common form of visual language of humor, commentary, belonging and political expression in Bangladesh but their status as art remains unresolved. This theoretical paper constructs a framework for analyzing selected Bangladeshi memes as digital vernacular art without presupposing that all memes are artworks. It offers no new corpus and does not test its claims empirically. Rather, it synthesizes literature on internet memes, multimodality, vernacular creativity, digital folklore, participatory culture, political satire, artification, authorship and mechanical reproduction, and contextualizes these discussions through the lens of the July 2024 uprising. Multimodal form, local vernacularity, participatory remix, civic or protest function, and artification by intentionality, conceptuality, cultural distinctiveness, and social agency are the five mutually reinforcing dimensions identified in the paper. These dimensions are then translated into seven testable propositions (P1, P2, P3a, P3b, P4, P5, P6), indicative variables and analytical methods for future corpus, survey and time-series research. The paper also develops the printmaker's multiple as a parallel to meme culture: a meme template is an open matrix, from which dispersed users pull successive, modified impressions. The limits of this analogy are stated explicitly. The paper posits that the convergence of formal decisions, local linguistic and cultural codes, transformative reuse, participatory action, and social meaning can make selected Bangladeshi memes a form of digital vernacular art.

Keywords: *Internet memes, Digital vernacular art, Protest art, Collective authorship, Participatory culture, July 2024 uprising, Digital folklore.*

1. Introduction

Internet memes are among the most recognizable forms of everyday digital expression. They circulate as screenshots, reaction images, captioned photographs, image macros, short videos, altered posters, re-voiced film scenes, and endlessly adaptable templates. Their apparent simplicity can hide a dense communicative structure. A meme may depend simultaneously on a familiar image, a short line of text, an assumed political context, a local idiom, and the audience's recognition of a previous version. Shifman (2013, 2014) therefore treats internet memes not as isolated cultural units but as groups of digital items that share characteristics of content, form, and stance while being imitated and transformed by users. Milner (2016) similarly emphasizes that memetic media are created through networked participation. More recent work treats memes as multimodal, platform-shaped collections of content rather than as single images (Rogers & Giorgi, 2024; Wagener, 2021). From this perspective, memes are not only jokes; they are social texts whose meanings emerge through repetition, variation, circulation, and shared

cultural competence. Bangladesh provides a particularly rich setting for studying these processes. Facebook-centered meme communities, Bangla and Banglish (mixed Bangla and English) captions, references to television and cinema, school and family humor, political slogans, folk imagery, and localized versions of global templates have become part of the country's networked vernacular. Bangladesh-specific research increasingly shows that memes carry social, political, cultural, economic, and emotional meanings beyond entertainment, including harmful uses such as body shaming (Ahona, 2024; Mumu & Rashid, 2023; Uddin & Uddin, 2026). The July 2024 uprising made this especially visible: satirical images, remixed scenes, slogans, photographs, and parodic visual forms circulated alongside street protest, graffiti, music, and other cultural expressions. Recent studies of the uprising examine memes as cultural resistance, political commentary, emotional support, and digital folk art (Hossain, 2026; Mahtab, 2026).

The conceptual difficulty lies in the word art. To identify aesthetic, political, or folkloric qualities in memes is not the same as declaring that every viral image is an artwork. Such a claim risks collapsing differences between casual jokes, propaganda, abuse, advertising, political documentation, and more deliberate acts of visual-cultural production (Denisova, 2019). A stronger approach is to ask how, when, and under what conditions memetic practice acquires characteristics associated with vernacular and contemporary art. Shapiro's (2019) concept of artification is useful here because it understands the movement of non-art practices toward art status as a process of changing practices, evaluations, and cultural legitimacy rather than as a fixed label. A second conceptual problem concerns authorship. Memes are often assembled from pre-existing photographs, film stills, screenshots, graphic templates, slogans, and fragments of earlier memes. One user may originate an image, another may add a caption, a third may localize it, and hundreds of others may reshape or recirculate it. This pattern resonates with participatory culture, produsage, and remix theory (Bruns, 2008; Jenkins, 2006; Lessig, 2008; Navas, 2012). It also invites comparison with printmaking, where the artwork is not a single unique object but a multiple generated through a matrix. The analogy is imperfect but illuminating: the digital template behaves like an open matrix that can be 're-inked' by strangers, producing an uncontrolled edition of variants. This article integrates these two lines of inquiry. It is presented as a conceptual paper: it is not based on any new empirical data, and as such the presented claims should be interpreted as a framework for meaning and propositions for testing, rather than as empirical facts (Jaakkola, 2020). Such a framework is needed because existing scholarship remains fragmented. Research on digital folklore and vernacular creativity puts aesthetics firmly under consideration (Burgess, 2006; de Seta, 2020), but it rarely considers the conditions under which a meme becomes an art. Studies of internet memes likewise do not ask when a meme turns into art (Milner, 2016; Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021; Shifman, 2014); they investigate how memes replicate, persuade, and build identity under connectivity restrictions. Marketing uses, meaning-making in everyday life, harmful content, and protest functions have been documented in Bangladesh-specific works (Ahona, 2024; Hossain, 2026; Mumu & Rashid, 2023; Uddin & Uddin, 2026). However, none of these studies make the connection between aesthetics, protest, and distributed authorship in one model, nor does any of them draw on printmaking theory to account for serial variation. The gap is integrative rather than empirical. The paper therefore addresses four research questions. RQ1: How do multimodal form and local cultural codes make Bangladeshi memes culturally intelligible? RQ2: How was the protest environment defined in July 2024, and how did meme practices fit into it? RQ3: How does remix challenge originality and singular authorship, and how far does the printmaker's multiple account for this? RQ4: What ethical, legal, and archival issues arise when memes are treated as vernacular art and cultural heritage?

The paper makes four contributions. Theoretically, it treats art status as an outcome of converging conditions rather than an intrinsic property of memes. Conceptually, it brings together meme studies, digital folklore, artification, and print theory in a five-dimension framework in which art status is contingent rather than given. Methodologically, it translates the framework into seven propositions that can be tested through future corpus, survey, or time-

series research, together with an eight-category coding scheme for such work. Practically, it provides direction for archivists, curators, art educators, platform managers and policy makers who engage with protest memes as cultural records. Section 2 reviews related work and identifies the gap; Section 3 presents the framework and propositions; Section 4 describes the approach; Section 5 develops the conceptual analysis; Sections 6 and 7 discuss findings and implications; Section 8 separates ethical, legal, and archival tensions; and Section 9 concludes and addresses limitations, future research, and policy implications.

2. Literature Review

This section reviews six research streams and then maps the debates among them. The aim is to show where they agree, where they conflict, and what remains unexplained.

2.1 Internet memes, multimodality, and visual meaning

Contemporary meme studies move beyond the older idea of the meme as a self-replicating cultural unit. Shifman (2013) shifts attention toward families of digital texts that users recognize and rework through shared conventions. Variation is therefore central rather than accidental. A meme remains legible because participants recognize enough of its previous form to understand what is being changed. Milner (2013, 2016) develops this further by describing memes as a vernacular lingua franca in which fixity and novelty operate together: templates must remain recognizable while being open to new claims. A multimodal approach is essential because the meaning of a meme rarely resides in either image or language alone. Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2017) describe image macros as multimodal constructions in which visual and verbal components jointly organize interpretation. Cropping, font, scale, juxtaposition, facial expression, screenshot quality, and caption placement all affect stance. In Bangladesh, a globally familiar image can be culturally localized by a Bangla caption, while a local television still or political photograph can be transformed into a repeatable template. This makes meme meaning relational, contextual, and highly dependent on shared knowledge. Cochrane et al. (2022) show that such combinations can be classified along separate visual and textual dimensions, while Cannizzaro (2016) reads memes semiotically, as signs whose meaning depends on interpretive communities. Rogers and Giorgi (2024) add a caution that is often overlooked: what counts as a meme also depends on how platforms and databases collect and display it, so the unit of analysis is partly technical.

2.2 Vernacular creativity, digital folklore, and Bengali visual traditions

Burgess (2006) uses vernacular creativity to describe ordinary acts of cultural production that occur outside elite institutions yet shape everyday public culture. Howard's (2008) concept of the vernacular web similarly emphasizes online practices in which communities adapt existing forms and negotiate norms from below. Memes fit this orientation because they are often low-cost, rapidly produced, socially situated, and evaluated by peers rather than by formal cultural institutions. Their value may depend less on technical polish than on timing, wit, cultural accuracy, and recognizability. Digital folklore provides a related perspective. De Seta (2020) identifies vernacular creativity, internet folklore, memetics, and digital folk-art aesthetics as overlapping approaches to user-generated cultural transmission. Folkloric qualities become particularly visible when authorship is diffuse, variants proliferate, conventions are inherited informally, and cultural knowledge passes through iterative adaptation. These features also connect digital meme practices to older popular visual cultures. Jain's (1999) account of Kalighat painting, for example, shows how inexpensive, widely circulated, topical images could use humor and satire to comment on changing social life. The historical media conditions differ radically, but the comparison highlights recurring relations among affordability, topicality, visual wit, and public circulation. Zaib et al. (2026) likewise frame meme culture as a folk art that builds community. However, folklore literature tends to treat aesthetic value as collective and anonymous. This makes it harder to explain the deliberate formal choices that some meme makers clearly exercise, a tension taken up through artification in Section 2.6.

2.3 Participatory culture, produsage, and remixes

Jenkins (2006) and Jenkins, Ito, and boyd (2016) describe participatory culture as an environment with relatively low barriers to creative expression, strong practices of sharing, and informal learning among participants. Bruns (2008) uses the term produsage to describe the hybrid condition in which users are also producers. Lessig (2008) and Navas (2012) frame remix as a cultural practice in which reuse itself can constitute creative authorship. These theories help explain why meme culture is not adequately described by a simple original/copy distinction. Each derivative version may add a new local reference, emotional tone, political claim, or aesthetic relation to previous versions. The participatory character of memes also complicates copyright and ownership. A meme may contain layers of contribution that are technically and socially distinct: the original photograph, the visual template, the first caption, subsequent captions, platform watermarks, screenshots, and reposting contexts. Leung (2024) argues that viral remix culture places pressure on conventional ideas of singular authorship. For cultural analysis, the important point is that meaning often depends on the chain of transformations rather than on a single identifiable creator. Mielczarek and Hopkins (2021) find that legal protection for memes tends to depend on whether reuse is transformative, a test that closely matches the cultural distinction between mere duplication and creative remix.

2.4 Political memes, satire, and collective identity

Political memes condense complex positions into compact, shareable forms. Dean (2019) argues that memes and GIFs are part of everyday digital politics and should not be dismissed as trivial simply because they are humorous. Gal, Shifman, and Kampf (2016) show how memes can help construct collective identity by allowing users to combine individual voice with shared stance. Mina (2019) demonstrates how viral media can become tools of movements, while Moreno-Almeida (2021) shows how satirical online spaces can create forms of political participation in restrictive contexts. Mortensen and Neumayer (2021) describe this as the playful politics of memes, in which humor can build togetherness and sharpen exclusion. Fahlenbrach (2025) shows how protest imagery condenses into recurring net icons, while Peters and Allan (2022) demonstrate that the same memetic humor can be weaponized to normalize prejudice. Older theories of indirect resistance are also relevant. Scott (1990) describes hidden transcripts and disguised critique among subordinate groups, while Bakhtin's (1984) carnivalesque illuminates how humor can invert hierarchy and make authority temporarily ridiculous. Yet networked visibility should not automatically be equated with political effectiveness. Tufekci (2017) warns that digitally networked protest can mobilize quickly while remaining organizationally fragile, and Lukács (2021) shows that the political capacities of memes are context dependent. These cautions are important for Bangladesh: meme circulation may shape the symbolic and emotional environment of protest without being the direct cause of political outcomes.

2.5 Bangladesh-specific research and the July 2024 uprising

Bangladesh-specific meme research is increasingly substantial. Ahona (2024) finds that cultural appropriateness and audience familiarity shape the effectiveness of meme-based strategic communication. Uddin and Uddin (2026) analyze Bangla memes on Facebook as a form of communication that can express otherwise unspoken attitudes and transmit social, political, cultural, and economic meanings. These studies establish that local meme culture cannot be reduced to entertainment. Research emerging after the July 2024 uprising makes the political dimension clearer. Hossain (2026) analyzes 77 memes from five meme groups alongside ten hip-hop songs and treats both as hybrid cultural resistance. Mahtab (2026) examines seven image-based political memes and interprets them as postmodern digital folk art that transformed protest, violence, internet shutdowns, and religious references into memorable visual forms. The historical context is crucial. Reuters reported suspension of mobile internet on 18 July 2024 amid violent clashes, while Human Rights Watch and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights documented curfews, arrests, internet disruption, surveillance, media pressure, and extensive violence during the broader protest period (Human Rights Watch, 2024, 2025; OHCHR, 2024, 2025; Reuters, 2024). Meme-making therefore took place in an

environment of intense political uncertainty and restricted connectivity. Two cautions apply to this emerging literature. Hossain (2026) is an advance online publication, and Mahtab (2026) is an undergraduate thesis; both are valuable but are used here as supporting rather than primary evidence.

2.6 Artification, authorship, and mechanical reproduction

Artification offers a way to take meme aesthetics seriously without declaring all memes to be art. Shapiro (2019) treats artification as a process through which objects and practices acquire art-like forms of evaluation, status, and legitimacy. Applied to memes, the relevant question becomes whether particular works or meme series display intentional formal choices, conceptuality, intertextual construction, cultural specificity, participation, and social agency. The authorship question intersects with classic debates in art and literary theory. Barthes (1977) shifts attention from a sovereign author toward the reader's role in producing meaning, while Foucault (1977) describes authorship as a social function that organizes discourse. Benjamin's (1969) account of mechanical reproduction further challenges the aura of the singular original. These ideas are especially productive when combined with printmaking. In an editioned print, a matrix generates multiple impressions, each recognized as part of the work. The meme extends this logic into a networked environment in which the 'matrix' is digital, the edition is open-ended, and the 'states' are produced by dispersed participants without central control.

2.7 Critical synthesis: debates and research gap

These literatures do not simply add up; they disagree on three points of interest for this study. The first debate concerns value. Communication-oriented work values memes on spread, persuasion, and identity effects (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021; Shifman, 2014) while folklore and art-oriented work values memes for creativity, convention, and cultural fit (Burgess, 2006; de Seta, 2020; Shapiro, 2019). Table 1 summarizes these research streams, their main positions, and the unresolved issues addressed here.

Table 1. Critical map of related research streams and the gap addressed by this study.

Research stream	Representative works	Main position	Unresolved issue addressed here
Meme theory and multimodality	Shifman (2014); Milner (2016); Dancygier & Vandelanotte (2017); Rogers & Giorgi (2024)	Memes are families of multimodal texts defined by variation	Explains form, but not when form becomes art
Vernacular creativity and digital folklore	Burgess (2006); Howard (2008); de Seta (2020)	Everyday creativity has cultural value outside institutions	Underplays intentional formal choice and protest risk
Participatory culture and remix	Jenkins (2006); Lessig (2008); Navas (2012); Leung (2024)	Reuse is a legitimate creative act	Distributed authorship conflicts with legal ownership
Political memes and satire	Scott (1990); Mina (2019); Mortensen & Neumayer (2021); Peters & Allan (2022)	Memes enable dissent but can also normalize harm	Effects are context-dependent and rarely tested
Bangladesh-specific studies	Ahona (2024); Mumu & Rashid (2023); Hossain (2026); Mahtab (2026)	Memes carry local social, political, and emotional meaning	Case-based; no integrated or testable model
Artification and print theory	Benjamin (1969); Ivins (1953); Shapiro (2019)	Art status is a process; reproduction need not destroy value	Not yet applied to open, networked editions

Neither side offers criteria for determining when a meme moves from effective communication to art. The second debate is about politics. Optimistic accounts see memes as weapons of resistance and solidarity (Hossain, 2026; Mina, 2019), while others are more cautious, focusing on fragility, context and the potential for memes to generate hostility (Lukács, 2021; Peters & Allan, 2022; Tufekci, 2017). The third debate is the authorship debate. While distributed creation (Lessig, 2008; Navas, 2012) is valued by remix theory, legal scholarship still gives rights to

identifiable source works (Leung, 2024; Mielczarek & Hopkins, 2021). Three gaps follow. First, no integrated model combines aesthetics, protest, and authorship; each stream covers only one of these concerns. Second, studies conducted in Bangladesh are descriptive and case-based, and cannot yet yield claims testable across corpora. Third, the analogy between memetic variation and printmaking editions, though it is intuitive for artists, has not been theorized in meme research. The present paper covers all three gaps.

3. Integrated Theoretical Framework

The framework developed here (Figure 1) combines five dimensions: multimodal form, vernacularity, remix and participation, civic or protest function, and artification through social use. The dimensions are analytically distinct but mutually reinforcing. Multimodality explains how image and text organize meaning; vernacularity explains why the meme is legible to a particular community; remix explains how meaning develops across versions; political or civic function explains what the meme does socially; and artification asks when these processes generate evaluative qualities associated with contemporary or vernacular art.

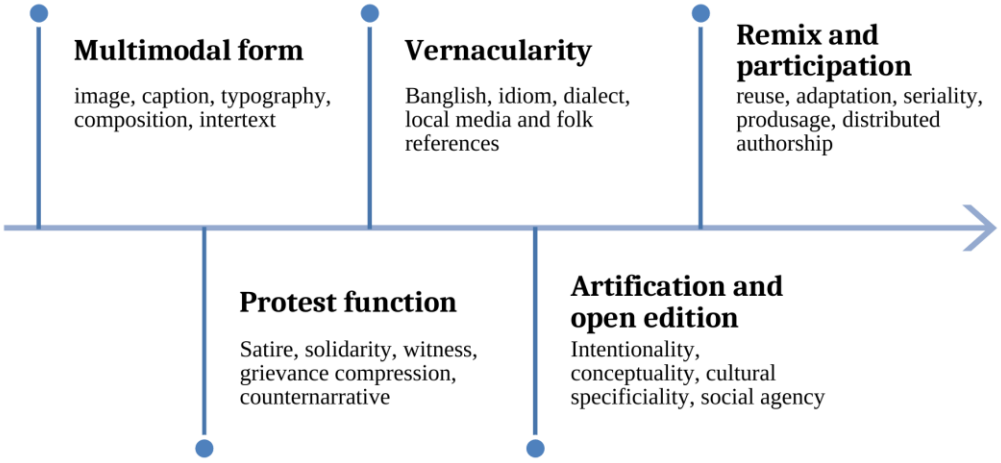


Figure 1. Integrated framework for interpreting Bangladeshi memes as digital vernacular art.

The framework deliberately avoids treating popularity as equivalent to artistic value. A widely circulated image may be effective communication without exhibiting a meaningful relation among formal choice, cultural specificity, transformation, participation, and social agency. Conversely, a meme may possess strong aesthetic and conceptual qualities without institutional recognition. The framework therefore evaluates art status as a situated outcome rather than a starting assumption.

3.1 Testable propositions

This is a conceptual paper, but the framework is stated in falsifiable form. Each dimension yields a proposition linking observable variables. Propositions are not tested here; they set a future research agenda. Three types appear: dimensional (P1–P3), event-based (P4), and evaluative (P5–P6). Table 2 maps each to variables and tests.

P1 (multimodal form): interdependence drives remixability

Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2017) show image macros are multimodal constructions. Cochrane et al. (2022) classify visual and textual dimensions separately. Neither asks how interdependence affects a template's later life. Milner (2013) notes templates stay recognizable while open to new claims. Jointly necessary image–caption pairs offer more entry points for variation than redundant ones.

P1. *Memes whose meaning depends jointly on image and caption, rather than on either mode alone, are more likely to be remixed than memes in which one mode is redundant.*

Scope: P1 concerns remixability, not popularity; measure both separately. Reverse causality is possible, so treat P1 as a cross-sectional association.

P2 (vernacularity): local codes bound engagement
Ahona (2024) and Uddin and Uddin (2026) show memes carry local social and political meanings. Ahona (2024) finds cultural fit shapes effectiveness. Burgess (2006) and Howard (2008) treat vernacular creativity as culturally situated. Milner (2016) ties legibility to shared competence. Local codes should therefore help in-group and hinder out-group reading.
P2. *The density of local cultural codes in a meme is positively associated with engagement among Bangladeshi audiences and negatively associated with circulation among audiences outside Bangladesh.*
Caveat: glossed or "relatable"-framed memes may travel; code for glossing and test the interaction.

P3 (remix and participation): distributed variation sustains templates
Lessig (2008) and Navas (2012) treat reuse as creative authorship. Leung (2024) shows remix pressures singular authorship. Jenkins (2006) and Milner (2016) stress networked participation. These establish that variants proliferate, not how remixer count shapes a template's trajectory. The printmaking analogy (Section 5.4) supplies the mechanism: an open matrix needs continued re-inking (Ivins, 1953; Pelzer-Montada, 2018).
P3a. *As the number of independent users who remix a template increases, the semantic diversity of its variants increases relative to the original template.*
P3b. *Greater semantic diversity among a template's variants is positively associated with the template's lifespan.*

P4 (protest function): crisis shifts meme-stream composition
Dean (2019), Gal et al. (2016), Mina (2019), and Moreno-Almeida (2021) show memes condense grievance and build identity. Hossain (2026) and Mahtab (2026) read July 2024 memes as resistance and folk art. These studies are interpretive; they do not specify compositional shifts across a crisis. The documented shutdown and reopening (Human Rights Watch, 2024; OHCHR, 2024; Reuters, 2024) supply testable interruption points.
P4. *During periods of political crisis and restricted connectivity, the proportion of satirical and solidarity memes in the overall meme stream is higher than in baseline periods, and the increase is largest in the days immediately following the restoration of connectivity.*
P4 is event-based, not dimensional. Specify the primary interruption point. Tufekci (2017) and Lukács (2021) caution that symbolic shifts are not causal proof.

P5 (artification): artistic value is not reducible to virality
Shapiro (2019) treats artification as a process, not a label. Burgess (2006), de Seta (2020), and Zaib et al. (2026) locate value in vernacular creativity. No study translates this into predictors of judged artistic value. The first four dimensions supply those predictors; circulation is the rival variable to be controlled.
P5. *Judged artistic value is positively predicted by scores on the first four dimensions (multimodal form, vernacularity, remix and participation, and civic or protest function), and share count is at most a weak positive predictor of judged artistic value after controlling for those dimensions.*
Measure artistic value with a multi-item scale and reported reliability. Code dimensions independently of outcomes to limit common-method bias. Report audience–expert agreement rather than assuming it.

P6 (convergence): protest function moderates vernacular and remix effects
Section 5.2 claims the dimensions reinforce each other under protest. This has two parts. Interdependence among dimensions is descriptive and weakly testable. Moderation of specific effects on artistic value is directly testable. Only the second is stated formally here.

P6. *Civic or protest function moderates the relationship between (a) vernacular density and judged artistic value and (b) remix and judged artistic value, such that both relationships are stronger for memes with a civic or protest function than for memes without one.*

P6 needs an interaction term in regression or multigroup SEM. Code civic function with an explicit rule and report inter-coder reliability. Treat the interdependence claim as a descriptive corollary, not a formal proposition.

Table 2 maps each proposition to indicative variables and analytical techniques. This paper does not estimate relationships between variables; it lays the groundwork for future research that will. The mobile internet shutdown of 18 July 2024 provides a suitable interruption point for P4 (interrupted time series). Regression and structural equation modelling suit P1, P2, P5, and P6; survival analysis suits P3b; longitudinal diversity models suit P3a.

Table 2. Operationalization of the propositions for future empirical testing

Proposition	Independent variable(s)	Dependent variable	Suggested test
P1	Image–text interdependence (0 = redundant, 1 = complementary, 2 = strictly interdependent)	Number of derivative variants	Coded corpus; negative binomial regression
P2	Vernacular density index (Bangla/Banglish tokens plus coded local references; stated weighting)	Engagement inside vs. outside Bangladesh (separate models)	Platform metrics; regression; glossing moderator
P3a	Number of independent remixers (distinct, verified accounts)	Semantic diversity of variants (stance entropy; token divergence)	Remix genealogies; longitudinal diversity model
P3b	Semantic diversity of variants	Template lifespan (days until circulation falls below a stated threshold)	Remix genealogies; survival analysis
P4	Crisis/shutdown period (dummy; primary interruption specified)	Share of satirical and solidarity memes in daily stream	Daily counts; interrupted time series
P5	Scores on Dimensions 1–4 (coded from corpus); share count	Judged artistic value (multi-item scale; audience and expert samples separate)	Survey; SEM; incremental-validity test
P6	Civic function × vernacular density; civic function × remix	Judged artistic value	Survey; moderated regression or multigroup SEM

4. Approach and Methodology

4.1 Data collection methods

This is a conceptual paper of the type "theory-synthesis" and "model building" (Jaakkola, 2020). It builds theory rather than measuring effects, using a qualitative integrative synthesis (Torraco, 2005), and contextual discourse analysis. It does not rely on interviews, participant observation or an original primary meme corpus. This is a conscious decision. Claims about how memes circulate, who creates them, and who consumes them are sometimes made without a transparent data source. The paper does not present undocumented examples as proof. It keeps the evidence base explicitly secondary and offers its central claims as propositions to be tested in later work (Section 3.1).

4.2 Sources and selection criteria

The synthesis drew on peer-reviewed papers, scholarly books, meme studies specific to Bangladesh, and credible reports documenting the context of July 2024, grouped into seven thematic clusters: (i) internet meme theory, (ii) multimodality and visual meaning, (iii) vernacular creativity and digital folklore, (iv) participatory culture and remix, (v) political memes and digital activism, (vi) artification and authorship, and (vii) ethics, copyright, and born-digital preservation. Three criteria were used to select the items: they must be directly relevant to at least one of the framework's dimensions; exceptions noted, they must be peer-reviewed or published by an academic press; for Bangladesh, they must focus on memes or digital protest culture. Recent Bangladesh-specific sources were verified against publisher or repository

records. Because Hossain (2026) is an advanced online publication and Mahtab (2026) is an undergraduate thesis, neither is used as the sole basis for a central claim. Reports by Reuters, Human Rights Watch, and OHCHR are cited solely to establish the political and information context of July 2024.

4.3 Analytical procedure

The material was analyzed using eight dimensions: (1) visual form, (2) language/captioning, (3) aesthetic device, (4) vernacular element, (5) political or social function, (6) remix status, (7) authorship pattern, and (8) artification dimension. The categories were used iteratively, i.e., each category was read through the sources, patterns of convergent claims and conflicting claims were compared, and the patterns were summarized and combined into the five dimensions and seven propositions. The same classification is intended to be a coding scheme for a future corpus-based study.

4.4 Ethics statement

The study involved no human participants and reproduced no meme images; formal ethics approval was therefore not required. The wider ethical, legal and archival questions surrounding meme research are covered separately in Section 8.

5. Conceptual Analysis

5.1 A vernacular visual grammar

The first analytical claim is that Bangladeshi meme meaning is relational rather than purely verbal or visual. A meme may depend on a television scene, a celebrity expression, a political photograph, a global template, or an ordinary social situation that users already know. A short Bangla or Banglish caption then redirects the image toward a new context. The meme appears compressed because much of its meaning is supplied by the audience's cultural memory. This supports multimodal accounts in which image and language work as interdependent resources rather than separate layers. Localization is itself a creative operation. Global templates become Bangladeshi through references to school culture, family relations, food, class anxieties, workplace frustrations, popular dramas, regional language, religion, elections, public bureaucracy, or familiar social types. Local images can also become templates through repeated recaptioning (Uddin & Uddin, 2026). In both cases creative achievement lies in preserving enough of an existing form for recognition while changing enough to produce a fresh stance. This balance between fixity and novelty is central to memetic vernacular creativity (Milner, 2013). A vernacular aesthetic may also value roughness. Low-resolution screenshots, abrupt cropping, inconsistent fonts, compressed images, deliberate misspellings, and informal Banglish can signal speed and peer-to-peer authenticity rather than technical failure (Milner, 2016). In a professional design context these features might be judged as defects; within meme culture they can function as social signs that distinguish networked peer expression from institutional communication. The aesthetic is therefore partly relational: it is judged against expectations internal to the community. Language is especially important. Uddin and Uddin (2026) emphasize that Bangla memes can transmit implicit attitudes and multiple social meanings. Word choice can index intimacy, education, class, region, generational identity, irony, or political stance. Banglish adds another layer by allowing hybrid digital registers that are familiar to urban and online audiences. Because humor often depends on tone rather than literal meaning, translation must preserve context as well as denotation.

5.2 From humor to artification

The combined evidence supports a conditional rather than universal claim about art. Memes become plausible candidates for digital vernacular art when their communicative effects depend on deliberate formal and conceptual choices, locally meaningful cultural references, transformative reuse, audience participation, and social interpretation. None of these criteria alone is sufficient. A meme may be visually clever but culturally generic; politically powerful but aesthetically minimal; widely shared but derivative; or artistically inventive while ethically

objectionable. Artification becomes more convincing when several dimensions converge. This approach also explains why gallery recognition is not necessary for analysis. Vernacular creativity often exists outside formal institutions (Burgess, 2006). A meme can display conceptual reframing, intertextuality, montage, typography, serial development, and audience-oriented participation before any museum, archive, or art critic takes it seriously. At the same time, institutional recognition can alter the object by changing how it is framed, preserved, and evaluated. The meme's art status is therefore negotiated across communities and contexts rather than inherent in the file itself (Shapiro, 2019).

5.3 Protest, satire, and political compression in July 2024

The July 2024 uprising created conditions in which compact visual communication acquired heightened significance. The movement began around public-service quota reform but escalated into a national political crisis. During mid-July, internet access was disrupted, curfews and security measures intensified, and competing narratives circulated under conditions of fear and uncertainty (Reuters, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024; OHCHR, 2024). In such an environment, a single image-caption combination could condense grievance, mock an official statement, transform a slogan, memorialize a victim, or communicate solidarity among users who shared the necessary context. Three protest functions recur across the literature. First, satire and delegitimation use parody, ridicule, irony, and comic inversion to puncture the dignity of authority. This aligns with Scott's (1990) account of disguised critique and Bakhtin's (1984) carnivalesque. Second, solidarity and identity emerge when users repeat recognizable templates and jokes that signal a shared stance. Gal, Shifman, and Kampf (2016) describe this relationship between personal expression and collective identity. Third, witness and memory appear when photographs, names, slogans, and events are transformed into recurring visual references that later function as mnemonic shorthand. Bangladesh-specific studies reinforce this interpretation. Hossain (2026) treats memes and hip-hop as hybrid cultural resistance during the uprising, while Mahtab (2026) argues that political memes turned protest events, state violence, internet shutdowns, and religious references into shareable visual forms. These findings do not justify claiming that memes caused the movement's political outcome. A more defensible argument is that they shaped its symbolic, affective, and interpretive environment by making public feeling visible and repeatable. Humor is especially useful because it can create rhetorical ambiguity. In politically sensitive settings, a meme can shift between 'just a joke' and recognizable critique. Moreno-Almeida's (2021) work on satirical participation in Morocco illustrates the broader mechanism, although Bangladesh must be analyzed on its own terms. The ambiguity is politically useful because it allows criticism to circulate through familiar entertainment forms while reducing the distance between ordinary users and public debate (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021). The same ambiguity, however, can also shelter prejudice presented as harmless fun (Peters & Allan, 2022).

5.4 Collective authorship and the meme as an open edition

Meme authorship rarely fits the romantic model of a singular creator. A photograph may be taken by one person, extracted from a film by another, turned into a template by a page administrator, captioned by a third user, translated or localized by a fourth, and circulated again through screenshots and reposts. Meaning accumulates through the sequence. Socially, the meme becomes a collective object even when law continues to assign rights to identifiable source works and creators. The analogy with printmaking clarifies this process. In traditional printmaking, a matrix generates multiple impressions. The work exists through reproducibility rather than despite it, and variation among states or impressions can be meaningful. A digital meme template similarly functions as a matrix. Each version is sufficiently complete to circulate, yet it remains open to recaptioning, cropping, overlay, translation, and recombination. Unlike a numbered and signed print edition, however, the meme's edition is potentially infinite, unnumbered, platform-dependent, and produced by strangers. The analogy therefore highlights both continuity with reproducible art and the distinctive openness of networked authorship. This analogy can be refined by mapping printmaking terminology onto memetic practice. The matrix corresponds to

the template, the base image that carries the recognizable structure. Each variant corresponds to an impression. In print, a state is a deliberate change to the matrix between prints; in meme culture, a state corresponds to a change to the template itself, e.g. a new crop or figure, followed by later variants that take on the change. Proofs and trial impressions resemble the draft versions that circulate briefly in comment threads before one version settles. Ivins (1953) contended that the invention of the print made it possible to make exactly repeatable pictorial statements, and thus to alter the way that images carry information. Memes take this repeatability one step further by making every repetition editable. Contemporary print theory has also questioned the concept of the edition as a closed group of identical copies (Pelzer-Montada, 2018), which brings it closer to meme families. The analogy also has clear limits, and these limits are analytically useful. First, a print matrix is typically made by the artist or workshop, whereas a meme template is usually borrowed from someone else's photograph or film still. Second, a print edition is closed by canceling the plate or by signing and numbering a run, whereas a meme edition has no point of closure and its variants cannot be counted. Third, the continuity of intention across the impressions is assured by the hand of the printmaker, while meme versions can flip the meaning of a meme template, turning a compliment into a mockery. Fourth, prints are durable physical objects, whereas meme variants are files that can be deleted, compressed, or buried by an algorithm. The analogy is therefore best suited to convey the serial variation and the importance of the multiple, and less suited to convey ownership, intention, and permanence. When used with these conditions in mind, it provides a vocabulary for artists and art historians to use when analyzing memetic seriality that does not assume memes are prints.

5.5 Memes as archive and collective memory

Memes can become informal archives of public feeling, but they are fragile archives. A recurring template may become attached to a specific event, emotion, or political claim. When later remixes reactivate the template, they may also reactivate the memory stored in it. This is particularly significant for protest cultures in which official narratives are contested, and digital traces are vulnerable to deletion or censorship. Born-digital archives must preserve more than isolated image files. Publication date, platform, page or creator, caption, language, translation, known remix predecessors, comments, and circulation context can all be necessary to reconstruct meaning. A museum or library that saves only the JPEG may unintentionally erase the network relations that made the object culturally significant. For this reason, meme preservation should focus on genealogies and context, not only files (Rogers & Giorgi, 2024).

6. Discussion

6.1 When does a meme function as digital vernacular art?

The strongest answer is conditional. A meme functions as digital vernacular art when its meaning depends on deliberate formal and conceptual choices; when those choices draw on locally meaningful cultural resources; when reuse transforms rather than merely duplicates prior material; when audiences participate in interpretation or circulation; and when the object acquires social agency within a particular community. This definition avoids both dismissal and overclaiming. It rejects the idea that memes are trivial by nature while also rejecting the assumption that virality automatically produces art. Vernacularity is central to this condition. The locally specific features of Bangladeshi memes—Bangla, Banglish, dialect, family and school references, film dialogue, folk motifs, class markers, political slogans, and recognizable public figures—are not deficits relative to ‘high’ art. They are the sources of communicative density (Uddin & Uddin, 2026). Familiarity secures recognition, recognition enables rapid interpretation, and interpretation makes remix possible. The artistic force of the meme often lies precisely in its ability to make a culturally dense statement through an apparently simple form.

6.2 Platform power, ephemerality, and institutional recognition

Digital vernacular creativity does not circulate in a neutral public sphere. Platforms determine visibility through algorithms, moderation rules, interface design, and commercial priorities. Internet shutdowns and platform restrictions can abruptly interrupt cultural participation

(Human Rights Watch, 2024; OHCHR, 2024). Deletions, account suspensions, page changes, and self-censorship create gaps in the archive. For this reason, any claim about meme circulation must acknowledge that the visible corpus is shaped by infrastructure as well as by users (Rogers & Giorgi, 2024). Institutional recognition introduces another tension. Museums, universities, and archives can preserve memes as contemporary cultural heritage, but institutional framing may also detach them from the rapid, participatory contexts that produced them. Enlarging a meme and hanging it on a wall risks treating it like a singular static image. A more faithful curatorial approach would show sequences, variants, source materials, remix chains, timelines, and audience responses. In this sense, the network rather than the isolated image may be the more appropriate unit of exhibition.

7. Theoretical and Practical Implications

7.1 Theoretical implications

The framework has three theoretical implications. First, it moves the debate on meme aesthetics away from whether memes are art and toward the conditions under which a meme comes to function as art. This introduces Shapiro's (2019) processual account of artification into meme studies and provides observable indicators (Table 2). Second, it builds on theories of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006; Milner, 2016) to emphasize that participation is both a social and a formal condition: the number and diversity of variants are part of the work. Third, the printmaker's multiple, with its limited edition, connects art theory and digital culture. It implies that the long debate on reproduction (Benjamin, 1969; Ivins, 1953) needs to be extended to editions that are open, editable, and collectively authored.

7.2 Practical and managerial implications

The framework also has practical applications. For archivists and librarians, the analysis in Section 5.5 suggests that protest memes should be archived as genealogies linked to their predecessors, recording date, platform, caption, translation, and remix history (Rogers & Giorgi, 2024). For curators, it recommends showing sequences and remix chains rather than single “enlarged” images, thus preserving the participatory character of the work. For art teachers in Bangladesh, the eight analytical categories can serve as classroom aids for teaching visual literacy, satire, and the ethics of appropriation through familiar materials. For platform and media managers, Propositions 2 and 4 suggest that moderation systems trained primarily on global data can misread locally coded satire, which supports investment in Bangla-language moderation capacity. For communication practitioners, Ahona’s (2024) finding that cultural fit shapes campaign effectiveness highlights the importance of vernacular density over template popularity, while the evidence on body shaming (Mumu & Rashid, 2023) serves as a reminder that humor can cause real harm.

8. Ethical, Legal, and Archival Tensions

8.1 Ethical issues: harm and responsibility

An art-centered account of memes must not aestheticize harm. The same devices that support satire can also support harassment, misogyny, communal hostility, dehumanization, body shaming, and misinformation (Mumu & Rashid, 2023; Peters & Allan, 2022). Ethical evaluation therefore cannot be separated from formal analysis. A meme can be aesthetically sophisticated and socially harmful at the same time. Researchers should distinguish critique directed toward institutions and public power from content that targets private or vulnerable individuals. Public availability does not remove this responsibility: meme research can involve identifiable private individuals and politically vulnerable creators, so the reproduction of sensitive images should be minimized.

8.2 Legal issues: copyright and attribution

Copyright presents another unresolved problem. Memes frequently incorporate protected photographs, film stills, logos, illustrations, and screenshots. Smith and Lantagne (2021) and Leung (2024) show that meme culture complicates conventional ownership and authorship, and Mielczarek and Hopkins (2021) show that courts tend to protect reuse only when it is

transformative. Public circulation should not be treated as automatic permission for republication in scholarship or exhibitions. Where rights are uncertain, description, redrawn analytical figures, or properly licensed archival links may be preferable to reproducing the meme itself.

8.3 Archival and political issues: risk, misinformation, and preservation

Political sensitivity is especially important in Bangladesh. Archives of protest memes may contain information that identifies ordinary users or politically vulnerable creators. Attribution can be culturally valuable but may also increase risk. Ethical preservation therefore requires contextual judgment: public pages, professional creators, anonymous users, and private individuals should not be treated in the same way. In some cases, preserving provenance while withholding identifying details may be the most responsible approach. Misinformation must also be treated as a substantive analytical category. Humor and visual compression can increase shareability while weakening the cues that distinguish documentation from exaggeration or fabrication. Archives should therefore retain source context and uncertainty labels rather than presenting every viral image as factual evidence of an event.

9. Conclusion

Bangladeshi meme culture is best understood neither as trivial online humor nor as art by default. It is a field of everyday visual production in which aesthetic, folkloric, political, communicative, and archival functions overlap. The paper answers its four research questions. First, art status in memes is conditional. It depends on the convergence of multimodal form, vernacular density, transformative remix, civic function, and social agency, not on virality (RQ1 and RQ2). Second, authorship in memes is best described as an open edition, in which the template acts as a borrowed matrix and each variant as an impression; the analogy explains seriality well but not ownership or permanence (RQ3). The analogy is therefore a tool for analysis, not a legal or ontological claim. Third, treating memes as heritage creates obligations that are ethical, legal, and archival at once, and these are better handled separately than as one general caution (RQ4). Separating these obligations makes each one actionable for archives, curators, and researchers. The central argument is therefore that selected forms of Bangladeshi meme production can function as digital vernacular art when formal intentionality, local cultural knowledge, intertextual remix, participatory circulation, and social agency converge. The framework's value lies in what it makes testable, not in what it settles. Like a print, the meme exists through its multiples; unlike a print edition, however, its edition is open, unstable, and collectively authored. To study this culture seriously is to study how public feeling becomes visual, editable, repeatable, and archived through networks.

9.1 Limitations

This study has four main limitations. First, it is conceptual and relies on secondary sources, so its claims about circulation and audience response remain to be tested. Second, Bangladesh-specific sources are few and recent, and one is an undergraduate thesis, so some interpretations may need adjustment as this literature develops. Third, the analysis focuses on image-based memes that are centred on Facebook and neglects video memes and closed messaging groups, where much circulation occurs today. Fourth, it was developed in the context of July 2024, so its application to other political periods or countries should be explored rather than assumed.

9.2 Future research

It is recommended that the propositions be tested in future research by employing a documented and ethically controlled corpus of Bangladeshi memes that are gathered in conjunction with their remix genealogies and metadata. Audiences, artists, and curators can be surveyed to assess the perceived artistic value of memes and to test the structural model suggested by Propositions 5 and 6, and interrupted time-series designs can be used to explore shifts in meme flows before, during, and after the shutdown and restoration of internet access in July 2024. Comparative

studies across South Asia, and practice-based studies in which printmakers deliberately work with a memetic template, would test the reach and limits of the open-edition analogy.

9.3 Policy implications

There are three policy implications. First, Bangladesh's national archives, university libraries, and museums should establish protocols for collecting born-digital protest culture that are sensitive to context and protect the identities of vulnerable creators. Second, the documented use of internet shutdowns during the uprising (Human Rights Watch, 2024; OHCHR, 2025) demonstrates that network shutdowns also disrupt cultural participation and erase parts of the public record, which should be considered when drafting a policy on network disruption. Third, copyright advice for educators, researchers, and cultural institutions should also make clear when transforming, non-commercial reuse for commentary, criticism, and teaching is acceptable, enabling scholarship and exhibitions to deal with memes without perpetuating harm or infringing rights (Leung, 2024; Mielczarek & Hopkins, 2021).

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