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FROM LAUGHTER TO LIGHTNESS: MEMES AS A DIGITAL COPING MECHANISM

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ABSTRACT

This study, conducted in rural fishing communities in Cape Coast, Ghana, and grounded in the Relief Theory, explores how ''memes'', short, humorous digital artefacts, function as informal coping mechanisms among rural dwellers. Through eleven focus group discussions (n = 44), the study identifies patterns in meme engagement, content types, and underlying motivations. Thematic analysis revealed that meme viewing and sharing are daily rituals embedded in the rhythms of rural life, and persists despite economic constraints. Participants described memes as tools that "lighten the heart," providing temporary relief from stress and creating moments of shared laughter and social connection. Locally grounded forms, featuring Ghanaian comedians, Pidgin expressions, and culturally resonant humor, were especially popular, reflecting how memes translate lived struggles into collective amusement. Beyond individual catharsis, memes also serve as subtle forms of social commentary, allowing participants to voice frustrations about political, economic, and social issues through humor. The findings extend Relief Theory by showing that laughter functions not only as emotional release but also as communal resilience in digitally connected, resource-limited settings. By framing memes as digital coping devices, this study challenges the trivialization of online humor and underscores its psychosocial significance. Implications are offered for mental health advocacy, social welfare, and policy design, suggesting that culturally embedded humor can be a powerful, low-cost tool for strengthening well-being in rural communities.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, internet access has expanded rapidly, transforming the way people connect, communicate, and entertain themselves (Shanmugasundaram & Tamilarasu, 2023; Han, 2024; Cyber Security Intelligence, 2025). What was once a luxury available to only a small segment of the population has become a common part of daily life, reaching both urban centres and smaller communities. Affordable smartphones, competitive data packages, and widespread mobile network coverage have made the cyber world accessible to millions who previously had limited or no online presence (Manyika et al., 2013; Shanahan & Bahia, 2024; Teodorescu et al., 2023). This technological accessibility has created fertile ground for the growth of online cultures, including the circulation of memes, digital humour, and other forms of expressive media that help people navigate social and emotional stress (Yusuf, 2024; Tang, 2024; Mitman & Denham, 2024). Within this context, the routine act of purchasing data or airtime reflects more than just a financial habit; it underscores users' desire to remain connected to digital spaces where humour sharing, and collective coping occur.

The emergence of memes as a dominant form of online expression can be traced to the participatory and interactive nature of digital culture. Originally conceptualized by Dawkins (1976; 2006) as units of cultural transmission, memes in the digital era have evolved into internet-based graphics, videos, or textual formats that user's remix, adapt, and circulate within virtual communities (Shifman, 2013; Milner, 2016). Their strength lies in their simplicity and relatability; a meme can capture shared emotions, social commentary, or collective humour in a single image or short clip. By evoking laughter and recognition, memes foster a sense of shared experience, allowing individuals to connect emotionally across distances and circumstances (Dynel, 2016; Chagas et al., 2019). This capacity for shared meaning and humour has led to their increasing role as informal coping mechanisms, particularly in times of stress or uncertainty. As users engage with memes, they not only consume entertainment but also participate in communal emotional regulation- laughing at, and through, their challenges together (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015; Ngai et al., 2024). In this sense, memes represent more than light-hearted amusement; they embody digital resilience and collective coping in online environments.

Statement of the Problem

Across Ghana, mobile phone penetration and data usage have risen steadily, even in communities where incomes are low and resources are limited (National Communications Authority, 2016; Tanle & Abane, 2018; Adika, 2024). Despite this rapid growth, there has been relatively little examination of what people actually use the internet for on a daily basis. In the Ghanaian research landscape, many existing studies on internet use have tended to focus on aspects such as cyberloafing (Twum et al., 2021), cybercrime (Baafi, 2021), online fraud (Fan & Nunyuie, 2019; Jibril et al., 2020), or the dangers of excessive screen time (Kyei-Arthur et al., 2024). While these are important areas of concern, they provide only one side of the picture. The possibility that internet use may also yield positive social, emotional, or psychological outcomes has received far less attention.

Memes, for instance, have become more than just a passing online trend. In countless conversations, individuals have described watching them to "relieve stress," "lift their mood," or "help pass the time" after work or school (Akram & Drabble, 2022). For some, they provide a quick escape from daily challenges; for others, they act as a source of shared laughter and social connection (Ngo, 2023). In contexts where access to professional mental health services may be limited, digital humour of this kind may serve as an informal coping strategy, a way for people to manage stress, maintain a sense of lightness, and strengthen social bonds through shared amusement (Dionigi, 2023; Occa et al., 2025; Simione & Gnagnarella, 2023). If such positive uses can be better understood and documented, there is potential to support and strengthen these practices in ways that contribute to community well-being. However, the extent to which people engage in this kind of internet use, and the specific benefits they derive from it, remains underexplored in Ghana.

Although a growing body of global scholarship, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, has examined how memes provide stress relief, foster social bonding, and serve as informal tools for mood regulation (Akram et al., 2021), there are significant gaps concerning the African contexts, particularly rural Ghana. There is little evidence addressing how frequently people in such communities engage with memes, what types of memes they tend to consume, and what motivates their engagement. To fill this gap, the present study explores meme consumption as a form of digital coping and social connection in rural fishing communities in Cape Coast, Ghana. Specifically, it investigates how often people in these communities engage with memes, what kinds of memes are most commonly consumed, and the reasons individuals give for watching them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Relief Theory and the Power of Humour

Relief theory, rooted in Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905/1960), provides one of the earliest and most influential explanations of humour and its psychological functions. According to this perspective, humour and laughter serve as a means of releasing pent-up emotions, frustrations, or anxieties that individuals might otherwise find difficult to express openly. Laughter becomes a socially acceptable channel through which tension is discharged, producing a cathartic effect that restores a sense of psychological equilibrium (Freud, 1960). In this sense, humour is not merely a form of entertainment but an adaptive mechanism that helps people cope with the challenges of daily life.

In rural fishing communities in Cape Coast, Ghana, as in many parts of the world, individuals are faced with daily stressors ranging from economic hardship and limited educational opportunities to family responsibilities and social pressures. In such contexts, memes (i.e., short, humorous digital artefacts) function as immediate and accessible forms of relief. Their brevity and relatability make them effective tools for reducing stress in the moment, providing individuals with what Freud would describe as a safe outlet for otherwise unexpressed tensions (Frigillano, 2023). For instance, memes that exaggerate the inconvenience of "dumsor" (power outages) or rising food prices allow audiences to momentarily laugh at circumstances that might otherwise provoke

anxiety or frustration (Mathobie, 2022). The laughter that follows does not solve the structural problems themselves but does provide temporary psychological release, enabling individuals to carry on with a lighter emotional load.

Moreover, relief theory explains why individuals often report feeling "lighter," "happier," or "less burdened" after viewing or sharing memes. Contemporary empirical studies lend support to this interpretation. Samson and Gross (2012) demonstrated that humour can downregulate negative emotional responses, while Akram et al. (2021) found that anxious individuals rated memes as more humorous, relatable, and shareable than their non-anxious counterparts. These findings align with the basic claim of relief theory, that humour provides a mechanism for releasing inner tension and restoring affective balance. In the Ghanaian context, where access to formal mental health care remains limited, memes may act as informal therapeutic tools, filling a gap by offering low-cost, easily accessible forms of emotional regulation. At the same time, an appraisal of relief theory must recognise its limitations. One critique is its reductionism; it tends to explain humour solely as a function of tension release, overlooking the multifaceted purposes of humour such as identity expression, political critique, or social bonding (Morreall, 2009). The act of sharing a meme and receiving responses from friends or family contributes as much to its relieving function as the content itself. Relief theory does not fully capture this interactive, communal dimension of humour. Despite these shortcomings, relief theory remains highly relevant to this study. It offers a strong theoretical foundation for understanding why memes are often described as mood-lifting and stress-relieving. Its central claim that laughter lightens emotional burdens, captures the core phenomenon this study investigates: the way people in rural fishing communities in Cape Coast, Ghana uses memes to move "from laughter to lightness." However, it must be complemented with other theoretical perspectives, such as coping theory or collective coping models, to provide a more comprehensive explanation of how memes operate both at the individual and communal level. By situating memes within the framework of relief theory, this study highlights their function as more than trivial amusements, and recognize them instead as meaningful coping devices that contribute to emotional well-being in everyday life.

Empirical Perspectives on Meme Consumption and Emotional Coping

While humour theories provide a conceptual lens, empirical studies on memes as coping mechanisms reveal how these dynamics unfold in practice. Nautiyal and Chakraborty (2023) conducted a qualitative study to explore how memes help individuals cope with existential dread. Their findings revealed that memes allowed respondents to articulate anxieties while simultaneously providing comic relief. Participants described memes as relatable, therapeutic, and capable of reducing loneliness and isolation. This underscores the idea that memes are not trivial digital artifacts; rather, they play meaningful psychological roles in individuals' lives. These results align with earlier work by Martin (2007), who argued that shared humour provides emotional ventilation during periods of stress. However, Nautiyal and Chakraborty's global and online focus does not clarify how frequently individuals consume memes, nor does it address which categories of memes are most effective in alleviating distress. Moreover, the lack of attention to African cultural contexts, where local humour traditions and limited internet access may shape meme practices limits the study's relevance for rural Ghana.

Building on this, Bunker (2025) examined memes as coping tools during the COVID-19 pandemic by analyzing 272 social media memes. The study identified six main stress themes: quarantine, social distancing, shortages, lifestyle changes, health concerns, and public perceptions. Memes addressing these themes reflected different coping strategies, with some offering direct critique of stressors (primary coping) and others normalizing or reframing challenges (secondary coping). The strength of this work lies in demonstrating that memes help normalize collective stress and provide emotional relief through shared experience. Similar findings were echoed by Flecha-Ortiz et al. (2021), who studied meme use in Puerto Rico and concluded that memes function as "collective coping strategies," helping communities move from anxiety to resilience. Yet, both studies concentrated on the content of memes rather than the perspectives of audiences. As a

result, they shed little light on why individuals consume memes, how often they seek them out, or whether certain meme genres (such as video versus image memes) are more effective in producing coping benefits. These gaps underscore the need for audience-centered research that engages directly with consumers.

Closer to the Ghanaian context, Marfo et al. (2022) examined humour during the COVID-19 pandemic and discovered that humour, often expressed through meme-like posts, helped reduce fear and anxiety. They observed that humour became more frequent over time, serving as a way for people to discuss the crisis in less threatening terms. This study is significant because it highlights humour as a cultural resource for resilience in Ghana. The findings resonate with Poschinger and Shannon (2024), who argued that humor transforms collective trauma into manageable experiences across digital spaces. However, Marfo et al.'s emphasis on urban populations overlooks rural communities, where internet access and digital practices may differ considerably. For instance, rural individuals may not consume memes with the same frequency due to infrastructural and economic constraints, raising questions about whether the same coping functions apply equally across rural and urban contexts.

Further insight into Ghanaian meme culture is provided by Quarcoo and Kholinar (2023), who carried out a multimodal discourse analysis of 100 humorous posts from Facebook and WhatsApp. Their findings showed that Ghanaian memes frequently integrate multiple semiotic resources, such as codeswitching between English, Twi, and Pidgin, and the use of visual imagery and cultural references. This multimodality enhances relatability by embedding humour in shared cultural and linguistic practices. Such findings align with the work of Shifman (2014) ; Milner (2016), who emphasized the participatory and culturally grounded nature of memes globally. However, Quarcoo and Kholinar's analysis centered on meme construction rather than meme consumption. The study does not clarify why individuals engage with these memes, how often they do so, or whether rural audiences consume memes differently from urban audiences.

Beyond cultural considerations, some studies have focused more directly on the relationship between memes and mental health. Akram et al. (2021), for example, investigated how individuals with different anxiety levels responded to COVID-19 memes. Their findings indicated that anxious individuals rated memes as more humorous, relatable, and shareable than non-anxious individuals. This suggests that memes may play an especially significant coping role for those experiencing heightened stress, a conclusion consistent with Samson and Gross (2012) work linking humour to emotional regulation. While this strengthens the case for memes as psychological coping tools, Akram et al.'s study was conducted in Western settings and relied on quantitative surveys, raising questions about cultural transferability. Meme culture in rural Ghana, for example, may differ in terms of access to meme formats (static versus video), the influence of local dialects, and the embedding of humour in communal traditions. These differences highlight the importance of context-sensitive research that examines meme consumption patterns in underexplored regions such as rural Ghana.

The aforementioned studies establish that memes have the potential to alleviate stress, reduce anxiety, and foster a sense of collective resilience. They also show that humour in digital spaces is shaped by cultural and linguistic practices. Yet, despite these insights, existing research does not adequately address the specific questions guiding the present study, namely, how frequently memes are consumed, what kinds of memes are most prominent, and what reasons individuals give for engaging with them. These questions are especially pressing in rural Ghana, where humour, internet access, and coping practices intersect in unique ways that remain underexplored in the scholarly literature.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences and perspectives of rural dwellers in fishing communities in Cape Coast, Ghana, regarding the use of

memes as coping mechanisms. A qualitative approach allowed the researchers to capture the meanings participants attach to their internet use, the types of memes they consume, and the reasons they attribute to their meme consumption. As Creswell and Poth (2018) note, qualitative methods are particularly suited to inquiries that seek to understand human behaviour, social practices, and subjective interpretations in their natural contexts. Within this framework, focus group discussions (FGDs) were selected as the primary method of data collection. This method was effective for generating insights into shared practices and meanings, especially within communities where collective experiences are central. By encouraging participants to interact, discuss, and reflect together, the focus group approach enabled the researchers to observe not only individual perspectives but also the social dynamics surrounding meme consumption. Given that humour is inherently social, the FGD approach was particularly well-suited to this study.

The research was carried out in rural fishing communities in Cape Coast, Ghana. The target population consisted of adult community members who regularly used mobile phones and had some exposure to memes, regardless of literacy level. A total of 11 focus group discussions were conducted, with four participants in each group, yielding an overall sample size of 44. The relatively small size of each focus group was deliberate, as it allowed participants to engage more freely in discussion while accommodating their limited availability. Recruitment of participants was based on a combination of convenience and purposive sampling. Convenience sampling was employed because participation depended largely on the availability of individuals in the evenings after they had completed their domestic and occupational responsibilities, particularly cooking and fishing-related work. At the same time, purposive sampling was applied to ensure that participants reflected the study's focus on marginalized groups. All participants had limited formal education, with the highest level attained being junior high school. None had progressed to senior secondary education or beyond. This criterion was important as the study sought to explore how memes function as coping strategies among individuals who may have limited access to formal mental health resources and fewer digital literacy skills.

The focus group discussions were held in community centres within the fishing villages and were scheduled in consultation with community leaders to ensure convenience for participants. Most sessions were conducted in the evenings, when participants were available, and each discussion lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. The sessions were conducted in the local language most familiar to the participants, with translation and interpretation provided where necessary. A semi-structured interview guide was used to steer the discussions, with questions focusing on three main areas: the frequency of meme consumption, the types of memes consumed, and the reasons for meme engagement. Probing questions were included to elicit deeper insights and encourage participants to share personal experiences.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the study. Approval for the research was obtained from the Department of Education and Psychology of the University of Cape Coast (UCC). In addition, clearance was sought from village authorities, who granted permission for the study to be conducted within the communities. Prior to each discussion, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Verbal informed consent was obtained, given the participants' limited literacy levels. To ensure confidentiality, no names were recorded, and participants were identified only by codes during transcription and analysis. The discussions were conducted in a respectful and culturally sensitive manner to ensure that participants felt comfortable and safe in sharing their experiences.

Analysis of Data
The focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach. This process involved familiarisation with the data, coding, and organising emerging ideas into meaningful themes. Coding was inductive, allowing

categories to emerge from the data itself, though the research questions also guided the focus. To ensure validity, preliminary findings were shared with selected participants informally ("member checking"), where they confirmed that the summaries reflected their experiences accurately.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
The findings are presented in three broad thematic strands corresponding to the research questions: (1) the frequency of meme consumption, (2) the types of memes consumed, and (3) the reasons participants gave for watching memes. In addition, an emergent theme concerning memes as informal social commentary is also discussed. Each theme is explored with illustrative quotes from participants, followed by interpretation in relation to Relief Theory and existing scholarship.

Meme Consumption as Everyday Ritual
Participants described meme consumption as a daily activity, integrated into their routines despite the economic challenges of purchasing mobile data. For many, watching memes was not an occasional pastime but something habitual, especially in the evenings after fishing, trading, or cooking. As one woman explained:
"*After cooking in the evening, I just take my phone and check WhatsApp. I watch the funny videos until I sleep.*" (Female Participant, FGD 7)
Even though data costs were mentioned as a burden, participants still prioritised spending small amounts on bundles for entertainment. One male participant expressed this bluntly:
"Even if I don't have much money, I will buy small bundle. Because after the day's stress, it is the funny videos that make me forget the wahala." (Male Participant, FGD 2)
Such testimonies reinforce Freud's Relief Theory that laughter generated by memes provides a cathartic release from accumulated pressures (Freud, 1960; Akram et al., 2021). The insistence on allocating scarce resources to internet bundles illustrates that memes are perceived not as luxuries but as essential coping resources for managing stress in daily life.

Types of Memes and Local Relevance
When participants were asked about the kinds of memes they watched and shared, several distinct categories emerged, all of which were deeply embedded in Ghanaian culture and everyday struggles.
Reaction Memes were among the most popular, often featuring screenshots of well-known Ghanaian celebrities, pastors, or actors making exaggerated facial expressions. Icons like ''Lil Win'', ''Agya Koo'', ''Ras Nene'', and ''Akrobeto'' (Ghanaian comedians who create comedy in the local languages) were repeatedly cited. One participant laughed as he explained:
"If you see Akrobeto saying 'who nose tomorrow,' with his big nose, you will just laugh because it is true. Things are hard, but the way he says it makes you forget." (Male Participant, FGD 4)
These reaction memes resonated because they mirrored the frustrations and absurdities of rural life but in a humorous, exaggerated manner.
Political and Satirical Memes were also common, particularly those mocking "dumsor" (power cuts), fuel prices, or political figures. These memes provided participants with both laughter and a subtle outlet for social critique. As one man explained:
"The ones about government make me laugh, but also it is true. Things are hard, and the jokes says it better than we can." (Male Participant, FGD 8)
This aligns with Milner's (2016) argument that memes often function simultaneously as humour and as political commentary, though participants here stressed the laughter more than the critique.
Everyday Struggles Memes formed another dominant category. These included memes about traffic, "trotro" mates (bus conductors), long queues, or mobile money issues. Participants laughed at a common meme format where someone is sweating profusely with the caption: "When

ECG takes the light just as you plug your phone." Such memes were popular precisely because they reflected daily frustrations in rural and urban Ghana alike.

Slang and Pidgin Memes were described as especially enjoyable because they used familiar local expressions such as "Eii," "Wahala," or "Abi you dey feel am?" For participants with limited formal education, memes in Pidgin or Fante were far more relatable than those in English. As one young man explained:

"If it is in English, I don't always get it. But when they do it in Fante or Pidgin, I laugh plenty. It feels like it is about us." (Male Participant, FGD 9)

This supports Quarcoo and Kholinar's (2023) finding that codeswitching and cultural references increase relatability in Ghanaian memes.

TikTok and Video Memes were highlighted as especially important, given participants' limited literacy. Short skits by comedians such as Ras Nene, Teacher Kwadwo, or "Made in Ghana" were frequently shared in WhatsApp groups. These were popular not only for humour but also because videos could be understood without reading text.

Finally, Wholesome or Cultural Memes were also valued, particularly those that drew on food, church life, or proverbs. A woman laughed as she recalled a meme about food:

"When the waakye seller adds extra plantain unasked- that one, it is true happiness." (Female Participant, FGD 6)

These wholesome memes were described as uplifting and "making the heart light," blending cultural pride with humour.

In summary, the types of memes consumed were wide-ranging but consistently grounded in Ghanaian cultural and social realities. They provided not only entertainment but also an avenue for rural dwellers to see their struggles reflected and reframed in humorous ways.

Memes as Stress Relief and Social Bonding

Perhaps the strongest theme to emerge from the focus groups was the role of memes in relieving stress and creating social connection. Participants often described memes as tools that "lighten the heart," offering temporary escape from financial, occupational, and domestic pressures. A woman in Group 3 explained:

"Sometimes the day is too hard. The money is not coming. But when I watch funny videos, my heart feels light. I even forget my problems for a while." (Female Participant, FGD 3)

In addition to individual stress relief, memes were widely described as bonding tools. Participants explained that they often forwarded memes to family and friends as a way of showing care and maintaining relationships. A young man in Group 6 remarked:

"If I see something funny, I send it to my brother. He will laugh and then send me back another one. That is how we chat when we don't have much to say." (Male Participant, FGD 6)

This sharing process highlights the social nature of memes. Rather than being consumed privately, memes became part of communal life, creating shared moments of laughter even in the absence of physical togetherness. This finding supports Flecha-Ortiz et al.'s (2021) idea of memes as collective coping strategies, helping groups to experience solidarity in times of stress.

Emergent Theme: Memes as Informal Social Commentary

While most participants consumed memes primarily for stress relief, some also engaged with memes that carried political or social critique. Satirical memes about fuel prices, corruption, or economic hardship were popular because they "spoke truth" in a humorous way. One participant explained:

"Sometimes the meme is funny, but you know it is also true about the country. Things are not easy, and the meme says it in a way we can laugh." (Female Participant, FGD 10)

This dual function of memes of humour and critique underscore the versatility of memes as cultural artefacts. While Relief Theory captures their stress-relieving function, this emergent theme shows that memes also create space for commentary, giving rural dwellers a voice in conversations they might otherwise feel excluded from.

Implications of the Study

The findings of this study demonstrate that memes are far more than trivial digital entertainment; they serve as everyday coping mechanisms for rural dwellers in fishing communities in Cape Coast, Ghana's. By offering laughter, relatability, and shared social experiences, memes help individuals manage stress and reinforce social bonds. These insights carry important implications for mental health advocacy, social welfare practice, healthcare, community leadership, and national policy. For mental health advocates, the study highlights the need to recognise memes as informal but significant tools of emotional regulation. Reaction memes featuring familiar figures such as Lil Win or Ras Nene, and wholesome memes about food or church, help rural dwellers "lighten the heart." These low-cost, culturally embedded resources could be integrated into mental health promotion campaigns. For instance, advocates could design humorous, locally relevant memes about stress, anxiety, or substance use, making psychoeducation more relatable and reducing stigma around mental health conversations. For social welfare agencies and practitioners, memes can be used as entry points to engage with vulnerable populations. Everyday struggles memes about power cuts, fuel prices, or market life, provide a language of humour that resonates with marginalised groups. Social workers could incorporate such memes into community outreach to break down barriers and build rapport. In addition, memes using Pidgin or local slang can be powerful for communicating welfare messages to groups with limited literacy, ensuring inclusivity in information-sharing. For healthcare providers and hospitals, memes offer opportunities to reduce patient anxiety and create supportive environments. TikTok and video memes were especially valued by participants because they could be understood without reading. Hospitals could therefore play short, uplifting clips in waiting areas to ease the stress of patients and caregivers. Furthermore, reaction memes could be used in health campaigns on WhatsApp or Facebook to remind communities about preventive care, vaccination, or nutrition in ways that feel humorous rather than didactic.

For community leaders, memes represent tools for reinforcing cohesion and collective resilience. In rural Ghana, where communal life is highly valued, the sharing of memes strengthens social ties. Leaders, churches, and youth groups could use wholesome and cultural memes- drawing on proverbs, local foods, or festivals to promote unity, spread positive messages, and address sensitive issues like alcoholism or domestic disputes in a light-hearted but impactful way. For policymakers, the study underscores that memes are not only cultural products but also resources for social well-being. Political and satirical memes demonstrate that rural communities use humour to process frustrations about governance, "dumsor," and the economy. This suggests that internet access is not simply an economic driver but also a psychosocial resource. Policies to reduce the cost of data and expand digital inclusion could therefore be seen as contributing to community well-being, not just productivity. Furthermore, ministries of health, communication, and education could collaborate with creative industries to produce humorous, culturally grounded memes for public campaigns, ensuring that messages about health, education, and citizenship resonate widely.

Conclusion

This study has shown that memes are integral to the everyday lives of rural dwellers in Cape Coast's fishing communities. They are consumed daily, shared widely, and appreciated across diverse formats, from celebrity reaction memes and political satire to everyday struggles, slang and Pidgin jokes, video skits, and wholesome cultural humour. Far from being trivial distractions, memes serve critical functions: they relieve stress, foster social connection, and provide safe outlets for commenting on difficult realities. The findings affirm the central claim of Relief Theory that laughter acts as a cathartic release that lightens emotional burdens. Yet the data also demonstrate that memes go beyond individual catharsis. They are communal artefacts, sustaining

resilience by bringing people together through shared humour and reinforcing cultural identity through local languages, slang, and references. In rural contexts where access to formal mental health resources is limited, memes serve as informal but powerful coping tools. For mental health advocates, social welfare practitioners, healthcare providers, community leaders, and policymakers, the lesson is clear: digital humour should not be dismissed as frivolous. Instead, it should be recognised, respected, and harnessed as part of a broader strategy for promoting community well-being. In these fishing communities, memes are more than jokes on a screen- they are small but meaningful interventions that help people move, quite literally, "from laughter to lightness."

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