

Соціальні комунікації

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THE SEMIOTICS OF PUN-BASED HUMOR AMONG THE 2000S GENERATION: WORDPLAY, MEMETICITY, AND DIGITAL CONTEXT

Summary. *The article is devoted to the study of the semiotics of pun humor among the generation of 2000s (Gen Z) and the peculiarities of communication culture. The aim of the article is to identify specific semiotic mechanisms underlying the humor of the generation of 2000s. The research methods include semiotic analysis, content analysis of digital communications, a systematic approach to the study of humorous practices, as well as a synthesis of scientific sources in the field of linguistics, psychology of humor and media studies. The results show that the humor of the 2000s generation is very different from the humor of older people. It is often built on absurdity, innuendo, memes and jokes that are understandable only to those who know the Internet context well. Digital content, especially memes, works not just as a picture or text. They simultaneously combine words, images, emotions and cultural references. That is why one meme can have several meanings. Wordplay and puns on the Internet have also changed. They are no longer always built according to the usual rules of language. Often a joke may seem strange or illogical, but this is precisely its funny effect. Such humor is clearly visible in memes, communication through emojis and the rapid exchange of jokes on social networks, when people pick up one joke and continue it in their own way. The practical significance of the study is determined by the possibility of a deeper understanding of a specific audience*

that actively communicates in the media space, which will positively affect the volume of customer engagement by marketing companies. By creating content that is understandable for the specified age group, trust and a favorable environment for further interaction are formed

Key words: *semiotics, Gen Z, humor, puns, media space.*

Introduction. Each generation differs in its worldview, way of thinking, communication and humor. It becomes clear that young people and older people stop understanding each other, stop feeling the mood, jokes, and the sense of humor does not coincide at all. Psychologists explain these changes by changes in the external environment in which a person grows up, and what people laugh at often speaks about their fears, values and way of perceiving the world. Humor is also connected with intelligence, because in order to understand or create a joke, you need to think quickly, understand the context and notice hidden meanings.

The generation of the 2000s, or Gen Z, grew up in completely different conditions. For them, the Internet is not just a useful tool, but a familiar part of everyday life. According to a study by B.A. Dela Rosa and M.V. Marcos [3], more than half of Gen Z representatives regularly send memes to their friends or acquaintances. This shows that memes are not just entertainment for them. They have become a full-fledged way of communication. It is in this digital environment that a special culture of humor of the 2000s generation is being formed, which is noticeably different from the humor of previous generations.

The question of what the humor of the 2000s generation is and what is behind its specific semiotic mechanisms remains relevant from both an academic and a practical point of view. Representatives of this generation are a key audience for modern marketing, media and education. Therefore, studying the features of their communicative culture, in particular those sign systems through which they transmit and perceive humor, is a necessary condition for effective

interaction with this group. This study attempts to answer this question by revealing the semiotics of wordplay, memetics and digital context as defining components of the humorous identity of Gen Z.

Literature Review. The topic of humor of the 2000s generation has not yet been studied in a comprehensive manner in academic writing. Some aspects of this phenomenon have already been considered, such as memes, Internet jokes, or language play. However, there is still a lack of research that would comprehensively explain how Gen Z humor works in the digital environment from a semiotic perspective. This is especially true of pun humor, i.e., jokes based on wordplay. It is this type of humor that requires deeper analysis, as it often combines text, images, cultural references, and Internet context.

The features of humor of the 2000s generation and its psychological dimensions were studied by C.Partlow and P.Talarczyk [9], who focused on absurdism as a dominant form of humor among Gen Z representatives and clarified the connection between the philosophy of the absurd and modern memetic culture. The issues of generational humorous identity and conflicts between generations through the prism of pandemic memes were considered by P.Aronson and I.Jaffal [1], identifying three key themes in the humor of the younger generation: the humor of the pandemic experience itself, collective generational identity, and antagonism towards older generations.

As for memetics as a communicative phenomenon, this issue has been deeply analyzed in several scientific investigations. Z.Z. Denysyuk [4] was the first in the Ukrainian-speaking scientific space to systematize memetics as a sociocultural communicative practice, revealing the role of memes as polysemic signs in the digital environment. L.Shifman [10] developed a conceptual three-dimensional model of Internet memes (content, form, position), which became the theoretical basis for the analysis of memetic practices in modern scientific research. N.Tassadiq [11] investigated the multimodal discourse of memes in social networks with the involvement of Atardo's linguistic theory of humor,

which allowed combining semiotic and linguistic approaches to the analysis of digital humor.

Puns and wordplay as linguistic phenomena in the digital context were studied by D. Chiaro [2], who introduced the concept of "ping-pong-punning" to describe the specific phenomenon of collective puns in the online environment and showed how verbal humor adapts to the logic of social networks. In parallel, from the perspective of the semiotics of digital signs, O. Gorbatyi [5] substantiated the role of semiotics in the transmission of humor and audience engagement, emphasizing the adaptability of humorous codes in the algorithmic media environment. G. Marino [7] investigated the genealogy of face semiotics from emoticons to memes, and L. Kerslake and R. Wegerif [6] analyzed the semiotics of emojis as a new visual language of the Internet era.

The digital context as a specific communication environment of Gen Z was studied by A.Mendez-Reguera and M.Lopez Cabrera [8], who showed that representatives of this generation are true "digital natives", able to effectively encode complex messages through a single image. B.A. Dela Rosa and M.V.Marcos [3] investigated the potential of memes in healthy eating communication among Filipino representatives of Gen Z, statistically confirming the dominance of memes in the media environment of this generation.

Thus, the scientific novelty of this study lies in the comprehensive analysis of the pun humor of the 2000s generation as a holistic system of signs that combines wordplay, memes, and digital communication. The methodological basis is semiotic analysis, content analysis, and systemic synthesis of interdisciplinary research in the fields of linguistics, media studies, and humor psychology.

Problem Statement. The aim of the article is to identify the semiotic mechanisms of pun humor of the 2000s generation and to reveal the connection between wordplay, memetics and the digital environment as a system of signs that forms the communicative identity of Gen Z. To achieve the goal, the

following tasks will be performed during the study: to characterize the specific features of the humor of the 2000s generation and identify its differences from previous humorous practices; to reveal the role of wordplay, memes and digital context as key communication tools of Gen Z; to analyze the semiotic dimension of youth humor through the categories of sign, code and discourse.

Methods and Materials. This study is based on the author's synthesis of scientific approaches to the study of the humorous culture of the 2000s generation. Semiotic analysis is used as the main method, which allows us to consider humor not as a set of jokes, but as a holistic sign system with its own codes, rules and decoding contexts. Content analysis of digital communications made it possible to identify key forms of Gen Z humorous discourse: meme, pun, emoji communication. The systemic approach ensures the integration of linguistic, psychological and media science dimensions of analysis. The comparison of existing scientific positions made it possible to outline the specifics of the semiotic field that generates and reproduces the humor of this generation.

Results and Discussions. The humor of the 2000s generation is a fundamentally new cultural phenomenon that does not fit into traditional comic categories. According to C.Partlow and P.Talarczyk [9], online humor today is strikingly different from what was popular in the late 2000s: if earlier a meme with bold font and an obvious punchline could cause laughter, then today's Gen Z humor requires significant context and knowledge of unpopular, even incomprehensible events. This humor is often intentionally incomprehensible to an outsider, and this is precisely its semiotic power: belonging to "their own" is determined by the ability to decode the code. P.Aronson and I.Jaffal [1] showed that during the pandemic, three persistent themes emerged in Gen Z humor: experiencing collective experience through a joke, emphasizing a common generational identity, and openly ridiculing older generations. This confirms that this generation's humor is not only entertainment, but also a mechanism of

consolidation and a marker of social belonging. A meme becomes a password: if you understand it, you belong to the community.

Below are summarized the specific features of the humor of the 2000s generation (see Table 1).

Table 1

Specific features of the humor of the 2000s generation (Gen Z)

Feature of humor	Characteristic
Absurdism [9]	Deliberate disruption of logic, detachment from reality, and chaotic imagery with no obvious meaning
Intertextuality [1]	References to cultural events, films, games, and memes that are accessible only to “insiders”
Nihilistic optimism [9]	Simultaneously mocking the meaninglessness of existence while maintaining a positive attitude toward one’s own future
Generational identity [1]	Humor as a marker of group belonging and a means of setting oneself apart from older generations
Memeticity [4; 10]	The ability of a joke to be replicated, transformed, and spread while preserving its basic structure
Multimodality [11]	The combination of text, images, sound, emojis, and hyperlinks in a single humorous message

Note: compiled by the author based on sources [1; 4; 9; 10; 11]

The above features indicate that Gen Z humor is a semiotically rich phenomenon, where wordplay, puns, and absurd memes are not random phenomena, but a natural expression of a specific way of thinking. From a psychological point of view, this is explained by the peculiarities of cognitive development in conditions of constant information overload: the brain adapts to fragmented content, developing a tendency to short, semiotically dense messages, where laughter arises not from explanation, but from recognition.

Wordplay among the 2000s generation has acquired new, fundamentally different forms compared to its classical counterparts. D. Chiaro [2] described the phenomenon of “ping-pong-punning” (PPP) as a chain pun, in which different participants pick up and develop one word or phrase, building unexpected semantic connections. This practice, which previously existed exclusively in oral communication, has moved to the space of social networks, where it has acquired

a new dynamic: participants can respond after a few hours, but the general logic of the language game is preserved. Online PPP transforms the spontaneous creation of puns into something that more closely resembles a thoughtful literary work, where each line is deliberate.

Regarding memeticity, it is worth noting that Shifman [10] proposed to consider Internet memes not as single products, but as groups of content, united by common characteristics along three dimensions: content, form and stance. It is the third dimension that is the most specific: stance determines how the author of the meme positions himself in relation to the audience and what he considers to be shared cultural knowledge. N. Tassadiq [11] emphasizes that the humor of memes relies on the "cultural literacy" of the audience, which must recognize intertextual references, visual symbols and linguistic signals. If this recognition does not occur, the meme is simply not funny, which confirms its semiotic nature.

Below is a description of the key digital contexts specific to Gen Z communication (see Table 2).

Table 2

Digital contexts of 2000s humor and their specificities

Context	Gen Z specifics
Social media (TikTok, Instagram, Twitter/X) [3; 10]	Memes spread instantly and evolve into new forms, shaping collective discourse through audience participation
Messaging platforms (Discord, Telegram) [2; 4]	Private or niche spaces where memes take on their most specific, “insider” character
Emoji communication [6]	Emojis are used not in their literal meaning, but as codes with established cultural connotations
Video memes and GIFs [7; 11]	Short looped videos or animations that convey culturally rich humorous content without text
Comments and replies [2]	The PPP phenomenon is realized in comments under posts through chain puns and wordplay

Note: compiled by the author based on sources [2; 3; 4; 6; 7; 10; 11]

The generalization of the above contexts allows us to assert that semiotics plays a key role in this system. O. Gorbatyi [5] convincingly showed that humor in the digital environment is a semiotically adaptive phenomenon: it cannot be

universal, since its decoding depends on previous experience, cultural patterns, and the specifics of the interface. Algorithmic recommendation systems themselves become mediators of the semiotic field, determining which humorous codes are “activated” and which remain unnoticed. This means that what is funny for Gen Z does not simply differ in form from the humor of other generations – it functions according to fundamentally different semiotic rules. It is precisely the understanding of these rules that is the key to the next question: how the semiotics of youth culture structures a holistic system of meanings through which Gen Z perceives and reproduces itself in the world.

Understanding the semiotics of the youth culture of the 2000s generation is impossible without realizing that the sign for this audience has ceased to be unambiguous. G. Marino [7] traced the genealogy of modern memes back to the typographic emoticons of the 1980s, showing that the first Internet meme of 1998 – the site “Eric Conveys an Emotion” – reproduced emotional facial expressions precisely from text emoticons. This means that the semiotic tradition of digital humor is deeper than it seems: every modern meme carries within itself the memory of previous sign systems.

A key semiotic category for understanding youth culture is the concept of “memeticity of type”. G. Marino [7] clearly distinguishes between these concepts: if virality refers to the spread of a specific image, then memeticity refers to the spread of a type, that is, a structure that can be infinitely reproduced in new variations. For example, the “Distracted Boyfriend” template is not just a popular image – it is a semiotic matrix that allows you to reproduce any situation of choice between two alternatives. Gen Z instantly recognizes this matrix regardless of the specific content, which indicates the acquired collective semiotic vocabulary. Another important tool of the semiotics of youth culture is emoji. L. Kerslake and R. Wegerif [6] in their analysis of Danesi’s work note that emojis standardized by Unicode do not adhere to the principle of fixed meaning. Anyone can suggest new emojis, and existing ones acquire new connotations that differ from the

official ones. The classic example given by the authors is the eggplant emoji (🍆), the official meaning of which is purely botanical, while in youth digital discourse it carries a completely different meaning. This is a clear example of how the semiotic codes of Gen Z are the result of collective agreement, and not external authority.

The semiotics of youth culture is also closely related to the concept of “stance” in a memetic text. L. Shifman [10] pointed out that the stance determines how the author of the meme positions himself in relation to the text, the audience and other participants in the discourse. In the practice of Gen Z, this is realized through the so-called “barefaced memes” described by G. Marino [7]: they do not require knowledge of specific characters or referents, since their semiotic structure is self-sufficient. A meme such as “Distracted Boyfriend” is an allegorical sign that is read through pragmatic competence, not through encyclopedic knowledge. In contrast, memes with real characters (for example, “You don't say!” with Nicolas Cage) require recognition - and this is where the selection of “one's own” and “others” begins.

An important semiotic phenomenon of youth culture is the process of “emoticonization” – the transformation of real faces into signs ready for commenting on digital content. G. Marino [7] describes entire genres of memes built on stylized faces: rage faces, Chad, Wojak – each of them is a kind of emoticon that conveys a specific mood, personality or situation. Gen Z operates with this vocabulary as naturally as previous generations used oral clichés and jargon. The difference is that this vocabulary is multimodal and constantly updated: new types appear every week, and outdated ones are quickly labeled as “cringe” (awkward-naive) – which in itself is a semiotic act of demarcation.

N. Tassadiq [11] extends semiotic analysis through the concept of multimodal discourse: in memes, meaning does not arise from individual signs, but from their interaction. A serious political image combined with a sarcastic caption generates powerful irony - this is what the author calls “intersemiotic

complementarity”. For the youth culture of Gen Z, this logic is basic: they intuitively understand that meaning arises at the intersection, and not in the image itself or the text itself separately. That is why a banal phrase placed on the “right” template can become a viral hit, while a brilliant text on an unknown background will go unnoticed. A.Mendez-Reguera and M.Lopez Cabrera [8] demonstrated this logic in practice: when Gen Z students were asked to create memes to explain educational material, the most popular was the “Two Spiderman meme” to explain the molecular difference between the two complements of the immune system. The students did not simply reproduce the meme, they semiotically recoded it, filling it with academic content while preserving the recognizable structure. This is a vivid example of how Gen Z thinks in semiotic patterns: they first look for the “right” sign, and then fill it with new content.

A semiotic analysis of youth culture also allows us to understand the specifics of wordplay in this environment. D. Chiaro [2] showed that online puns have evolved: if traditional PPP required an instant reaction, then in the digital space a punter can think over the answer for hours, turning a spontaneous wordplay into a carefully thought-out text. Z. Denysyuk [4] complements this observation by pointing to the precedential nature of memes: almost all of them are references to a specific cultural context, and it is this precedentiality that provides them with semiotic power and the ability to spread.

O.Gorbatyi [5] emphasizes that semiotic adaptability is a key condition for the success of humorous content in an algorithmic environment: humor should be designed not as universal, but as one that is able to integrate into different social, cultural and individual levels of interpretation. For Gen Z, this means that the most successful memes are semiotically multilayered: they are immediately funny to a wide audience, but contain an additional level of meaning for those who are “in the know”. This approach to constructing humorous text is a reflection of the cognitive culture of a generation that grew up in conditions of a constant multilayered information flow.

Conclusions. Gen Z humor is significantly different from the Internet humor of a decade earlier. First of all, its characteristic feature is a tendency towards absurdity, fragmentation and violation of the expected logic of a joke. If memes of the late 2000s were often built on a clear structure of “context – climax – punchline”, then Gen Z humor often functions as a deliberately chaotic combination of image, text, it deforms visualization, uses random words, hidden intellectual references. The peculiarity of Gen Z humor is not only in its absurdity, but also in the fact that it performs the functions of identifying a certain age audience. Humor is most clearly manifested in memes, and people who are able to understand them become those who are able to deeply understand this audience – this is a kind of password for age identification. It is not surprising that this type of joke is used for all content, advertising, criticism of the authorities, reactions to current events and emotional connection.

The semiotics of Gen Z humor is based on multimodality, intertextuality, and hybridization of signs. The content of the content does not arise from a single element, not just from text or image, but from the combination of text and color, image and mood. This is an important semiotic phenomenon of modern digital culture, functioning at the semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic levels; they also capture the transition of meme communication from unimodal to multimodal and from monolingual to multilingual.

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