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Visual Appeals of Popular YouTube Short-Form Video Memes

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Abstract: Short-form video memes (SFV memes) have become a key medium for the creation and circulation of digital culture, yet the specific visual strategies driving their virality on platforms like YouTube Shorts remain underexplored. This study analyzes twenty top-liked YouTube Shorts using a mixed-method approach to identify how established principles of memetic appeal—such as simplicity, humor, repetition, and whimsicality—are enacted through concrete visual techniques. Findings reveal recurring strategies including bold text overlays for clarity, single-color rimmed frames as genre signals, easily trackable motions, rapid editing, sudden plot twists, and exaggerated facial expressions to generate humor and absurdity. Comparative analysis shows that real-scene memes rely on relatable framing and narrative surprises, whereas produced memes employ formal manipulations such as 3D/VFX and audiovisual synchronization. The study concludes that the virality of SFV memes emerges from the interplay of these visual strategies, offering a refined framework for understanding audience engagement and content diffusion in short-form video ecosystems.

Keywords: short-form video; memes; virality; visual strategies; digital culture



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1. Introduction

Digital memes have emerged as a central feature of the internet, functioning simultaneously as forms of entertainment, communication, and social commentary. Originally conceptualized as cultural replicators, memes have evolved into a core component of online interaction, particularly on platforms that prioritize brevity and visual immediacy. With the rise of short-form video platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts over the past two decades, memes have circulated at an unprecedented pace, fostering vernacular creativity and reshaping patterns of digital content consumption. YouTube Shorts alone reports billions of daily views, highlighting short-form videos as a rapidly expanding ecosystem for communication, advertising, and commerce, with memes playing a central role [1].

Memes are inherently multidisciplinary media, combining linguistic, cultural, trend-based, and visual elements. While prior research has examined various facets of memes, there remains a critical need to understand the specific visual strategies that render short-form video memes memorable and widely shared [2]. Previous studies emphasize traits such as simplicity, humor, irony, repetitiveness, and whimsicality as central to memetic success. Yet, the ways in which these principles are visually realized—through looping edits, exaggerated juxtapositions, text overlays, or deliberately unconventional aesthetics—remain underexplored, particularly within the high-speed, attention-constrained context of short-form videos.

This study addresses this gap by analyzing the most liked YouTube short-form video memes to identify the visual strategies that operationalize established principles of memetic appeal. In doing so, it aims to elucidate why certain visual approaches resonate strongly with audiences and how these strategies contribute to the viral potential of short-form video memes [3].

2. Literature Review

The literature review presents a survey of existing research on memes and short-form videos. It begins by providing an overview of memes within the context of short-form video platforms, tracing the origins and evolution of the meme concept and examining how digital platforms such as YouTube Shorts, TikTok, and Instagram Reels influence their circulation [4]. The review then highlights the cultural and social significance of memes, considering their roles as rhetorical devices, tools for social bonding, and forms of visual and aesthetic expression. The second part focuses on the features that contribute to memetic virality, including humor, simplicity, repetitiveness, irony, and whimsicality, as well as the emotional and psychological mechanisms underlying audience engagement with these features [5]. Finally, the review connects these principles to the visual strategies commonly employed in short-form video memes, demonstrating how specific visual traits operationalize broader memetic appeals and contribute to the viral potential of content.

2.1. A glance at Memes from Short-Form Videos (SFVs) in General

Memes have long been recognized as a popular and influential form of media worldwide. The concept of memes was initially introduced as units of cultural transmission that evolve through processes of variation and selection, analogous to genes. Later expansions of this idea emphasized memes as central components of human culture, encompassing any cultural element passed from one individual to another [6].

In the digital age, the definition of memes has evolved under widespread internet usage. Digital memes are now understood as content units that spread online, including videos, jokes, and other media, often marked by user-generated parodies, remixes, and intertextual references. Visual memes frequently combine imagery and text, such as reaction photos, meme graphics, or parody videos, highlighting the flexibility and multimodal nature of memetic structures in online contexts and pointing to the need for more detailed investigation [7,8].

The emergence of short-form video platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts has created new ecosystems for meme circulation. These platforms offer unique affordances, including looping visuals, vertical framing, and rapid pacing, which shape the attention patterns and engagement strategies of short-form video memes. The massive scale of user interaction underscores the ubiquity and cultural significance of these videos, demonstrating their reach across diverse audiences. Platform-specific conventions further influence meme production and reception; for example, textual overlays and framing techniques in certain meme formats create shared humor and foster community identity, illustrating how SFV memes generate social cohesion through visual and textual cues.

Culturally, short-form video memes carry substantial social significance. Memes function as persuasive tools for communicating societal topics, capable of subverting mainstream narratives and conveying alternative meanings through devices such as irony, juxtaposition, and exaggeration [9]. They also serve as indicators of collective values and identity, strengthening social bonds and community belonging, particularly among marginalized or niche groups. Aesthetic strategies further reinforce these roles. The deliberate use of low-quality, amateur, or absurd visual styles—often referred to as "ugly" aesthetics—enhances authenticity, lowers barriers to participation, and encourages broader circulation of memetic content, contributing to vibrant and engaged online communities.

In summary, memes in short-form videos are shaped not only by the technological affordances of their platforms but also by their cultural, rhetorical, and aesthetic functions, which collectively drive their creation, circulation, and social impact.

2.2. Features of Popular Memes in Short-Form Videos

Building on the general overview of memes in short-form videos, this section examines the features that contribute to meme virality and the visual strategies that embody these features in SFV memes. Viral memes generally exhibit four interrelated principles: simplicity and orientation toward ordinary experiences, humor, repetitiveness, and whimsical or absurd content [10]. Understanding these principles provides a foundation for analyzing how visual strategies reinforce memetic success.

2.2.1. Core Principles of Memetic Success

Simplicity and Orientation Toward Ordinary Experiences

Short-form video platforms are designed for mass participation, where content must be accessible to audiences with varied backgrounds and experiences. Memes that depict simple, universally recognizable scenarios or relatable daily experiences tend to attract attention and resonance [11]. Simplicity ensures that audiences can quickly comprehend the message, increasing engagement through liking, sharing, or recreating content. Relatable memes provide psychological comfort by signaling shared experiences, fostering social connectedness, and enhancing a sense of community belonging.

Humor

Humor is a universal driver of meme virality, encompassing various forms such as jokes, irony, puns, and playful exaggerations. Viral memes often combine cognitive contrast, incongruity, and playful imitation to elicit amusement. Irony and parody allow memes to critique societal norms while remaining entertaining. Humor not only attracts attention but also functions as a social signal, creating shared laughter and reinforcing community identity.

Repetitiveness

Repetition enhances memorability and facilitates engagement. Popular memes often feature recurring visual elements, looping motions, repeated gestures, or recurring lyrics. In short-form videos, the looping nature and short duration naturally reinforce repetition, embedding content in viewers' memory and encouraging imitation. Repetition ensures that memes remain easily recognizable and shareable, increasing the likelihood of widespread circulation.

Whimsical or Absurd Content

Deliberately whimsical, absurd, or low-fidelity visuals-sometimes referred to as "Internet Ugly" aesthetics-play a crucial role in attracting attention and creating a sense of authenticity [12]. Such content challenges traditional aesthetic norms, lowering barriers to participation and encouraging rapid creation and sharing. Whimsical or absurd elements also provide escapism, allowing viewers to momentarily detach from real-world concerns while engaging with entertaining content.

2.2.2. Visual Strategies Corresponding to Memetic Principles

Form and Presentation

Visual strategies translate the above principles into perceivable features. Humor, irony, and absurdity often appear through exaggerated edits, such as distorted faces, altered motion speeds, and juxtaposition of unrelated elements. Contrasting music and imagery can create comedic effects, while intentionally low-quality graphics or glitch effects reinforce authenticity and community accessibility. These strategies signal that professional design is unnecessary for effective memes, encouraging user replication and remixing.

Content and Structure

Simplicity and repetitiveness are reflected in content design. Minimalist visuals and clear layouts enhance immediate comprehension, while templates, stock characters, and looping motifs provide familiar structures for audiences to recognize quickly. Recurrent visual elements and repeated textual overlays strengthen memorability, supporting rapid consumption and viral spread [13]. The combination of brevity, repetition, and clarity ensures that memes are both easily understood and highly shareable.

Integration of Visual and Textual Elements

Short-form video memes often rely on an interplay of background videos, textual overlays, templates, and platform-specific software features to maximize appeal. Text and graphics together create layered meanings and reinforce memetic principles, yet prior research has rarely isolated the role of background visuals. This study aims to fill this gap by analyzing the visual strategies applied in the most-liked YouTube Shorts, providing a refined understanding of how SFV memes achieve virality [14].

3. Methodology

This study employed a mixed qualitative and quantitative approach to analyze the visual strategies that contribute to the popularity of meme-based YouTube Shorts. A corpus of 20 Shorts, published between August 2024 and September 2025, was manually selected using keywords such as "memes," "funny memes," "animation memes," and the hashtag #meme. Three inclusion criteria ensured relevance and comparability:

1. The video had to be under one minute in length, strictly categorized as a YouTube Short.
2. The video had to accumulate over 100,000 views, indicating high popularity and audience reach to enhance generalizability.
3. The video had to feature general life or relatable scenarios, rather than niche or community-specific content.

To avoid distortions in measurement, compilations, "Try not to Laugh" challenges, "Ranking Memes" compilations, and reaction videos were excluded, as they combine multiple meme units and complicate the evaluation of individual visual appeals.

The final corpus was divided into two groups: real-scene Shorts ($n = 11$), primarily consisting of filmed, unedited footage of people or real-world environments, and produced Shorts ($n = 9$), which involve editing, animation, 3D modeling, overlays, or other digital manipulations. This division allows for comparison between vernacular, low-intervention videos and heavily produced, often secondary creations.

Each Short was analyzed at the micro-level using three observational units:

1. **Shots:** Number of shots, average shot length, and editing techniques such as cuts, speed changes, or loops.
2. **Key frames:** Beginning, climax or punchline, and ending frames coded for visual composition and framing.
3. **Visual elements:** Added elements such as overlays, visual effects, 3D inserts, and color grading.

A coding schema was developed to systematize the analysis. Variables included both quantitative and qualitative features, recorded in binary, categorical, or numeric formats depending on the characteristic. For example, the presence of a "plot twist" was coded as present/absent, while average shot length was measured numerically in seconds.

Analysis proceeded in three stages. First, descriptive counts were generated to identify the frequency of each feature across the corpus. Second, the prevalence of visual strategies was compared between real-scene and produced Shorts, highlighting differences in reliance on editing, framing, or other features. Third, representative cases were examined to illustrate how specific strategies—such as blurred video quality or slow, steady motion—contribute to viewer appeal.

To contextualize popularity, both raw like counts and like-view ratios were recorded. While raw likes measure absolute popularity, the like-view ratio provides an indicator of engagement effectiveness, balancing differences in exposure among videos. Using this dual metric strengthens validity by accounting for both reach and efficiency of appeal.

4. Result Analysis

This section addresses the research question through both quantitative and qualitative analysis of the selected corpus. First, an overview of the dataset is presented to provide a clear portrait of the videos. Next, quantitative patterns of observed variables are summarized. Prominent visual strategies in SFV memes are identified and discussed. Finally, differences between real-scene and produced Shorts are analyzed, along with the relationship between these strategies and the general principles of memetic success, including simplicity, humor, repetitiveness, and whimsical content.

4.1. Overview of Dataset

The dataset comprises 20 YouTube Shorts published between August 2024 and September 2025. Among these, 11 are real-scene Shorts, while 9 are produced Shorts involving editing, 3D animation, visual effects, or other digital manipulations. Collectively, the videos received an average of 1,087,350 likes and 51,949,488 views, yielding a mean like-view ratio of 2.64%.

Real-scene Shorts generally achieved higher average views (approximately 58.9 million) compared to produced Shorts (approximately 43.3 million), and the mean like counts were also slightly higher for real-scene content (approximately 1.16 million versus 997,000). These patterns suggest that although both categories are highly popular, real-scene Shorts may benefit more from wider algorithmic circulation and organic audience engagement.

4.2. Quantitative Patterns

Analysis of the 20 Shorts revealed several recurring visual strategies that contribute to memetic appeal. Most videos (15 out of 20) consisted of a single continuous shot, whereas the remaining five employed rapid cuts, averaging 6.2 shots per video with a mean shot length of 2.79 seconds, illustrating the presence of distinct visual traits across the corpus (Figure 1). Text overlays were nearly ubiquitous, appearing in 19 of the 20 Shorts, with positioning most frequently at the top of the screen, followed by mid-screen and bottom placements. The font size was predominantly medium or large, as shown in Figure 2, highlighting the importance of textual clarity in conveying humor, context, or narrative cues. Only a small portion of videos (four Shorts) incorporated deliberate speed edits, including three speed-ups and one slow-motion sequence, mostly concentrated in the produced category, suggesting that pacing adjustments are more common in heavily edited content.

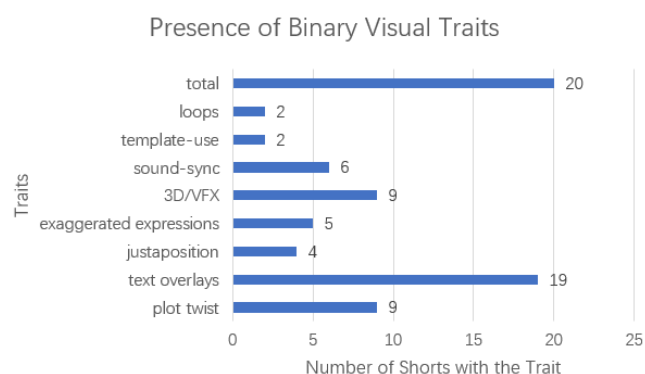


Figure 1. Presence of Binary Visual Traits.

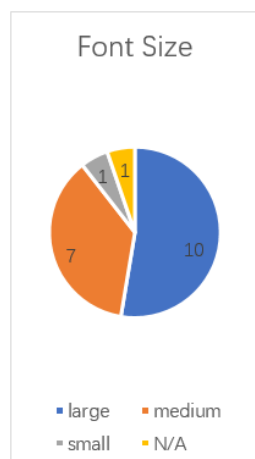


Figure 2. Font Size.

Striking visual contrasts, such as split-screen juxtapositions, appeared in four Shorts, serving to create humor or irony through immediate comparison. Image quality varied across the corpus, with eight videos coded as high quality, nine as medium, and three as low, as illustrated in Figure 3, reflecting that both high-fidelity and intentionally rough visuals can coexist in successful SFV memes. Among real-scene Shorts, close-up shots and mid-shots dominated, while wide framing was relatively rare, underscoring the preference for immediacy and viewer engagement through visual proximity (Figure 4). Deliberate synchronization of visuals with beats or lyrics was observed in six videos, enhancing their rhythmic appeal and comedic timing. Nine produced Shorts incorporated 3D or visual effects, highlighting the role of post-production in shaping viewer experience, whereas exaggerated facial expressions appeared in five videos to amplify humor or absurdity. Interestingly, only two Shorts employed explicit meme templates, indicating that originality and novel visual construction remain dominant factors in viral short-form content.

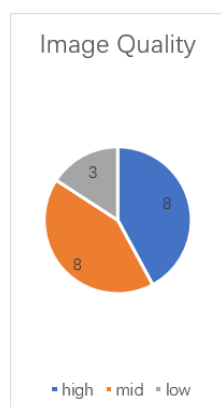


Figure 3. Image Quality.

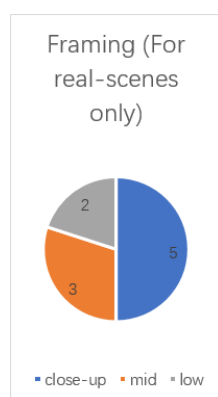


Figure 4. Framing (For real-scenes only).

Overall, these quantitative patterns provide insight into the technical and creative strategies that underpin the popularity of SFV memes, demonstrating how shot composition, textual presentation, pacing, visual contrast, and audiovisual integration collectively contribute to audience engagement and memetic circulation.

The counts indicate that text overlays and close framing are the most universal strategies, while more advanced features (speed edits, templates, or juxtaposition) appear occasionally.

4.3. Key Visual Strategies Identified

4.3.1. Bold Text Overlays

Nearly all Shorts (19 out of 20) employed bold text overlays, most commonly in medium or large fonts. This strategy functions primarily to clarify the meme's message within seconds, reducing cognitive load and reinforcing simplicity—a core principle of memetic success. For example, one Short displaying the overlay "Predicting my gfs (girlfriend's) texts" explicitly illustrates the author's intention in the background video: typing responses to the girlfriend's questions before they were sent.

Bold text overlays also serve as a channel for the creator's commentary, often conveying reactions or emotional responses to the content. For instance, a Short captioned "My soul would've left my body" accompanies a real-scene cellphone prank, in which a girl's cellphone was replaced with a toy phone, eliciting a visible shock when loud music played in class. The caption explicitly conveys her reaction, enhancing comprehension and encouraging audience engagement by fostering empathy.

4.3.2. Single-Color Backgrounds and Rimmed Frames

Half of the Shorts (10 out of 20) utilized rimmed frames or solid-color borders, typically black or white, around inserted images or clips. Rather than expanding the video to fill the vertical screen, these borders leave visible spaces along the edges. For example, the aforementioned cellphone prank meme employed this layout, despite being vertically shot.

Although underexplored in prior literature, rimmed frames appear to act as a visual cue signaling the meme genre. Combined with text overlays in the empty margins, this format distinguishes the content as a "meme" and conforms to platform-specific norms, facilitating rapid recognition and audience targeting.

4.3.3. Easy-Trackable Motions

Many Shorts emphasized simple, trackable motions, such as linear movement, back-and-forth swinging, revolving, parabolic arcs, or vibrations. These motions are visually easy to follow and enhance clarity, aligning with the principle of simplicity.

For example, a Short from the popular "Somebody's Mentality" meme template features Emotiguy, a 3D yellow emoji face. The animation demonstrates multiple simple motions: shaking hands (swinging), yelling awkwardly (vibration), and sliding a pizza slice (steady linear movement). The simplicity of these movements enhances humor and allows viewers to immediately grasp the action, contributing to the meme's virality.

4.3.4. Quick Edits

While the majority of the corpus consisted of single continuous shots, five Shorts employed rapid edits, averaging 2.8 seconds per shot. Quick cuts accelerate pacing and heighten the whimsicality of content by synchronizing punchlines with abrupt visual changes.

An illustrative example involves a Short in which a man cooks a single popcorn kernel with excessive oil and sugar. The 34-second video employs up to ten shots, intertwining accelerated cooking procedures with freeze frames and close-ups, creating a sense of absurd humor throughout.

4.3.5. Suddenness of Plot Twist

Nine Shorts featured a sudden narrative or tonal shift, typically appearing at unexpected moments to deliver a punchline. This strategy generates surprise and amusement by contrasting preceding and subsequent content through visual cues such as facial expressions and body movement.

For example, a Short depicting a man sleeping in a car shows him peacefully still for three seconds, then abruptly reacting with a wide-eyed scream. The rapid transition exemplifies the sudden plot twist, aligning with principles of incongruity and absurdity to maximize comedic effect.

4.3.6. Exaggerated Facial Expressions

Five Shorts highlighted exaggerated facial expressions to convey intense emotions, such as anger, frustration, or epiphany. This technique, often associated with the "Internet Ugly" aesthetic, enhances both humor and relatability.

Notably, three of these examples appear in produced Shorts, including animations such as the Emotiguy pizza meme, a haunted living-alone scenario, and a reanimated Tom and Jerry clip. Exaggerated eyes, mouths, and facial wrinkles in these 2D or 3D animations amplify absurdity and personification, making humor immediately perceptible to viewers.

4.4. Comparison of Real-Scene and Produced Shorts

Although the key visual strategies identified in the previous section are common across most memes, there are notable differences between the two categories in the corpus: real-scene Shorts and produced Shorts. These differences reflect the relative emphasis on content versus formal manipulation in each type.

Real-scene Shorts generally exhibit less deliberate application of advanced visual techniques, likely due to their "shot-and-upload" nature. They rely heavily on close or mid framing, plot twists, and exaggerated facial expressions. These strategies require minimal editing yet effectively generate humor through relatable, ordinary scenarios. In this sense, real-scene memes prioritize content over form, foregrounding everyday experiences that resonate widely with viewers.

Produced Shorts, by contrast, demonstrate a higher dependence on virtual techniques such as VFX, sound synchronization, and 3D animation. Many produced videos incorporate minimalist or repetitive motions—for example, looping animations of 3D Emotiguy drinking from a bottle. Produced content leans toward formal manipulation, often parodying popular media clips and emphasizing whimsical or spectacular visual effects.

Table 1 summarizes the characteristic strategies observed in real-scene and produced Shorts, illustrating the contrast in approach between these two formats.

Table 1. Distinct Visual Strategies in Real-Scene vs. Produced Shorts.

Real-Scene Shorts (<i>n</i> = 11)	Produced Shorts (<i>n</i> = 9)
Close/mid framing	3D/VFX
Emphasis on content: plot twist	Sound synchronization
Exaggerated expressions	Looping characters

4.5. Discussion of Findings

The analysis of the dataset confirms the enduring significance of core memetic principles, namely simplicity, humor, and whimsicality, in the circulation of YouTube Shorts. In addition, several platform-specific strategies emerged. Rimmed backgrounds appear to function as a visual index of meme status, signaling to viewers that a video belongs to a recognizable memetic genre. Similarly, easy-to-track motions indicate that brevity favors clear, linear trajectories, enhancing comprehension in fast-paced consumption environments.

However, certain patterns diverge from expectations established in prior literature. Only two of the twenty Shorts utilized explicit looping, despite repetitiveness being commonly cited as central to virality. In these cases, sudden plot twists and unexpected narrative developments acted as primary engagement drivers. This pattern may be explained by the focus of real-scene memes on rare or accidental moments in everyday life, such as pranks or whimsical responses, which are inherently difficult to replicate. Consequently, repetition is less central to audience gratification, whereas surprise and novelty become key to engagement.

Another notable finding concerns production quality. Eight of the twenty produced Shorts were classified as high-quality, challenging the notion that low-quality or "Internet Ugly" aesthetics dominate meme visuals. This suggests that on YouTube Shorts, polished production can coexist with vernacular creativity, allowing memes to retain spontaneity while leveraging technical enhancements.

Overall, these findings illustrate how abstract memetic principles—simplicity, humor, repetition, and whimsicality—are materialized through tangible, platform-specific visual strategies on short-form video platforms. They highlight the interplay between content, form, and audience perception, showing that both accidental and deliberately crafted strategies contribute to meme success.

5. Limitations

Despite employing a systematic coding framework and combining quantitative counts with qualitative interpretation, several limitations constrain the generalizability of this study.

First, the sample size is small, comprising only twenty Shorts. While sufficient for identifying recurring visual strategies and comparing real-scene with produced content, it does not capture the full diversity of meme culture on YouTube Shorts and precludes robust statistical generalization.

Second, the selection of videos was conducted manually, influenced by YouTube's search and recommendation algorithms. These algorithms may prioritize certain formats or engagement patterns, potentially biasing the dataset toward highly visible content and excluding videos that might offer unique insights.

Third, although a structured coding schema was applied, qualitative coding inherently involves subjectivity. Inter-coder reliability checks were not conducted, so some coding decisions may reflect individual interpretive bias despite efforts to maintain consistency.

Fourth, real-scene memes are particularly contingent on incidental factors such as lighting, background environments, and performers' actions. These uncontrolled variables may obscure broader visual patterns and make it difficult to distinguish deliberate strategies from chance occurrences.

Finally, the study focused exclusively on visual strategies, without fully considering other essential dimensions of meme virality, including audio, captions, user comments, and algorithmic circulation. Incorporating these factors could provide a more comprehensive understanding of meme success.

Future research should employ larger, systematically sampled datasets and leverage computational analysis or third-party analytics platforms to strengthen quantitative rigor. Expanding the analysis across multiple short-form video platforms could clarify whether identified strategies are platform-specific or universal. Experimental studies examining audience responses to particular visual features, such as text overlays, plot twists, or VFX, would provide stronger evidence of causal relationships between visual strategies and memetic success. Additionally, linking visual strategies to user engagement practices, such as remixing, sharing, and commenting, could enhance practical understanding of meme circulation dynamics.

Appendix A: Coding Schema of Visual Strategies.

Category	Variable (how to measure)	Type
Shot structure	Number of shots; avg shot length (s)	numeric
Plot twist	Identifiable change/climax present (Y/N)	Binary
Looping/repetition	Explicit seamless loop (Y/N)	binary
Text overlays	Overlay present (Y/N); position (top/mid/bottom); duration (s); font size large/medium/small	binary / categorical / numeric
Speed edits	Speed-up / slow-motion / reverse / N/A	categorical
Juxtaposition	Side-by-side contrast / unexpected mismatch (Y/N); describe paired elements	binary + short text
3D/VFX	Any 3D object/VFX (Y/N)	binary
Quality	High / Mid / Low quality	categorical
Camera framing	Close-up / mid / wide (dominant)	categorical
Actor expression	Exaggerated facial expression (Y/N)	binary
Color grading / filter	Natural / highly saturated / desaturated / vignette (categorical)	categorical
Sound-sync	Visual-to-beat synchronization (Y/N)	binary
Template use	Recognizable meme template (Y/N); name template	binary / text
Perceived function	Humor / irony / shock / relatability / nostalgia (choose up to 2)	categorical (multi-select)

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