

FROGS AND OGRES: TRANSFORMATION, REUSE AND CREATIVITY IN MEME CULTURE.

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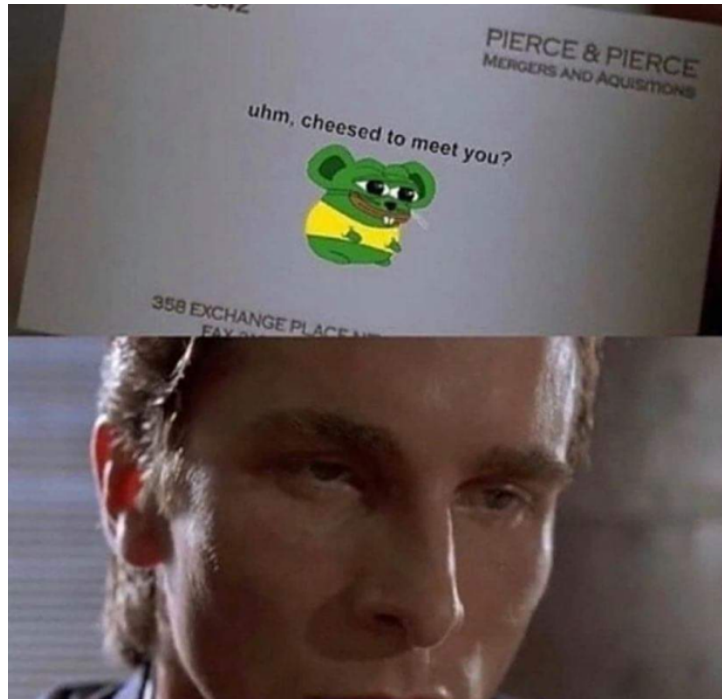
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By this point in time, I had spent months of my life manually going through data which contained hate speech, conspiracy theories and extreme violence; much of this was done during a global pandemic. This image depicts *American Psycho*'s Patrick Bateman impressed to his core by a card showing a Pepe the Frog meme with the 'uhm, cheesed to meet you?' caption. I found it very funny.

ABSTRACT

Memes have been the zeitgeist of social media participation for the last three decades, but their creative, comedic, playful and transformative complexities are under-emphasised by current digital media scholarship. The purpose of this thesis is to bring light to the inner social, technological and formal logics of meme culture and to describe complex meaning in an otherwise difficult to grasp cultural environment. Additionally, this thesis aims to construct new models of understanding memes with the help of a diverse range of methodologies and disciplines including genre theory, parody theory, humour studies, play theory, communication studies and copyright law. Through this approach, the thesis cuts ties with the prominent, but ineffective guiding framework of Dawkinsian memetics. Instead, it offers an alternative to prior definitions of memes, and looks at them as an emergent, vernacular genre of the web 2.0 social media landscape. This is done through both theoretical discussion and mixed methods media analysis. As such, discussed ideas (such as 'hypertextuality', 'parody', 're-entextualisation' and 'resemiotisation') are put into the practice of textual, intertextual and contextual analysis. Findings of this thesis indicate that the frameworks of rhetorical genre theory, remediation as well as social laughter and social play prove particularly effective for the genre understanding of memes. Further, two key case studies – the 'Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life' and 'Pepe the Frog' memes – prove successful examples for the adaptation of parodic and paralinguistic lenses onto a media studies understanding of meme culture. Additional learnings suggest that the transformativeness of memes could face challenges but could also earn recognition under recent EU, UK and US understandings of parody as copyright exception; and that the methodology of context-sensitive qualitative analysis can re-position prior understandings of everyday reuse into a more complex but also more accurate framework. Overall, the findings of this thesis emphasise and demystify online cultural transformation as it happens, in both grand and subtle ways, through everyday meme participation.

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INTRODUCTION

1. SHAGGY'S POWER

This research is about memes, and it is about transformation. What exactly I mean by either of these terms and how the two are related will be introduced, examined and re-examined on the following pages. The methodology of this thesis involves a deep dive into digital media scholarship and related interdisciplinary frameworks, as well as the analytical discussion of digital case studies both big and small. Both of the two terms – ‘memes’ and ‘transformation’ – require some explanation, and neither comes without significant theoretical baggage.

In a few moments, I turn to outlining the key research questions and chapter structure of my investigation into meme culture, and the ways in which we can make sense of its colourful cultural works. As a first step, however, I prefer to set the scene with an example. It is an example inevitably fragmentary in the sense that its sprawling web of textual and intertextual intricacies is condensed and curated for the purposes of this introduction, but it nonetheless represents many of my explored themes and interests throughout this thesis well. The example involves the discussion of multiple media properties and digital artefacts which are connected in some specific ways. Its first starting point is a Scooby-Doo cartoon adventure.

The animated film *Scooby-Doo! Legend of the Phantosaur* (2011) – one of countless direct-to-video Scooby-Doo escapades – featured a storyline in which character Shaggy, as the result of hypnosis, turns fearless upon hearing a trigger word. Shaggy, who is otherwise characterised as a goofy, cowardly slacker in the franchise, becomes confident and heroic for a sequence in which he successfully fights a biker gang by himself. He manoeuvres the fight against numerous men skilfully, uses nearby objects to his advantage, and lands a fair few punches before winning the fight. The plot

device of the character under hypnosis did not reach beyond this self-contained adventure and is, by itself, unremarkable. However, the biker gang fight scene featuring the confident and powerful Shaggy found a new audience years later: it was re-contextualised in 2017 as an 'Ultra Instinct Remix' ('Ultra Instinct Shaggy' 2018).

To understand what this means, we need a second starting point. It comes in the form of another animated fight sequence – this time, from Series 5 of the Japanese Shonen anime series *Dragon Ball Super*. The show, a continuation of earlier *Dragon Ball* series, followed franchise protagonist Goku on a quest of intergalactic martial arts battles, becoming more and more powerful as a result. *Dragon Ball Super* introduced a new metric to escalate the ever-growing 'power levels' of its protagonist: an ultimate technique called 'Ultra Instinct'. Goku achieves the state of Ultra Instinct in episode 110 titled 'Goku Enkindled! The Awakened One's New Ultra Instinct!' (2017); his body is surrounded by a blue glow; his mind and physique surpass all previous limits. The fight begins; the song *Kyuukyoku no Battle* with a sung performance by Akira Kushida (ibid) accompanies the action. Goku's newfound ability gifts him extraordinary power, demonstrated by lightning-speed movement and a calm, determined control over the battle. Meanwhile, other characters – warriors and deities – discuss the event. 'He broke through his ceiling?'; 'Yes, he is now in uncharted territory' (ibid). A watershed moment, the episode had an effect not just on the narrative of the series but the show's fandom too – and internet users soon began incorporating the stylistic and narrative themes of the sequence in home-made video mashups they labelled 'Ultra Instinct Remixes'.

Primarily posted on YouTube, Ultra Instinct Remixes re-used elements from multiple sources to evoke the style of the *Dragon Ball Super* sequence. Users emulated the anime series' key moment through (somewhat crude) editing effects and made use of the show's soundtrack as well ('Ultra Instinct Remixes' 2017). Through these acts of re-appropriation, Goku's fight was evoked by, among others, *Ultra Instinct Iron Man* or *Ultra Instinct Peter Parker* (ibid). Among these was the specific video upload

of interest to us: one which used these similar stylistic patterns in its recycling of *Scooby-Doo! Legend of the Phantosaur*.

Ultra Instinct Shaggy – the since-deleted video by YouTube user Midya, currently available as a re-upload (RoastedCurry 2019) – starts with Shaggy in the middle of the confrontation with the biker gang as they exchange threats of violence. The *Dragon Ball Super* song *Kyuukyoku no Battle* fades in as tensions escalate and the fight begins. ‘Your choice’ (ibid), Shaggy grins as peace negotiations fail. He then launches into battle with a backflip – the first instance of motion among many which is manipulated by Midya in the remix. For these moments in the animated battle, the video employs dissolves and slow-motion editing to evoke Goku’s lightning-speed attacks in *Dragon Ball Super*. The audio follows suit: slowed down, cinematic sound effects are added on top of the original audio to emphasise the action. The added music takes centre stage as it overpowers the original audio, drowning out bits of dialogue without any intent of masquerading as a professional or official edit of any kind. It is crude, obviously home-made, and hardly subtle about the re-appropriation of its source materials.

Shaggy’s insertion into the format was one of many, and yet, it clearly stood out as a unique juxtaposition of media properties: its chosen hero and the children’s show were an unlikely pairing for the anime battle sequence. Likely due to this entertaining juxtaposition, other internet users also took interest in *Ultra Instinct Shaggy*. Midya’s video was followed by subsequent remix videos, written comedy sketch scripts such as DeviantArt user Nekroz-of-Mokey’s *Shaggy Rogers vs. Madara Uchiha* (‘Shaggy’s Power’ 2019) and works of fan art depicting Shaggy with *Dragon Ball Super*’s *Ultra Instinct* aura (fig. 1).



Figure 1: MielSibel10032002 (2017). 'Ultra Instinct Shaggy'. DeviantArt.

In July 2018, Midya's remix video was reposted by a user as a submission to Reddit's r/BossFight subreddit under the post title 'The Shagster, bringer of destruction' (ibid). Its top comment by Redditor muffler_kek wrote: "Like, you only made me use 10% of my power man" (ibid). This was a combination of Shaggy's recognisable speech pattern ('like', 'man') and the concept of the power level: a measurement for combat ability in the Dragon Ball franchise. The 'power level', at this point, had already been a running joke and reference point in internet discourse and popular culture for years ('Power Level' 2015). An earlier version of this joke (the line 'This isn't even 1% of 1% of 1% of my power, kid') had been featured in the story *Shaggy Rogers vs. Madara Uchiha* already ('Shaggy's Power' 2019), although at that point without Shaggy's characteristic speech pattern. The catchphrase combination became a turning point for Shaggy's new-found, tongue-in-cheek popularity. One of many popular images that followed depicted Shaggy with a quickly Photoshopped katana on his back alongside the caption 'Heh... Like, not bad man... You made me use 10% of my power' (fig. 2). The image became highly popular on Reddit and subsequently spread to other corners of the internet as well. For a while, the repetitions and variations of the power level joke became an integral part of the phenomenon.

Heh... Like, not bad man...
You made me use 10% of my power



Figure 2: narwhal-lord14 (2018). 'Like not bad man'. Reddit.

In early 2019 the katana image was posted on the 4chan imageboard alongside a 'greentext story' (anecdotes and short stories written in green text, specific to 4chan's platform). A screenshot of this post later made its way back to Reddit, receiving 2000 upvotes (ibid). This untitled story meshes together multiple pop culture references and impersonates Shaggy as its narrator as he recounts an encounter with a foe:

'>Passing through a narrow alley

>"Hmpf, are you the one know as shaggy?"

>Turn around

>See some fat rabbit just standing at the beginning of the alley

>"Like, you guessed it, man"

>the rabbit clenches his fist

(...)

>”Like, yare yare daze, man. This is going to be a long night” (matthewoliveira 2019)

The two begin fighting. Eventually, the story concludes on a plot twist: the events have been a drug-induced fever dream all along. Shaggy’s enemy in this epic battle is referred to as a ‘fat rabbit’ – this is a reference to the then-popular ‘Big Chungus’ meme, itself a re-appropriation of *Looney Tunes*’s Bugs Bunny. In response to the appearance of his enemy, Shaggy says ‘Like, yare yare daze, man’, evoking a popular Japanese catchphrase from the manga series *JoJo’s Bizarre Adventure*. These new references to pre-existing media further emphasised the comic incongruity between two recognisable worlds: the power-scaling boss fights of Shonen anime titles and the goofy children’s cartoon characters who are far from such feats in their original environments. By this point, any reference to *Scooby-Doo! Legend of the Phantosaur* and its biker gang fight scene was no longer necessary.

The story depicting Shaggy’s battle with the ‘fat rabbit’ was one of many to come. Further juxtapositions, Photoshop edits and remixes followed, taking on the formats of written text, images and videos. Shaggy got to engage in battle with Superman, Naruto’s Sasuke, Marvel’s Thanos and Ross from *Friends* (this unlikely latter character often recurring as Shaggy’s arch nemesis), defeating practically all who challenged him. Various forms of media, such as comic book panels and film stills (fig. 3), were recycled and reused to create comedic juxtapositions. In February 2019 a new subreddit, titled r/BadAssShaggy, was launched (ibid) which, by 2020, accumulated 30,000 subscribers and a vast amount of user-created content. These works ranged from poor quality Photoshop edits to recaptioned cartoon screenshots to original, elaborate artwork and animation. As the joke grew in popularity, Shaggy as a character underwent yet further transformation – from powerful fighter to omnipotent chaotic god. He was now a threat; a mythological trickster endangering humanity. Adding an extra layer to the constantly developing joke, internet users turned to the behind-the-scenes interviews for the live action film *Scooby-Doo: The Movie*, writing mock-subtitles under screenshots of the main actors speaking. In these new contexts, the actors now looked like they were discussing

their experiences of shooting the film alongside actor Matthew Lillard whose mortal body, of course, was possessed by the spirit of Shaggy during filming (fig. 4).



Figure 3: Lilswoleder (2019). 'Shaggy fucking upper cuts thanos'. Reddit



Figure 4: allhailshaggy (2019). 'With a wave of his hand'. Reddit.

The phenomenon, at one point dubbed 'Shaggy's Power', inevitably entered mainstream discussion. Lillard himself greatly enjoyed this surprising cultural trend; he reacted to and discussed his favourite pieces of Shaggy content (Justin Caffier 2019). Around the same time, a petition to put Shaggy in the fighting video game *Mortal Kombat* was started and reached 380,000 signatures. The possibility of the

crossover was teased by the game's co-creator (Robin Burks 2019) before the developer eventually rejected the idea on account of Shaggy being a 'dead meme' (Christopher Baggett 2019). And while the initial wave of user-created content indeed decreased after a while, Shaggy's dedicated subreddit continued to engage with the re-imagined character, adapting him into new contexts. As one example, Shaggy could be seen in a multiple-part homemade comic in which he takes on the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak alongside Ross from *Friends* (fig. 5). As another example, Shaggy's grassroots pairing with the Dragon Ball franchise surfaced once again in relation to the online trend of 'Drip Goku' (which depicted protagonist Goku wearing high fashion accessories) which would quickly receive its Drip Shaggy counterpart (fig. 6).



Figure 5: steveharveymemes (2020). 'Shaggy is now at 10% power. Red Ross is being activated.'. Reddit.



Figure 6: 'The council of shaggy will smite those nonbelievers' (2021). Reddit.

The Shaggy's Power phenomenon is the fascinating, vibrant product of the complex participatory practices of internet culture. It marries pre-existing texts with new contexts, all the while both transforming old meaning and creating new meaning. Notably, it transforms well-known pieces of pre-existing popular media, but it does so in a way that neither necessarily honours or critiques those. As such, Shaggy's Power can be said to transgress more traditional concepts of both fandom and mockery. Instead, it seemingly appears ambiguous in its intentions. Further, it is not motivated by organised marketing efforts either, and Shaggy's new-found wave of popularity has less to do with "traditional" models of consumer behaviour and more to do with the cumulative, creative grassroots efforts of online communities. In fact, Shaggy's Power surfaced on the internet six years after *Scooby-Doo! Legend of the Phantosaur* and fifteen years after *Scooby-Doo: The Movie*. To make matters more complicated, no one creator could solely be credited with the radical transformation that the character underwent as the phenomenon developed. Midya's video (or, rather, its later reupload) may have been the catalyst for the trend, but certainly not its only creative participant. Shaggy's Power is co-constructed but not collectively organised; it is messy but not meaningless. It reflects familiar

social and cultural structures, but it is the specific cultural environment of the Web 2.0 social media which both enable and illuminate its rich cultural creativity.

Shaggy's Power is a 'meme' ('Shaggy's Power' 2019) – a category for cultural works which has risen to the frontlines of popular culture within the last three decades. Memes have been receiving growing academic attention in digital media studies, but not all questions about what memes are, what they do and why they do those things are settled. This thesis offers a contribution to this field and seeks to demystify meme participation. We have so far seen a cartoon character juxtaposed with other media properties, themes, character tropes, genres and running jokes; branching off into short stories, video mashups, drawn art, Photoshopped collages, fake subtitles and DIY comic strips; created, altered and encouraged by internet users on various social media platforms and with various motivations and levels of engagement. Already, there is much to see – but the rabbit hole goes deeper.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS, AIMS, SCOPE

What are memes exactly, what is their purpose in digital culture, and why should we care about them? This thesis is set to investigate these questions. The Shaggy's Power meme certainly isn't the only example of 'meme culture' in action. Social media provide endless varieties of cultural information clashing into one another as the most unlikely juxtapositions are created between different texts. Within the last three decades, memes have become the zeitgeist of the internet age. From subcultural inside jokes to viral parodies of popular media, they have unavoidably entered our social network feeds. From 'Rage Comics' and 'Advice Animals' to 'Distracted Boyfriends', 'Bee Movie But' remixes and 'Berries and Cream' TikTok mashups, memes are in present day an integral part of social media discourse and contemporary culture at large.

Notably, 'meme culture' (that is, the ever-evolving cultural landscape fuelled by the value creation of meme participation) makes active use of recycling and hijacking all kinds of cultural objects and media properties. We have seen some of these elements in the case study of Shaggy's Power: here, members of online communities re-appropriated and juxtaposed animated shows, film stills, behind-the-scenes interviews, music, clothing lines, catchphrases and other memes. Through non-canonical means and through the creative participatory acts of numerous internet users, these pre-existing cultural objects can gain a new "life" in meme culture. This "life" may be formed by a practically endless flow of interrelated artefacts, all and any of which can inform how they are perceived by participants of meme culture.

Of course, cultural transformation isn't exclusive to memes – but the interacting conditions of user participation, media convergence and the technological means for formal re-appropriation provide rich opportunities for creative reuse. Complex memes like 'Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life' or 'Pepe the Frog' – each featured as key case studies in this thesis – are proof of the extraordinary cultural capabilities of participatory media. In a complex dynamic between the technological affordances of the social media age and the social, cultural motivations of everyday participants, memes are built from practically endless combinations of individual expression and social interaction.

The umbrella term of 'meme' has become a prevailing concept in the vernacular of internet culture, usually referring to online jokes of various forms which are spread on social media platforms. However, the exact way in which the term is used in everyday discussion is not quite pinned down: sometimes, 'meme' may account for a singular artefact among many, while at other times it could describe a group of multiple artefacts which are united by a specific theme or punchline. As McKenzie Wark and Scott Wark point out, the word 'meme' 'oscillates ambiguously between instance and plurality. We can talk about [a meme] by talking about a specific instance of the meme or to gesture towards an envisaged totality of related instances of it' (2019: 303). This type-token distinction

between instance and plurality often obscures everyday conversation: if someone wishes to show their friend a meme, the term 'meme' could refer to a specific text or a group of texts which are united by some common themes and are thus understood to be representative of the meme. To bridge this semantic issue without inventing esoteric terminology, I choose to discuss the 'meme' as the collective, interconnected plurality of the 'meme text'. My discussion in Chapter One adds a third layer of meaning to the term: as I define memes as a genre of online expression, 'memes' in its plural will often refer to the genre as a whole. This isn't without precedent (the 'genre of film reviews' can be understood as the multiplicity of individual film reviews); and its use is not meant to signify different genres within memes, but memes-as-genre. These distinctions (between the genre of memes, a specific meme, and the meme texts memes consist of) will be made clear in the context of use. Nevertheless, this semantic conflict between meme-as-trend and meme-as-text remains part of the 'vernacular' (everyday) negotiation of these works. Its confusion is not a simple accident; as seen later, memes as works are often meaningfully informed by the multi-texted plurality of meme texts. In other words, the meaning of memes is often co-constructed by the meme texts which they are made up of.

Mememes also defy easy historical categorisation, as the exact meaning of the term is continuously negotiated by online communities across time. In other words, what the 'meme' label actually designates in everyday discussion has undergone change since the emergence of the phenomenon in the 1990s. From the mistranslated video game dialogue of 'All Your Base Are Belong to Us' of the late 90s to the 'Rage Comics' and 'Advice Animals' of the 2000s all the way to the TikTok mashups and remixes of the 2020s, both the social practices of meme culture and the technology they make use of have seen constant change. This is reflected in the everyday use of the term 'meme' too as it labels trends and patterns of online content throughout the years. Expectations of what memes are also change in this process, and what is considered a "successful" or good meme is actively negotiated based on how well they fit the expectations of given temporal contexts. As such, 'meme' in 2023 will not be used to describe the exact same practices that it did in 2009, and the cultural development of

meme culture is endlessly shaped and informed by the changing needs, interests and standards of its participants. Next to this temporal dimension, this question also has a spatial one: different online individuals, groups and communities do not have the exact same experiences on social media, and this extends to different understandings of meme culture as well. Different platforms, different communities and different language variants on social media activities offer further complexity.

Parallel to its variable everyday use, 'meme' is also a contested academic term among digital media scholars. It seems the question of 'what is a meme?' has multiple answers from different approaches and disciplines. In defining memes, digital media scholarship of the last decade has faced various theoretical and methodological challenges. This pursuit has been burdened in particular by the muddled relationship between memes and the field of 'memetics'. The lens of memetics, as I explore early on in Chapter One of this thesis, has little to offer to digital media theory's understanding of meme culture. Even though similar concerns have been voiced prior to this thesis, much of media studies scholarship of the last decade has continued to wrestle with the legacy of memetics as scholars are obligated to either re-negotiate or cut ties with the field.

But even beyond the memetic hurdle, the functions and purposes of memes are often left shrouded in mystery. Some notable problems around *transformation* – the main focus of this thesis – need addressing. First, while memes are routinely attributed an intertextual element, the exact nature of this intertextuality is less evident in academic, legal and everyday contexts alike. It is largely understood that intertextuality (and thus, transformation) has a particular significance in regard to meme culture. However, the nature and purpose of these acts of transformation – why they happen, whether they have any decodable meaning that is culturally relevant, whether they are "meaningfully" transformative or not – receive less academic attention. Related to this, memes are also caught in the crossfire of remix culture and copyright protection efforts. Lacking both a robust intertextual framework and meme-specific legal precedent, memes are stuck in 'semiotic limbo' between

transformative use and copyright infringement. This in turn renders memes morally and legally dubious, and it hinders creative expression on privately owned tech platforms whose copyright policies likely take cues from current understandings of lawfulness.

Finally, everyday transformation as it happens *within* a meme is at risk of being overlooked. In particular, everyday meme participation is often generalised under the framings of organised collectivism (whereby participants all contribute to a widely understood common goal) and ‘virality’ (whereby information spreads online without “meaningful” change occurring in this process). While prior scholarship has emphasised the semiotic complexity of all levels of participation (from creation to circulation and evaluation), these arguments benefit from further emphasis, and they are yet to be put into the practice of data-based research.

Key questions emerge: How can memes be situated in the cultural landscape, and what characteristics underpin their presence in digital culture? How exactly do memes transform other texts and media on the internet? How does ‘everyday reuse’ (the day-to-day vernacular participatory practices at the heart of meme culture) nuance our understanding of memes? And, finally, how do these lines of enquiry benefit cultural and digital media studies? The ambition of this thesis is to tackle these questions head-on, and thus help demystify what memes are.

By seeking answers to the above questions, I aim to highlight the creative value of this rich and vibrant cultural phenomenon. At the same time, I also seek to illuminate both the challenges and opportunities ahead of meme analysis. It is becoming increasingly clear that meme culture produces vast amounts of unique, creative cultural meaning, and that it in this process it re-appropriates, reuses and re-contextualises other cultural objects. In meme culture, texts and media properties of various sources are taken and remoulded by the everyday creativity of users. Grand, creative participation (remix edits, surprising juxtapositions, elaborate Photoshops) and acts of everyday reuse (reposting,

commenting, upvoting) all contribute to such acts of transformation. Within online participation, cultural meaning is under constant change, and this leads to the creation of new, novel meaning. 'Why this matters' is the principal focus of this investigation. I make a case for the social and creative relevance of memes in our contemporary culture – and, doing so, I build an interdisciplinary approach which seeks to illuminate the complexities of transformation and reuse in memes.

3. CHAPTER OUTLINE

This thesis consists of three lengthier chapters (as opposed to many shorter ones). This is due to two reasons. First, instead of using an isolated literature review, I have opted to engage with different debates (and, often, disciplines) which are specific to the main discussions of each chapter. And second, each of my three chapters proposes a larger guiding research question that is explored in detail with the help of multiple case studies. In order to fully unpack their proposed issues, it is necessary to keep the closely interconnected arguments within the three chapters together.

Chapter One already demonstrates this approach with its dual structure. This chapter considers some of the academic challenges in the study of memes, and it offers to reconsider what memes actually are. I do this in two steps. The first, shorter part of the chapter is concerned with some previous definitions and the theoretical challenges which arise from them. It presents the academic conflict between contemporary meme research and the study of memetics as developed by Richard Dawkins (1976). Here, I consider the field of memetics to be the 'first meme problem': the first academic obstacle in the way of a nuanced understanding of meme culture. I evaluate the effect and legacy of the Dawkinsian framework on present day digital media discourse. I side with recent scholarship regarding the idea that the semantic link between the two concepts – the 'meme' as understood by Dawkins and the 'meme' as used in relation to online content – does more harm than good to the field

of digital media studies. To this end, I follow the relationship of these two fields to what I consider its logical conclusion: the 'separation of the meme from the meme'.

At this point I start my investigation anew and propose a different approach to understanding memes. This second, longer part of the chapter re-introduces memes as an emergent *genre* of social media communication. I argue that memes are a genre specific to the social media environment, but one that is nonetheless informed by both emerging and pre-existing social needs and interests. I use the genre approach for two reasons. First, I believe there is enough evidence to indicate that meme participation is governed by a distinctive set of technological circumstances, social motivations, formal characteristics and audience (later, 'participant') expectations that it can be meaningfully classified a genre. And second, I believe that such an approach is able to illuminate these very patterns and characteristics. As a core of my approach, I use Carolyn R. Miller's 'genre as social action' (1984, 2009, 2015, 2017). I discuss the affordances offered by the Web 2.0 era social media environment, with a particular attention to online participation and the concept of participatory cultures as developed by Henry Jenkins (2006, 2008, 2009, 2013). Then, I look at the social motivations and needs which exploit these affordances, with a particular attention to the sociocultural structures of social laughter and social play. Finally, I consider the formal manifestations of these social motivations in the works of meme culture, with a particular attention to transformation and reuse – notions which take centre stage for the rest of this thesis.

Here, I adapt two frameworks which, while originating in different disciplines, work particularly well together. Gérard Genette's 'hypertextuality' (1997) describes a notable relationship between one text and another; and Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's 'hypermediacy' (2000) describes the tendency of new media to authenticate themselves through the explicit refashioning of other media. Of course, not all online content associated with digital media engages in such hypermediacy – but memes do. I argue that 'hypertextuality' and 'hypermediacy' can help us better understand the vibrant formal

dimension of memes, and the way emerging media texts negotiate with their predecessors. I discuss online participation, play, comedy, hypertextuality and hypermediacy as interrelated characteristics within meme culture. I use them to reframe memes as a vernacular, emergent genre premised on the social play and humour of participants as they actively transform cultural information.

Chapter Two builds on the previous notions of hypertextuality, hypermediacy and transformation. I argue that memes are ‘in a semiotic limbo’ – that is, their meaningfully transformative nature is often unrecognised in lack of the guidance of clear intertextual frameworks. This ambiguity, I argue, extends across academic, everyday and legal contexts too. Notably, it enables memes to be dismissed as derivative works which infringe on the copyright of their referenced texts. To bridge this gap in current understanding and to advocate for the rich hypertextual capabilities of memes, this chapter adapts the lens of parody theory. However, as I explore, the notion of parody itself is subject to academic disagreement and thus requires careful navigation. My adapted framework – which I refer to as ‘ambivalent parody’ for clarity – is particularly well-suited for the internet, and its adaptation can enrich our understanding and appreciation of memes. By engaging with ambivalent parody, this chapter investigates the creative reuse exemplified by memes. I draw a connection between two notions from separate disciplines: ‘ambivalence’ as it emphasises the complex attitude of parodic works, discussed by the parody theories of Margaret A. Rose (1979, 1993, 2011) and Linda Hutcheon (1985); and the ‘ambivalent internet’ as used by Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner to describe the multi-voiced nature of online participation (2017).

My contribution considers the adaptation of ambivalent parody onto meme culture a ‘match made in heaven’. In particular, it offers a theoretical framework which can account for the rich hypermediacy of meme culture without the necessity of restricting its parodic functions to that of critique and ridicule. This intervention allows a closer, pragmatic look at the nature of hypertextuality between memes and other texts; and, at the same time, it re-contextualises memes within a robust academic

framework. As such, it brings us a step closer to the demystification and legitimisation of meme participation. I argue that the approach of ambivalent parody is fitting for the discussion of the multi-voiced re-appropriations of meme culture. I discuss the concepts of incongruity, attitude and distance as the guiding principles of this approach. I also propose to contrast and compare the ‘parody’ of academic theories to ‘parody’ as employed by copyright law in the United Kingdom, the European Union and the United States. I argue that copyright law of the past decades has also navigated challenges comparable to the academic ones, and that recent legal precedents have opened the door for the recognition of more dynamic (and ambivalent) understandings of parody. This interdisciplinarity also serves as a reminder: parody is not just an abstract academic concept, but an everyday category for creative reuse as well.

The ideas introduced here are then put to the test in the detailed textual and intertextual analysis of the meme Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life. This meme is centred on a collection of text-based short stories which hijack the animated character Shrek and depict him as a mythical demon of tongue-in-cheek horror. My methodological approach in this chapter uses qualitative case study analysis, and the method of intertextual interpretation to detect commonalities, intertextual links and cultural components in the narratives found within and around the case study. I do so with an emphasis on “transmedia” analysis within digital culture: I look at images, written texts of various sources, videos. My case study explores the rich hypertextual layers of the meme and situates it as the novel parody of multiple works, genres and practices. These include the genres of fan fiction erotica, 4chan’s greentext anecdotes, online ‘creepypasta’ horror storytelling as well as *Shrek* and its surrounding media fandom. I do this with an approach of transmedia analysis: by examining written prose, images and animated videos, I discuss the way these texts co-construct the complex parody of the meme. In addition, I also look at the historical context of the now-defunct forum website ShrekChan and the social play associated with its performative subcultural “fandom”. In this last section, I use the case study to emphasise the power of online participation as it enables the complex convergence of

fandom, anti-fandom and ironic fandom in digital discourse. Here, I once again emphasise ambivalence. The chapter makes two simultaneous claims about its subject. First, memes such as Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life meaningfully benefit from the 'parody' label as parody highlights their transformativeness and their creative, comic distance from their referenced works. And second, memes as parodic works are illuminated by an approach which considers them as groups of texts co-creating meaning in complex, ambivalent ways.

Chapter Three continues to follow this latter claim. In it, I take a look at some of the everyday participatory activities which underpin meme culture. In contrast with the vibrant parodic hypertextuality explored in Chapter Two, this chapter investigates the ways in which varying kinds of day-to-day online engagement can contribute to changes in meaning. In the first part of the chapter, I build the case for a careful approach towards understanding such everyday reuse. I join existing research in warning against frameworks categorising digital culture along the dichotomies of transformation versus imitation, the 'meme' versus the 'viral', or 'high engagement' versus 'low threshold' participation. In this sense, this chapter complicates previous ideas on transformation: it asks about the unchronicled instances of participation which are easily mischaracterised as meaningless, or as united under the 'lingua franca' of collective creation.

I side with Jenkins et al. (2013) and Piia Varis and Jan Blommaert (2014) in asserting that changes in meaning do not end with changes to the formal properties of signs, and that a consideration of online use in context of social and semiotic processes can bring about a deeper understanding of the internet. This means that cultural meaning may change and transform through means other than textual: posting and reposting, liking and sharing, celebrating and dismissing, understanding and misunderstanding memes all create meaning. This, I argue, is key to understanding memes. Adding to previously discussed ideas (hypertextuality, hypermediacy, parody), I adapt two additional ones. 'Re-entextualisation' describes the way textually unchanged media texts are extracted from their previous

contexts and inserted into entirely new ones; and 'resemiotisation' describes the way in which 'every "repetition" of a sign (...) results in an entirely "new" semiotic process' (2014: 36). Through this closer focus on everyday reuse, the chapter shines a light on meme participation which could otherwise be disregarded by both theoretical and practical research. As a synthesis with previous ideas, I propose to look at transformation in memes as two sides of the same coin: both as the formal refashioning of media texts, and as the innumerable instances of contextualisation which memes are made up of.

The second part of this chapter once again builds on these ideas and sees them in practice. I introduce the case study of Pepe the Frog: a meme which is often reduced to a singular role in political discourse as a 'hate symbol' despite the varied ways in which it is used in everyday online communication. As I explore, the cartoon frog is redrawn and adapted into various contexts by online communities. I navigate these ideas with the interdisciplinary approach of linguistic and communication studies paired with social media content analysis. I examine the different communicative and social functions (such as those of the emotive marker, the identity marker, the creative resource and so on) that Pepe the Frog fulfils in 4chan's forum discussions. The methodology of this case study is centred on the qualitative analysis of five digital datasets, each showing 24 hours' worth of digital discussion from 4chan's different sub-communities. My findings present an insight into the 'variations on a meme'. These include emerging trends and themes; the branching out of spin-off variants which earn their own name in the vernacular through their repeated use; the social play of 'frogposting' as participants interact with meme texts as creative resources. As an additional set of learnings, the case study also discusses suitable methods and relevant considerations for the semiotic research of internet culture. These include the significance of image-text pairings of forum posts as units of analysis; the significance of the 'human instrument' in qualitative social media research; the risks and challenges of researching extreme content and hate speech online.

Through these three chapters, my thesis offers to interrogate the complexities of everyday cultural participation online. I discuss meme culture as the novel patterns of textual and contextual transformation which emerge from the social media environment, and I highlight the academic tools which are best suited for the demystification and re-appraisal of its cultural works. Further, I propose new models for media studies for the reframing of transformation and reuse in memes.

CHAPTER ONE: WHAT IS (AND ISN'T) A MEME

1. INTRODUCTION

The 2020 documentary feature *Feels Good Man* – a film chronicling the decade-long history of the Pepe the Frog meme and the uphill battle of artist Matt Furie hoping to reclaim it from the internet – has Furie introduce the word ‘meme’ with finger quotes around the 13-minute mark. Here, he expresses some confusion regarding what the term actually means. The documentary quickly offers an answer to Furie and to the audience: to provide context, it introduces a new talking head in scholar Susan Blackmore, introduced by the film as ‘psychologist and memetist’. Blackmore briefly comments on the design of the cartoon frog before drawing on the study of memetics to explain its function:

‘The whole idea of memes comes from Richard Dawkins’s 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*. Most of the book is about what he called “universal Darwinism”, which said, “All of biology is driven by genes, but culture is driven by memes.” He said, “Look around you and you’ll see, floating about in the primeval soup of culture, is information copied by imitation from person to person.” So that would include chairs... trousers... hairstyles. (...) And then, gradually, came the concept of internet memes. And people can easily see that process happening with Pepe. Pepe is a wonderful example of a meme that escaped out there into the memeosphere and suffered all the things you’d expect of a meme.’ (2020)

Blackmore’s voice is accompanied by suspenseful music; an original animated sequence featuring the character of the cartoon frog, as it leaps from one desktop window to the next, fills the screen. The documentary then moves on to follow Pepe the Frog’s use in online subcultural discourse. The film manages to find a linearity between this talking head and those following it, united by a consistently mysterious atmosphere as the documentary dives into the unknown of 4chan trends, dirty basements and hate speech. And yet, Blackmore’s statement exists somewhat at odds with the documentary’s

overall argument. It provides interesting context by tracing the term 'meme' back to its earlier use by Dawkins and the subsequent scholarship of memetics; yet, by doing so, it assumes an obvious linearity between the Dawkinsian meme and 'internet memes' as used by 4channers and online users. As a result, it reflects a disconnect between the 'imitation from person to person' that Blackmore is addressing, and the documentary's overarching narrative of a cartoon character that "fell victim to" purposeful hijacking at the hands of online communities. Further, the introduction of this academic voice does not bring the documentary's audience any closer to a clear understanding of what Pepe the Frog, as a meme, actually is.

The film's inclusion of Blackmore's interview is not necessarily an editorial misjudgement, nor is it necessarily a misrepresentation of memetics – itself a complex and highly contested cultural theory. Instead, it is just one instance of the ongoing confusion, plaguing academic and non-academic discussion alike, of how memetics relates to the specific study of 'internet memes'. Digital media research of the last decade has faced an ongoing conflict between the two 'memes' – one as applied to cultural units spread by copying from one human brain to the next, and one as it refers to funny images and videos shared and remixed on social media. How the former may inform scholarship on the latter is considered by this thesis as the first meme problem standing in the way of pinpointing the role and function of memes in digital media.

As I examine early on in this chapter, digital media studies have continued to engage with the field of memetics in various ways from cautious acceptance to outright dismissal. This, I argue, is in part due to the semantic ties between these two concepts, and in part due to a false linearity between them which was established early on in digital media scholarship. In fairness, the two concepts can appear analogous to an extent, and the framework of memetics itself has no issues accounting for the spread of cultural information on the internet. However, this contested historical association does more to hurt the discourse around (internet) memes than it does to help it. Further, any definition of the

Dawkinsian meme may be too broad to prove useful in effectively discussing the (internet) meme which, as this chapter explores, is a concept very much tied to its social and technological contexts. As such, the first task of this chapter is to depict the scholarly conflict between ‘the meme and the meme’ – the only satisfactory resolution of which, I argue, is the separation of the two concepts.

In its place, I also wish to introduce an alternative model for discussing memes. Put simply, it is reasonable to presume that the significant mainstream popularity of the term ‘meme’ in the last three decades skyrocketed because it labelled a new, specific phenomenon in need of a name. By reclaiming memes from memetics, this significance of the name as a descriptor of an internet-based phenomenon is restored and can lead to a better understanding of its functions. Specifically, it allows for the re-introduction of memes as a vernacular, emergent genre of digital discourse. As noted by Janet Giltrow, ‘[p]eople have names for genres. In times of technological change, people can use the classificatory dimension of genre to estimate the extent of change, recognizing an old genre in the uses of new technologies, or finding a name for what they take to be novel (2017: 40). I propose that the latter is the case for memes.

This chapter develops two, interrelated arguments. First, there is enough evidence to suggest that memes as novel, recurrent digital expression can be meaningfully categorised as a genre. And second, there is clear utility in such an approach as it reveals the social and cultural significance of memes. I propose the genre definition as an alternative to current approaches to memes which discuss their cultural behaviour (online spread, copying, “mutation”) and form (multi-textedness, multimodality), but not their *function*. In other words, I propose that memes can be successfully discussed under ‘genre as social action’ (Carolyn R. Miller 1984) as they fulfil identifiable sets of social function. Doing so serves as a step in demystifying memes and revealing them to be novel and tangible – though nonetheless complex – expression.

In order to re-assess memes on these new terms, this chapter engages with the frameworks of multiple disciplines from genre and media theories to social studies, comedy theory and the theories of intertextuality and remediation. I use these frameworks with the primary intention to introduce and highlight three dimensions alongside which memes can be best understood. First, I consider the *technological affordances* of Web 2.0 social media and situate memes within this specific participatory context. I then consider their *social exigence* – the sets of social needs, motivations and pleasures which inform memes –, and explore meme culture in relation to the ideas of social laughter and social play. Finally, I consider the formal attributes of *transformation and reuse* as defining characteristics of memes. Here, I utilise the complementary notions of ‘hypertext’ and ‘hypermedia’ which serve to identify meme participation as a uniquely transformative genre. This can foreground these acts of participation as a creative practice which is premised on the unhidden, explicit transformation of other texts and media. In turn, this also informs our understanding of the formal characteristics of memes as ‘junk art’: the aesthetic embracing of both the ‘ugly aesthetics’ of the amateur creator and the unhidden digital recycling of media properties. These parts all serve to inform an understanding of memes as genre works premised on playful transformation and creative reuse.

2. AN(OTHER) INTRODUCTION TO MEMETICS

The word ‘meme’, as coined by Dawkins in the 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, has little to do with humorous images and videos shared on social media. Instead, as Blackmore suggests in *Feels Good Man*, the memetic theory acts as an extension of the Darwinian concept of natural selection in which individual genes compete for survival through the evolutionary process. Analogous to the gene, Dawkins’s ‘meme’ adapts the idea of natural selection onto cultural discourse. According to Dawkins, the meme – aptly rhyming with ‘gene’ and derived from the Greek *mimeme* for ‘imitation’ – is a ‘unit of cultural inheritance (...) naturally selected in virtue of its phenotypic consequences on its own survival and replication in the cultural environment’ (1999: 290). His examples range from musical

tunes, ideas, catchphrases and fashion trends to religion and the idea of God and Christianity (1976: 206-207). As he explains, much like the way genes 'propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body (...) memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation' (1976: 206). According to memetics, these units of cultural information spread from one vehicle (our human brains) to another, and often succeed in infesting them. This proposed success of memes is premised on three attributes: their 'longevity' (the time they survive for), their 'fecundity' (the speed by which they replicate), and their 'copying-fidelity' (how faithful they remain to their original version). Dawkins understands the propagation of memes as both cultural transmission and cultural evolution. In his view, such practices are not specific to humans. He uses the example of birdsong: birds living in the same territories will adapt the same song while other 'dialect groups' will sing another and, as birds will occasionally fail to imitate a song perfectly, other variants of the original birdsong will catch on (1976: 203-204).

Dawkins's theory of memetics has proved to be highly influential, influencing a whole new sub-discipline. In *The Meme Machine* Blackmore argues that everything one learns by imitation from someone else is a meme (1999: 6). She presents an updated manifesto for memetics. She argues that instead of considering our ideas as our own conscious creations, 'we have to think of them as autonomous selfish memes, working only to get themselves copied. We humans (...) have become just the physical 'hosts' needed for the memes to get around' (1999: 7-8). In *The Selfish Meme* Kate Distin discusses the way memes compete for selection and therefore survival (2004: 10). She also claims that memes are more alike viruses than genes are (2004: 76). This virus metaphor is already present in Dawkins's original framework, along with its negative connotations – however, in his article for *The Daily Telegraph* titled 'Is religion just a disease?' Dawkins suggests that the cultural-information-as-virus analogy is not always true. 'Great ideas and great music spread, not because they embody instructions, slavishly carried out, but because they are great. The works of Darwin and Bach are not viruses' (1993: 18). In other words, some cultural units stick around because they actually have

recognisable value in human culture, while most other units fit the description of a 'virus'. Distin actually considers this a weakness on Dawkins's part, as she believes that all cultural artefacts, regardless of 'greatness' or usefulness, are in fact viruses (2004: 74).

A key author in contemporary (internet) meme studies, Limor Shifman prefaces her initial review of memetics in *Memes in Digital Culture* by noting how the concept of the Dawkinsian meme had been the subject of constant academic debate, derision and dismissal (2013: 2). She identifies two theoretical conflicts around memetics. The first of these two addresses the likening of memes to viruses. Shifman argues that this metaphor is problematic 'not only because memes behave very differently than genes, but also because reducing culture to biology narrows and simplifies complex human behaviors' (2013: 12). This question of meme-as-virus is centred on a notable shift in emphasis. While it is true that cultural trends and ideas catch and are spread in cultural processes, a key difference lies in whether we see this practice as a cultural force that is outside of the control of cultural participants themselves.

This ties in directly with the second conflict identified by Shifman: the question of human agency in relation to the diffusion of memes (ibid). In this respect, the Dawkinsian approach has been broadly criticised. Contesting the notion of the meme-as-virus overtaking the helpless human 'vehicle', Henry Jenkins et al. propose that, instead of thinking of cultural information as self-replicating viruses, we should ultimately recognise human agency in circulating cultural material (2013: 19). Human agency gains special importance when discussing what Jenkins calls 'participatory culture'. Participatory culture contrasts with older notions of passive media spectatorship, instead seeing consumers and producers as active participants of cultural conversation (2008: 3). Jenkins et al. contend that 'the viral metaphor does little to describe situations in which people actively assess media texts, deciding who to share it with and how to pass it along. People make many active decisions when spreading media' (2013: 20). The authors also note how active audiences have showcased a 'remarkable ability' to hijack

popular stories and re-contextualise jingles or advert slogans against their original purpose, producing ‘profoundly different interpretations’ of the original cultural information (ibid). This statement persuasively opposes Dawkins’s parallel between accidental deviations in birdsong and human cultural “mutation”. Joseph Poulshock argues a similar point by emphasising that the framework of memetics (specifically, as further developed by Blackmore) is scientifically unfounded, and that ‘the basic operational definition of memetics is seriously lacking or non-existent. That is, it is difficult or impossible to measure the transmission and reproductive fitness of memes’ (2002: 71). Shifman, on the other hand, argues that ‘the undermining of human agency is inherent not to the meme concept itself, but only to one strain of its interpretation’ (2013: 12). She sides with scholars such as Rosaria Conte, who discusses memetics in relation to autonomous memetic agents moving memetic processes along through their decision-making (2001: 87).

A third conflict surrounding memetics concerns the very idea of the meme as a unit of cultural information. Robert Boyd and Peter J. Richerson argue that culture should not be discussed as discrete ‘particles’ (1988: 37), and that memetics is therefore the wrong way to understand cultural evolution. Luis Benítez-Bribiesca points both to a lack of scientific evidence and to the lack of clarity around the term’s exact definition. As he argues, ‘there has been as yet no scientific demonstration of such an immaterial replicator. To start with, there is no clear-cut definition of a meme. No one really knows what this “unit of cultural transmission” really is’ (2001: 30). Dawkins himself acknowledges such criticisms and, in his foreword to Blackmore’s *The Meme Machine*, he poses the question of how large a unit deserves the name ‘meme’ (1999: xiv). He continues: ‘Is the whole Roman Catholic Church one meme, or should we use the word for one constituent unit such as the idea of incense or transubstantiation? Or for something in between?’ (ibid). As a solution, Dawkins and Blackmore offer the idea of ‘coadapted meme complexes’ or ‘memeplexes’ which describe ‘groups of memes that are replicated together’ (1999: 19). However, the essential unit of the Dawkinsian meme remains largely ambiguous.

Whether or not the field of memetics should be considered a valid approach to cultural theory is not of primary concern for this thesis. To note, in 2014 Dawkins himself claimed that his own idea isn't, and never was, a cultural theory. As part of a Q&A session held at the Oxford Union, he says: 'I wasn't intending [the meme] to be a contribution to the theory of human culture. Others have tried to make it so' (OxfordUnion 2014). What I am interested in instead is a different notion, also called 'meme', which emerged almost two decades after Dawkins's evolutionary metaphor. Further, I wish to address the ways in which studies of this new 'meme' have in different forms incorporated memetics into their theories. It is ironic that, just like the Dawkinsian meme would strive for survival, the notion of the 'meme' has survived the battles and hardships of critique and controversy and migrated into digital media studies. As seen below, however, Dawkinsian memetics does very little to accommodate a digital media understanding of (internet) memes.

3. SEPARATING THE MEME FROM THE MEME

Decades after Dawkins's first work on genes and memes, the term 'meme' suddenly resurfaced on the internet. A 1994 *Wired* article written by Mike Godwin and titled 'Meme, Counter-meme' – a think piece about the way social media users in online arguments usually end up calling the other person a Nazi (1994) – is often referenced as a possible turning point in the use of the term. However, the article has more to do with memetics than with the current, everyday use of the term. Either way, the phrase ultimately caught its second wind in online discussions around this same time. It may very well be the somewhat unclear and esoteric definition of the Dawkinsian meme itself that allowed the term to be "stolen" and re-interpreted by the internet masses. In *The World Made Meme* Ryan M. Milner attributes this event – the co-opting of the term 'meme' – to the userbases of websites such as 4chan, Reddit or Tumblr. Milner suggests that these communities 'stripped [the term] of some of its strongly Dawkinsian connotations, and reintroduced it to broader public discourse' (2016: 17). The word itself

is short and catchy, almost comically simple; ideal for recycling as online communities find that they are in need of a label to describe some of the new practices they are engaging in.

Milner is right in noting that the new use of the term may no longer be tied to memetics much at all. In fact, the mass userbase of the internet (and people in general) likely did not start actively describing funny images as 'memes' because they were passionate about evolutionary biology. Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear comment on this discrepancy, noting that 'participants in popular practices of online "meming" would not typically be interested in (...) whether memes are actually associated with physical neural manifestations in human brains, or have a kind of independent agency in terms of replication' (2007: 199-200). I agree. I am reminded of another phrase in the internet vernacular that was derived from a vastly different initial context: the term 'spam', originally borrowed from a 1970s *Monty Python's Flying Circus* sketch featuring the Spam luncheon meat as every single menu item in a café. This scene was later repeatedly quoted by users in the chat rooms of the early internet; and, subsequently, the word 'spam' was re-applied to describe unwanted digital messages and mail. Unlike the Spam-spam semantic similarity, however, the meme-meme semantic similarity is often entertained by academia.

Despite the significant gap between historical meaning and current use, the legacy of memetics continues to haunt academic discussion regarding the phenomenon of (internet) memes. We have seen an example of this in the *Feels Good Man* documentary, but many others exist. From embracing to negotiating to rejecting memetics, contemporary scholars (me included) all seem to engage with memetics at one point or another. This is not completely surprising: both terms seem to refer to patterns of cultural activity, the spread of information and the resulting popularity of cultural trends. As a consequence, early scholarship on (internet) memes was quick to identify the connection as a useful one. This also means that the study of (internet) memes is now more or less intertwined with memetics and is sometimes considered under the same discipline. This connection in present

scholarship is so deep-rooted that it earns some spotlight even in studies which wish to leave it behind for good (this thesis included).

As an example of this connection between memetics and the internet, Knobel and Lankshear discuss the possible differences that Dawkins's memes and 'online memes' may have in terms of their shelf life and cultural influence (2007: 199). They then assess a variety of "successful" 'online memes' in the context of the Dawkinsian framework. They argue that memetics serves as a useful guide for identifying and analysing these artefacts (2007: 201) and conclude that there are no characteristics which would set apart 'online memes' from other memes (2007: 208). In a different study, Patrick Davison also adapts the Dawkinsian framework as he assesses the survival ability of memes on the internet (2012: 123). Working from Dawkins's framework, Davison notes that 'the term "meme" can mean almost anything' (2012: 126). He emphasises that he does not wish to limit the scope of memetics by his focus on this new, 'internet meme': 'the goal is not to create a basis for invalidating the widespread use of the term' (2012: 126-127). In other words, the study ensures that the net of memetics can apply to all cultural movement online.

In *Memes in Digital Culture* Shifman expresses the belief that, even though the field of memetics as a whole had been controversial, contemporary meme studies can make use of it nonetheless. She aims to utilise memetics 'as a prism for understanding certain aspects of contemporary culture without embracing the whole set of implications and meanings ascribed to it over the years' (2013: 6). Taking a step away from discussing internet memes as autonomous replicators, Shifman rejects the notion of memes-as-agents. She states that 'the depiction of people as active agents is essential for understanding Internet memes, particularly when meaning is dramatically altered in the course of memetic diffusion' (2013: 12). She also acknowledges that the definition(s) of the Dawkinsian meme may have been too abstract (2013: 37) for an effective description of these 'new' memes. She

specifically critiques Blackmore's overly inclusive definition which regards everything from abstract ideas to specific artefacts as memes (2013: 39).

Shifman's work nonetheless functions as an extension of memetics; a sort-of missing link between the two different concepts (or, from her perspective, "traditional memes" and "internet memes"). Further, she argues that the 'gap between the popular and serious accounts of memes can be bridged' (2013: 14). Importantly, while not specifically providing a detailed account or a clear definition in her new framework for non-internet memes, she claims that 'memes were not born with the Internet; they were always part of human society' (2013: 24). She uses the example of the graffiti movement 'Kilroy Was Here': a recognisable and easily replicated wall drawing, once a war symbol during World War II and later becoming a global trend, drawn on walls around the world (ibid). She compares the phenomenon to the popular internet trend of 'planking', discussing both as memes – 'traditional and Internet-based' ones, respectively (2013: 28).

Despite this transhistorical gesture, Shifman's focus is nonetheless on "internet-specific" memes. In re-defining the meme, she describes internet memes as groups of digital items which may share a variety of common characteristics (which she labels form, content, and stance); which were made with awareness of each other, and are circulated, imitated and/or transformed on the internet by many of its users (2013: 7-8). This is a unique adaptation of the Dawkinsian theory to this new area. On the one hand, it usefully emphasises the agency of participants in circulating and transforming cultural material. On the other hand, this definition still keeps the scope of the framework broad enough to account for pretty much anything online, as long as they qualify as groups of digital items sharing common characteristics. This bar is rather low: it qualifies emoticons, abbreviations, online slang terms, chain letters, news and misinformation, birthday wishes, conspiracy theories, anecdotes, social media challenges, hashtag trends all as internet memes. This fits Shifman's purposes for bridging

memetics with the internet, but I argue that its cast net is still too broad to effectively characterise (internet) memes.

In *The World Made Meme* Milner takes another step away from Dawkins and proposes to limit the connection between one 'meme' and the other. He links this decision to the controversial metaphors of genetic inheritance and viral infection within memetics:

[T]here's cause to question the value of an argument that more thoroughly tangles up Dawkins's determinism with mediated expressions and conversations. Instead of tying the complex tapestry of culture to a simplistic theory of viral spread, it may be better to diminish the connections between Dawkins's argument and participatory media. (...) [T]here's no guarantee that the memetic lens tells us anything new about mediated conversation' (2016: 9).

Despite this statement, Milner goes on to argue that his own theoretical framework for studying (internet) memes will still draw from Dawkins's theory in a way that may be beneficial for the investigation of what he calls 'memetic media' (ibid). Further, even after he has declared a sort-of separation from memetics, he continues to use the term 'memetics' itself along with its various forms in relation to his own discussion, effectively blurring its ideas with his own. He also partakes in Dawkinsian thinking, claiming that the 'best' memes are the ones that are best at 'surviving in the cultural soup' (2016: 156).

In discussing the spread of (internet) memes, Milner once again emphasises the incompatibility between the internet meme and the Dawkinsian meme. Prior, Shifman has regarded the Dawkinsian criteria of longevity, fecundity, and copying-fidelity as workable notions for contemporary meme studies. As she argues, the internet provides a faster rate for spreading, thus a larger number of artefacts is spread, and information stored in online archives results in longer longevity (2013: 17).

Milner disagrees. He points to the relativity of longevity when it comes to meme artefacts and argues that a brief but larger rise in popularity complicates this notion in general. He also claims that fecundity becomes irrelevant in case of communication among smaller groups of participants (such as inside jokes between two friends). Further, he argues that copying-fidelity is especially an ill fit for ‘memetic media’ as memes tend to be re-appropriated and transformed endlessly, thus becoming significantly different from the original text in the process. As Milner emphasises, these acts of transformation and re-appropriation are essential to ‘memetic media’ (2016: 64-65). This last notion highlights a key discrepancy between the Dawkinsian framework and the discussed cultural texts at hand. For Dawkins, success has equalled the survival of the “original” replicator; for Milner, transformation takes centre stage. Inevitably, however, Milner’s discussion here is still not a dismissal, but a re-negotiation of memetics. He concedes that fidelity and imitation can remain helpful ideas ‘to a point’ and recommends the examples of unaltered images, GIFs, hashtags as evidence. Let’s put a pin in this – in Chapter Three I return to this argument and the problems with this suggested dichotomy between transformation and imitation.

Importantly, Milner explicitly admits that he does not wish to set clear borders for what a meme actually is. He does so in acknowledgment that any definition with the ambition to account for all cultural activities which behave in a ‘memetic’ way would end up labelling *everything* a meme. This is as some of the pillars of his own framework, including the ‘creation’, ‘circulation’ and ‘transformation’ of cultural texts, also leave plenty of room to account for most of culture. This then poses the question of ‘[w]hat isn’t a meme?’ (2016: 76). As he explains:

‘If memetic participation is characterized by the creation, circulation, and transformation of collective texts, then how much mediated participation could fall under this purview? (...) Is the idea of [the meme] so big that it’s of no utility when talking about how people use participatory media to have public conversations?’ (ibid)

Here, Milner's argument not only draws attention to the challenges of defining memes in general, but it also highlights a key issue that any digital media framework derived from memetics must face. While the study of memetics *could* be adapted to encompass the spread of cultural information on the internet, its application does not bring us any closer to a clear definition of what is and what isn't a meme in the vernacular understanding of the term. As the idea of the Dawkinsian meme is a broad, all-encompassing concept, it obscures most approaches aiming to pinpoint what makes these cultural patterns identifiable among all other cultural patterns. In other words, it seems that the memetic researcher cannot do what the everyday internet user can.

Milner opts to sidestep the responsibility of defining what is or isn't a meme and embraces this very ambiguity by choosing to instead discuss the logics underpinning mediated participation (2016: 77). Some of these logics, such as the transformation, re-appropriation, collectivism or multimodality of meme artefacts are relevant to digital media studies and are revisited throughout this thesis. Ultimately, however, what Milner describes as the 'memetic' dimensions of collective conversation are once again not specific to the internet. He joins Shifman in retroactively applying the 'meme' label to the Kilroy Was Here graffiti trend and claims it to be 'part of a long line of memetic practices – from 1960s protest songs to oral folk tales to Elizabethan posies – that help dispersed cultural participants connect to and innovate on what has come before' (2016: 89).

Comparisons between online and offline cultural practices are certainly interesting, and they highlight an important learning about social media: instead of looking at the internet as a parallel universe of fantastical "cyberspace", it actually reflects familiar social logics and structures (Sam Hinton and Larissa Hjorth 2013: ch 2). This view is also articulated by Shifman who argues that memes are effectively part of the cultural practices surrounding them (2013: 34). The conflict here is a semantic one: applying the 'meme' label in a generalised, transhistorical manner robs the phenomenon at hand

– the widespread sociocultural practices of online media play, in-jokes and creative reuse – of its name. Even though these mentioned parallels to other, pre-internet practices are, to some extent, warranted, the absorbing of all of these diverse practices into the parent category of the ‘meme’ obstructs the legitimisation of (internet) memes. Again, if it is true that everything throughout cultural history is a meme, what name do we call the humorous, playful online artefacts reusing popular media and transformed by online users so that they are not grouped together with all other forms of expression? Herein lies the ‘meme problem’: while the logic of ‘memetic participation’ (Milner 2016) *could* work in service of a broader framework of cultural theory, this happens at the inevitable cost of obscuring the existence of the specific cultural patterns which likely prompted the investigation of meme culture in the first place.

In the 2019 book *Internet Memes and Society: Social, Cultural and Political Contexts* Anastasia Denisova finally separates the meme from the meme. She introduces memetics by stating that the Darwinian approach does little to help meme analysis. As she argues, the memes ‘we are studying today, 40 years after Dawkins’s idea, are not defined as any unit of cultural production that survives through time and adjustment. Internet memes are intrinsically linked to the logic and rhythms of networks and social media’ (2019: 2). She discusses the ‘apparent ambiguity’ of memetic definitions as one of the ‘major drawbacks of the notion for interdisciplinary studies’ (2019: 7). Most importantly, in a brief but confident “re-re-definition”, Denisova points out that memes ultimately are a phenomenon of the internet culture, and ‘a cherished communication artefact of our times’ (2019: 10). In the same year, Bradley E. Wiggins also emphasises the semantic problem of equating ‘meme’ with ‘meme’. He argues that it is problematic to assume a direct, analogous link between the two ideas ‘because this ignores the discursive aspect of internet memes. (...) [It] fails to relate to the complex and multifaceted ways in which content is created, spread, etc. online’ (2019: 8).

Denisova's and Wiggins's rejections of the Dawkinsian framework provide an ideal starting point in the reappraisal of meme culture. Importantly, they allow for a closer look at the cultural, social, technological and formal logics underpinning and enabling memes as the online works of vernacular expression worthy of a name of their own. The investigation of these logics shall be the focus of the rest of this thesis. In the context of the theories put forward by Denisova and Wiggins, the word 'meme' no longer needs to be addressed as the redundant "internet meme" – as now, divorced from the discipline of memetics altogether, all memes are internet memes. Much like 'Spam' and 'spam' remain co-existing, yet separate concepts, my own discussion on memes going forward will be very much separate from memetics.

As evidenced by Blackmore's recent, uncontested presence in *Feels Good Man*, however, the Dawkinsian legacy continues to haunt and confuse digital media discourse. This chapter has thus far sought to present this process as the first problem standing in the way of complex, yet direct media analysis. In more pragmatic terms, since the memetic baggage leaves definitions broad enough to still correspond somewhat to their parent framework, this also notably obstructs a more focused look at the specific characteristics and functions that memes may have. It is possible, for example, that some definitions do not contain any reference to the humorous or playful nature of meme texts because such specific criteria would be at odds with the much broader net of memetics. It is the starting claim of this thesis that meme culture – that is, the transformative, playful online trends and patterns which I seek to investigate throughout these chapters – does in fact exhibit characteristics which can be identified, decoded and understood. The rest of this chapter is then tasked with the re-assessment of what I understand to be post-memetics meme theory. My approach is one that consciously avoids constructing a direct lineage from the Dawkinsian framework. All the while, my navigation of recent and current digital media scholarship in this thesis comes with the acknowledgement that some of this scholarship does make use of memetics to larger or lesser extents (but which doesn't mean that they are not useful or insightful in other ways).

In the coming section I propose to start anew with the help of an alternative approach: the re-positioning of memes as an emergent genre of digital culture. The genre approach benefits this enquiry as it allows for the investigation of why and how memes are made to mean online. This can, in turn, guide analysis to pinpoint the cultural significance of memes within the otherwise difficult to navigate environment of online content convergence. Let's explore.

4. MEMES AS GENRE

In December 2019 popular YouTuber and content creator Grandayy (@grandayy) conducted a series of surveys in which users of various platforms (such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram) could vote for the 'best meme' of each year between 2010 and 2019. The individual survey questions at every turn encouraged people to recommend or add any memes they found were missing from Grandayy's initially curated shortlists. The survey questions eventually received responses ranging from around 145,000 and up to around 208,000. These survey rounds led up to the YouTube video titled *Grandayy's Meme Awards 2019* which spoofed an award show format and featured online personalities introducing various awards including 'Best 2019 Meme', as well as categories for the best movie memes, music memes, video game memes and so on. In the lead-up to this video, the survey results for each year's best meme were announced on Twitter throughout December.

The winners of each of the ten surveys, all of which I am including below for the purpose of transparency, do not necessarily reflect a "true" evaluation of the most popular memes during the 2010s (they are all Anglo-American centric and the survey questions were also in English; it is likely that Grandayy's target demographic doesn't cover all bases of meme participation across age, sex, gender, ethnicity and so on). Nonetheless, they are a useful step in our post-memetic enquiry. Specifically, they offer a cross-section of digital trends which are, in the vernacular, perceived as

memes; and, by the nature of the surveys, perceived as *good* memes. This concept of ‘goodness’ can be an early sign of the genre expectations which inform everyday meaning-making in online communities. In other words, the metric of goodness by itself already implies that memes adhere to certain agreed upon characteristics. Further, the list can also showcase some recurring patterns, from social behaviour to formal attributes, which can guide us further in this enquiry. The winners of each year are as follows:

‘Epic Sax Guy’ (Dr Grandayy 2019a) – which refers to a saxophone solo by musician Sergey Stepanov at the 2010 Eurovision Song Contest (‘Epic Sax Guy’ 2010), isolated from its original song. It appeared in remixes, bait-and-switch pranks and popular 10-hour loops (one of which, paired with looped nodding from Gandalf of *The Lord of the Rings*, has surpassed 33 million views on YouTube as of 2023).

‘Nyan Cat’ (Dr Grandayy 2019b) – which refers to an 8-bit animation of a cat with a Pop Tart body flying through space (‘Nyan Cat’ 2011). It was most often paired with the Japanese Vocaloid song *Nyanyanyanyanyanyanya*, but often altered to match other songs and visual variations as well; for instance, it also appeared in subsequent jokes as played over the muted music video of nu-metal band Slipknot’s *Psychosocial*.

‘Illuminati Confirmed’ (Dr Grandayy 2019c) – which refers to the tongue-in-cheek image and video edits drawing attention to triangular shapes in the footage of public figures and celebrities as ironic proof of the Illuminati conspiracy theory. It often evoked both the likeness of the Eye of Providence symbol and the opening theme of *The X-Files*.

‘Doge’ (Dr Grandayy 2019d) – which refers to a wide-spread photograph of a Shiba Inu dog with raised eyebrows, appropriated from a personal blog. The image was often paired with captioned interior

monologues in broken English and the Comic Sans font ('Doge' 2014); the Doge later also saw other variations, and it influenced the cryptocurrency Dogecoin.

'MLG' (Dr Grandayy 2019e) – which refers to the parody videos of 'MLG' ('Major League Gaming') video game compilations ('Montage Parodies' 2012). These Montage Parodies used exaggerated editing techniques and featured multiple pop culture motifs associated with early 2010s 'gaming culture' such as marijuana leaves, the Dr Dre song *The Next Episode* and products from Doritos and Mountain Dew, among others.

'Pepe' (Dr Grandayy 2019f) – which refers to Pepe the Frog, an anthropomorphic frog character appropriated from the comic *Boy's Life*. The character was redrawn and re-edited in multiple variations as a 'reaction image' in online communication; it is a meme which I discuss extensively as a case study in Chapter Three of this thesis.

'We Are Number One' (Dr Grandayy 2019g) – which refers to remixes of the song and video of the same name from the children's television show *Lazy Town*. It took the form of various remixes and mashups, many of them premised on specific editing rules – resulting in versions where the musical sequence would progressively speed up or cut to other video material 'every time they say "one"'.

'Flex Tape' (Dr Grandayy 2019h) – which refers to meme texts reusing a popular video commercial to the Flex Seal product of the same name. The meme texts primarily focused on energetic pitchman Phil Swift, multiple quotes of whom (such as 'I Sawed This Boat in Half' and 'That's a Lotta Damage') would be referenced and repurposed for comedic effect ('Flex Tape' 2018).

'Ricardo Milos' (Dr Grandayy 2019i) – which refers to a recycled video of a Brazilian adult model by the same name. Milos's erotic dance video for the website Jock Butt was both replicated through

performance and remixed by Japanese, Russian and Western users alike throughout the 2010s, often inserting the dance into the end of TikTok videos as a bait-and-switch joke ('Ricardo Milos' 2013).

And, finally, 'Area 51' (Grandday 2020) – which refers to an ironically made 2019 Facebook event and its surrounding subsequent jokes about a plan to 'storm' the American military base of Area 51. RSVP'd my millions of users (though, eventually, not actually attended), the trend was centred on the pretence that its many participants would catch the military compound by surprise and could therefore uncover the government's extra-terrestrial secrets ('Storm Area 51' 2020).

As a first observation, we can notice that the memes listed are co-constructed by online participation. Each of the memes has a premise which invites participatory activities. We Are Number One remixes, for instance, build on the simple joke that the word 'one' is often repeated in the song of the same name. This means that the trend is replicable, and likely easy to follow along with for its participants. MLG Montage Parodies also balance repetition and variation by using familiar video effects and pop culture references and applying them to various topics. The incorporation of Epic Sax Guy into 10-hour long video loops encourages not only the further creation of similar videos, but their enjoyment and circulation as well (hiding the implicit challenge that viewers sit through as much of the 10 hour runtime as they can). The Area 51 meme seems more confusing at first; instead of a specific image or video, at the centre of the trend is the shared ironic stance of participants who all pretend to plan a raid on a government facility to rescue captive aliens. This is a formally different practice, but its premise is very similar to all the other ones: these memes are calls to action, invitations to play.

As a second observation, we can notice that most, if not all, memes on the list exhibit a playfully comedic tone. The Doge, Flex Tape, We Are Number One and Ricardo Milos memes make use of referenced source material that is already deemed humorous or absurd in some ways. Through Flex Tape meme texts, users identify the funniest quotable lines from an erratic product commercial and

place them in new contexts for funny juxtapositions. The Illuminati Confirmed and Area 51 memes both satirise conspiracy theories (celebrities in the Illuminati, aliens at Area 51) through their exaggerated, ironic pretence. Unlikely cultural pairings such as Nyan Cat and Slipknot, or Epic Sax Guy and *The Lord of the Rings* make use of incongruity and create entertaining juxtapositions. Meme texts like *We Are Number One but the word one triggers duplication and makes the video slow down + get louder* (MrMrMANGOHEAD 2016) make their formula very clear and use their added variation to spark laughter.

Finally, as a third observation, we can notice that most memes make direct use of already existing texts and media. Pepe the Frog is recycled from a comic strip; Doge meme texts reuse a photo of someone's pet dog; the Epic Sax Guy meme tears out a brief fragment of a live stage performance; Ricardo Milos videos manipulate a performance taken from an adult website and so on. The texts produced through these re-appropriations are hardly mistakeable for their originals – instead, they are often distorted, reimagined, combined with other elements or placed into completely different contexts. They also seem to rework texts from a variety of other media. Through their online reuse, works originally found within television programming or personal blogs leave behind the boundaries of these media contexts and instead become the recycled ingredients of social media expression.

These examples can serve as a helpful baseline for some early learnings about how memes function. Through the practices of participation, reuse, humour and play, these cultural objects – frogs, saxophone players, erotic dancers, government conspiracies – become organising structures for online communities, at once shaping and being shaped by the communicative actions of individuals (Wanda J. Orlikowski and JoAnne Yates 1994: 541). In other words, the recurrent actions of social participation which are illustrated by this sample are structured along the lines of complex and varied, yet decodable and meaningful sociocultural characteristics. They are more than replicated artefacts – they are examples of genre expression.

In establishing a functioning taxonomy of what defines memes as a genre, the limitations of a formal approach must be first considered. Orlikowski and Yates note that genres typically have some characteristic aspects of form – ‘form’ referring to the readily observable features ranging from the communication medium to structural features to language or symbol systems (1994: 544). Certainly, a brief look at the sample of memes from above reveals some notable formal patterns. For instance, most memes on the list could be categorised by their use of specific technological tools (such as Photoshop, video editing and remixing software, reusable templates) or the online environments and platforms they are circulated in (such as Facebook, YouTube, 4chan, TikTok). Further, we can also take note of the way in which many of the memes on the list combine different symbol systems, mixing written word, image, audio and video in what Milner describes as the multimodality of memes (2016: 24-25). Milner calls multimodality the ‘lynchpin of memetic media’ (2016: 25), not only referring to the fact that digital artefacts can exist in a variety of formats, but also that these formats – modes – regularly clash and merge within the same texts. Such is the case for Doge meme texts that combine images with captions of written text in order to create meaning; or the combination of video, stock images and music in remixes such as the YouTube video *Ricardo Milos Party* in which the dancer, multiplied in video editing, is placed into a stock image house party, cooking pizza and at one point being interrupted by a policeman who is also Ricardo Milos (Kyouma Extra 2019; re-upload).

However, as noteworthy as these formal features are, on their own they are not enough to construct a meaningful genre taxonomy which could truly differentiate memes from other forms of expression. This is for two reasons. First, any such formal categorisation would be overly reliant on given historical snapshots of the genre. Genres change and transform, and these processes are accelerated on the internet as developments both cultural and technological can have a profound effect on form. Genre change in meme culture – including changes to user interests, trends and motivations – can occur rapidly, and popular aesthetic choices can fall out of favour as the genre develops. In addition, this

formal taxonomy is only further challenged by the changing affordances of technology: the growing access to image and video editing software; the rise of new platforms and the decay of others; the new features, websites, applications and tools which at once shape and are in turn shaped by online practices. These risks threaten taxonomies such as Denisova's account on 'Global Meme Formats' (2019: 46) which includes categories such as the 'Demotivator', the 'LOLCat' and the 'Twisted Map' – categories which are bound to this specific historical snapshot. The first arising issue with the formal approach then regards the inconsistencies of the formal characteristics themselves. The assumption, for example, that memes are the combinations of recurring images and funny captions is challenged by the emergence of textless reaction images/GIFs and video-based remixes alike; the logic that creative video remixes are mostly made with the use of video editing software is challenged by the emergence of free video filters and templates on platforms like TikTok; and so on.

The second reason why the overreliance on form can prove problematic is because formal criteria on their own may not always meaningfully separate the discussed genre from others. As an example of this issue, we can look at the formal characteristics of a text from Grandayy's meme survey: an image from the Flex Tape meme trend, in which spokesperson Phil Swift is put alongside an image of the Titanic with the caption 'Titanic 1912 Colorized' (fig. 7).



Figure 7: ChickenNugget734 (2018). 'I found the real reason the Titanic sank'. Reddit.

The image, which offers a play on Swift's quote 'I Sawed This Boat in Half' in an advert for Flex Tape, displays a clear set of formal characteristics. First, it uses image editing software to assemble and export the resulting image. Second, it uses image elements of different sources in a crude textual combination which Milner describes as 'bricolage': taking elements from established contexts and weaving them into a new expression (2016: 64). And third, the image makes clear of use of multimodality as it combines visuals with written text, and these elements work together to create meaning (in this case, a joke about Swift causing the Titanic tragedy). And yet, all these significant formal attributes can also easily apply to texts from other genres – for example, social media advertising (fig. 8).



Figure 8: 'Which Baby Shark Character Are You? [...]' (2022). Instagram.

Figure 8 shows an Instagram advert for an online quiz for finding out which character from the children's song *Baby Shark* the visitor is. This image *also* uses image editing software to combine its elements (the crudely inserted characters from a *Baby Shark* video; an actual photo of a shark with its eye drawn on; the blue colour gradient background; the added caption of the advert, complete with a shark emoji). It is *also* an act of visual bricolage; it is *also* multimodal. As such, while the analysis of formal attributes in memes is certainly important, their role in understanding memes as a genre is not enough. Adverts of various kinds, Instagram 'stories' using added GIFs and captions, fan art, comic strips, posters could all fit the above criteria. Milner admits to this issue in the concession that his identified formal patterns indeed aren't specific to memes: 'memes are multimodal media, but so is essentially everything shared online. I've argued that memes are premised on reappropriation, on bricolage and poaching, but then again, so is a vast amount of cultural creation' (2016: 76-77). To make matters worse, formal and stylistic characteristics are often borrowed and adapted between different

genres as well. Social media advertisement efforts in particular have learned to emulate the digital collages and low budget compositions of some meme formats as a response to the growing popularity of memes in mainstream internet culture. What meaningfully differentiates these texts from one another is their *function*.

To this end, I follow Carolyn R. Miller's influential work on 'genre as social action' to guide us forward. As she summarises, genre can be understood as recurrent, significant social action which creates meaning; as well as the mediation between private intentions (purpose) and socially objectified needs (exigence) (2014: 56-57). 'Exigence' here is understood as a set of social patterns and expectations that provides social motive for rhetorical action (1984: 158); and the felt need to address a situation mutually recognised by language users (Janet Giltrow and Dieter Stein 2009: 6). As a first example, consider the discursive genre of the birthday wish (verbal and written alike). The birthday wish is a genre of everyday expression premised on the social exigence of the expectations and desires to commemorate others' day of birth with some form of greeting. This broader societal need meets a given individual's private intentions as the birthday of an acquaintance or a loved one approaches. As a second example, consider the genre of campfire stories: the established tradition of sharing scary stories in a social setting, and the private intentions to participate in such an exchange under the right circumstances. In both of these examples, rhetorical action arises from the dynamic of situation and motive (Miller 1984: 152). In the case of the above examples, the socially established and objectified motive to greet someone on their birthday, or to tell a scary story, motivate individuals to do so when familiar situations for these forms of expression arise.

Miller warns that genre claims may fail if they are unable to provide not only significant formal evidence, but also a pragmatic component (1984: 163-164): the rhetorical action that the given discourse performs (1984: 152). Genre is then recognisable to 'participants in a sphere of activity' by both its formal manifestation and its motives (Giltrow 2017: 40). This differentiation has heightened

importance in regard to the 'convergence' of social media I discuss soon. The introduction of motive, or function, of social expression is key to solving both the visual conundrum offered by the Baby Shark quiz advert, and what Milner has described as the ambiguity of 'memetic media'. It means that, looking beyond the formal and technological qualities which *are* important, but which alone *cannot* meaningfully differentiate various types of online expression, the understanding of memes as meaningful social action both alleviates these tensions and can lead to a new model of understanding altogether.

So, if there can be a genre understanding of memes through recurring social action – the decade-spanning 'best memes' of Grandayy's survey results do indicate that this is the case –, then where does this genre come from? Miller's discussion of genre change and *genre emergence* can help. To begin with, she emphasises that normal processes of historical, cultural, economic, political and technological change can all be expected to provoke genre change (2017: 8). On the one hand, established genres may migrate and be adapted into new media (Carolyn R. Miller and Dawn Shepherd 2009: 282), re-emerging as a variation of already existing genres (Svend Østergaard and Peer F. Bundgaard 2015: 97). For instance, a bank account statement which is received via post or electronically essentially stays the same expression regardless of its migration.

On the other hand, however, new genres "native" to one technology or medium rather than another may also 'emerge' (Miller and Shepherd 2009: 281). In this case, these 'emergent genres' can be said to 'develop as a response to the negative constraints or positive affordances of given situations: that is, either the "exigencies" of the situation or the new resources available in a situation' (Østergaard and Bundgaard 2015: 97). We can see these 'affordances' of new and developing technology – the access to new or altered tools, features, platforms and so on – in interaction with social exigence. As Miller and Shepherd suggest, sometimes 'a new suite of affordances fits an exigence in much the same way as an old medium did, and the genre then simply adjusts'; while, in the case of emergent genres,

‘the new suite of affordances potentiates an exigence that had not yet been met’ (2009: 282). Miller warns that the existence of new media or technology by itself should not account for genre change automatically (2009: 283), and that technology is ‘not understood as the sole or even the primary origin of genre change’ (2017: 19). Instead, the new technological medium may create ‘new conditions of possibility, new affordances that are then adapted, combined, and extended in actual use to serve particular social needs which themselves are constantly undergoing change’ (ibid). Genre emergence is then tied to the complex relationships between technology and social need.

Notably, Miller argues that some genres do not only respond and adapt to sociocultural and technological change, but they can also provoke such change themselves (2017: 14). This may especially be the case for what Miller calls ‘vernacular genres’ in the online environment. Compared to more traditional genre types, she describes vernacular genres as ones in situations of few institutional or administrative constraints, where users are able to collectively create a way of addressing a shared exigence (2017: 24). This is also relevant for our discussion of memes, which are often created and circulated without (or, in fact, despite) the presence of institutional structures. Discussing vernacular genres, Miller emphasises this shifting dynamic between institution and individual, and the interaction between technological affordances and social exigence:

‘New technologies give consumers the tools of production and of dissemination, which enable them through collective practice to create new vernacular genres (...). People have the means to do new kinds of things and to do them collectively, so that they can rapidly become joint modes of social action – holistically identifiable, socially meaningful, and reproducible. (...) Vernacular genres emerge and survive when a community finds a configuration of features that satisfies or pleases those who interact together, addressing some communally recognized exigence’ (2017: 24-25)

Building on the theories introduced above, I seek to position memes (from Shaggy's Power Photoshops to Pepe the Frog drawings to We Are Number One remix videos and so on) as an internet-based, emergent, vernacular genre. I argue that the "native", novel genre of memes has emerged from the marriage of technological affordance and social exigence. As a primarily grassroots, communally negotiated genre, memes may serve a variety of functions. Their surrounding technology (image and video editing software, social media platforms and applications, filters and effects and so on) serve the needs of online communities in interaction with their dynamic sets of social exigence (the desire to participate, the building of social relations, the establishing and maintaining of like-minded social groups and so on). Memes are at once the complex by-product of their surrounding technological environment, and the centre of meaningful vernacular social action for various online groups and communities. As Marika Lüders et al. suggest, genres 'emerge or adapt where digital technologies and society, or the media and the message, meet in the dimension of time' (2010: 950). I argue, then, that an understanding of both the digital technology (the media) and the underlying social functions (the message) inform an understanding of memes as genre.

The framework of 'genre as social action' is especially useful in the case of online creative practices as they are closer to grassroots everyday expression than they are to institutional, commercial production. The 'emergent genre' label fits particularly well: it describes meme culture as developing out of repeated and replicable social patterns. Going forward and developing my own genre model of memes, I look at three theoretical dimensions: their surrounding technological affordances; their underlying social functions and exigencies (specifically, the social structures accompanying laughter and play); and their vibrant formal transformation of other texts, genres and media. These three should be considered as inevitably interacting and intertwined, dynamic dimensions. Users create and circulate meme texts online as they are enabled to by social media platforms, and in turn technology seeks to accommodate (or, in some cases, restrict) meme-making and -sharing too. Further, the processes of formal transformation and reuse are at once tied to specific media affordances and to the

social needs and desires which motivate them in the first place. Memes are social action insofar as they make use of novel technology for both adapting existing social motivations, and revealing new, novel ones which crystallise alongside the new potentialities of social media.

5. THE AFFORDANCES OF 'NEW' MEDIA

Memes are posted, reposted, shared, upvoted, downvoted, commented on, seen and ignored, downloaded, altered, transformed and remixed through digital technology. Some aspects of digital creation are enabled by “offline” conditions already (such as image and video editing software, or digital photography). Beyond the computer screen, however, lies the two-fold environment of media convergence and user participation: Web 2.0 era social media. ‘Web 2.0’ refers to the developments in internet software which ‘enabled Web applications to move from being static (...) to a scenario where the engagement, participation and collaboration among users generates the content’ (Terry Flew 2014: 35, emphasis in bold removed). For the purposes of this thesis (and while we await a clear understanding of what Web 3.0 would look like), we can view this environment as the birthplace of meme culture.

Neither of the two concepts – convergence and participation – are necessarily specific only to Web 2.0 internet, but they are essential characteristics to both internet culture and meme culture. On the one hand, internet users are enabled and encouraged to interact with one another and to generate content on social media. This results in a digital environment that not only contains content curated by the institutional gatekeepers of brands and companies, but the grassroots participation of everyday users as well. On the other hand, the internet also offers access to forms of digitised media previously separated by technology: television programmes, films, music, paintings and so on. Memes are connected to both these circumstances. Participants of social media have the technological means to

both create and manipulate a variety of content and share it with others on the internet – which in turn opens the door to a variety of social and cultural activities.

This is the environment that Henry Jenkins describes as ‘convergence culture’ (2006). This convergence isn’t just limited to different media interacting with each other within the same technology; it is also the convergence of top-down and bottom-up cultural information, as corporate- and consumer-driven cultural processes fight for attention within the same environment (2006: 18). While grassroots content might not always have the same opportunities of spreading as content that is financed and distributed by brands and companies, it is nonetheless still part of the “game”. Users communicate and respond to cultural artefacts, create and alter content; social media posts may “go viral” and gain unexpected popularity, and communities may pick up cultural trends that in turn have a chance of affecting other parts of our culture. These logics can inform our understanding of memes.

5.1 Participatory culture

To emphasise the importance of this less “traditional” and more dynamic cultural understanding of media and its active participants, Jenkins puts forward the term ‘participatory culture’ in contrast with older notions of passive media spectatorship. As he argues, ‘[r]ather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands’ (2006: 3). He discusses participatory culture as having ‘relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement’ (2009: xi). He adds that ‘[n]ot every member must contribute, but all must believe they are free to contribute and that what they contribute will be appropriately valued’ (2009: 6). Participants therefore may take turns as ‘active’ and ‘passive’ audiences as they decide to engage with content that interests them (Jenkins et al. 2013: 155).

Jenkins's work on digital media is the site of shifting emphasis regarding the hierarchy of cultural actors. For one, they are often addressed as 'consumers', 'fans', and 'audiences' (2006: 3, 135, 173; 2013: 6, 155, 165, 188), which suggests a traditionally straightforward connection between producers and consumers of media properties. At the same time, however, he also suggests that the separation of consumer and producer may be the wrong way to talk about this cultural environment 'since in a folk culture, there is no clear division between producers and consumers' (2006: 136). Sam Hinton and Larissa Hjorth address this shift in emphasis in noting that, in a participatory culture, the user is best not characterised as a member of an audience, and 'is something that looks more like a producer' (2013: 58). Jean Burgess goes even further by suggesting that, in the context of new media, the terms 'producer', 'audience' and 'consumer' are inadequate as these configurations of relations are caught up in a process of convergence (2007: 29). In this sense, participants of the 'new media' environment need no longer be primarily defined by the economical logics of production and consumption, but instead as users that engage with a wide variety of media texts in a wide variety of ways. The acts of creating, transforming, and sharing content invite a new approach of understanding cultural 'production' as participation is learned and practiced through everyday social and cultural acts. These acts, Burgess notes, 'become naturalised to the point that they appear to be seamlessly continuous with everyday life' (2007: 189).

Importantly, Jenkins et al. note that participatory culture did not simply emerge with the appearance of the internet. They describe platforms such as YouTube or Twitter as similar to already existing practices of participatory culture, such as the century old practices of 'resource sharing, conversation, and coordination that communities have long engaged in' (2013: 30). On the other hand, Jenkins also points to participatory culture as the logical consequence of a culture absorbing a variety of new media technologies, which in turn enable participants to 'archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways' (2009: 8). Web 2.0 can thus be seen as both old and new: building on pre-existing social needs and activities, but also transforming and enriching those while

revealing new ones at the same time. Jenkins et al. also argue that, in the case of the emerging environment of social media, participatory practices may be more complex and messier than in the case of other media (2013: 1). And later: '[i]n this networked culture, we cannot identify a single cause for why people spread material' (2013: 13). In other words, social media activities are versatile enough to transgress any one function. Instead, social media are the site of content convergence, housing a diverse range of activities old, new and in-between.

5.2 Social media, media

What complicates the situating of memes in the specific cultural context of social media is the complex idea of 'social media' itself. The term 'social media' describes an ever-changing network of internet phenomena: internet-based platforms which 'allow users to create profiles for sharing user-generated or curated digital content (...) within a networked community of users who can respond to the content' (Kelli S. Burns 2017: ch. 1). The landscape of these online platforms is under constant change as new websites emerge and old ones evolve, merge or disappear. At the same time, each of these platforms offers a unique experience for the user, providing a unique range of benefits (ibid) and, often, limitations. This is relevant for memes as well – particularly as meme texts populate many of these different platforms. In addition, as Victoria Esteves and Graham Meikle note, the rules and structures of memes are related to the communication practices and the particular online space in which they were developed (2015: 564). On the other hand, as they add, memes are not confined to their initial spaces and may circulate beyond the boundaries of any given social media platform (2015: 567).

This can lead to unique discrepancies in different meme texts within the same meme. We have seen this in the example of the Shaggy's Power meme which offered a unique transmedia experience made up of drawings, video remixes, comics and short stories; and both case studies Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life and Pepe the Frog of Chapters Two and Three of this thesis will further support this idea. The

differences in meme texts across social media are indeed at least in part informed by the rules and logics of the social media platforms they originate in (videos on YouTube, reaction emotes on Twitch, video duets on TikTok). Then again, acts of reposting and further re-appropriations often take place across platforms as YouTube videos end up on Reddit and 4chan posts spread to other corners of the internet as copied-and-pasted text or as screenshots.

Even though the umbrella term 'social media' has generously lent itself to a rapidly changing environment in the last few decades, its environment is never quite discussed as a group of media independent of one another. Instead, it is the internet which is often referred to as the all-encompassing medium for various social media content (Flew 2014: 9; Milner 2016: 24); or, in a somewhat counter-intuitive way, 'social media' are addressed as a single, all-encompassing medium (Hinton and Hjorth 2013: 55). While this semantic conflict may not cause much trouble in the social sciences, it is certainly worth noting for the humanistic media theorist, as it further muddies the waters of another problem: understanding what media actually are in the midst of 'new media' studies.

Whether social media can earn their legitimacy as media is a question complicated by media convergence. Convergence enables web applications to showcase different kinds of content, thus resulting in a so-called 'multimedia interface – a single view that can incorporate elements of many different media' (Hinton and Hjorth 2013: ch. 2). Regarding multimedia practices, Lev Manovich notes how, prior to the invention of the computer, filmmakers had already been 'combining moving images, sound, and text (...) for a whole century' (2002: 50-51). Discussing digital culture in context of cultural practices in general, he points to the emergence of post-modernism:

'As became apparent by the early 1980s, culture (...) no longer tried to "make it new". Rather, endless recycling and quoting of past media content, artistic styles, and forms became the new

“international style” and the new cultural logic of modern society. Rather than assembling more media recordings of reality, culture is now busy reworking, recombining, and analysing already accumulated material.’ (2002: 131)

For Manovich, the emergence of digital language and the human-computer interface means the inevitable culmination of such cultural tendencies. He discusses the ‘computerisation of culture’ as not only the appearance of new cultural forms such as virtual reality or computer animation, but as the re-definition of existing ones such as cinema and photography as well (2002: 9). He considers the digitisation of material a radical change to the nature of media (2002: 52) as the digital interface strips different media of their original distinctions, imposing its own logic on them (2002: 65). How Manovich defines or separates media, however, is not quite clear. On the one hand, he argues that in ‘semiotic terms, the computer interface acts as a code that carries cultural messages in a variety of media’ (2002: 64). On the other hand, he proposes to call the human-to-computer interface a medium, explaining that the history of the interface is that of borrowing and reformulating other media both past and present – the printed page, film, television (2002: 89).

The question arises whether the digital interface, and the various forms of cultural expression it contains within itself (from computer graphics and video games to social media platforms, online communication and memes) can be labelled a *new* medium at all. Lisa Gitelman defines media as both ‘a technology that enables communication’ as well as the ‘set of associated “protocols” of social and cultural practices that have grown up around that technology’ (interview with Gitelman by Henry Jenkins 2008: 13-14). This suggests a co-dependence between material and cultural content.

David N. Rodowick challenges this idea of tying media to technology. He argues that a ‘medium should be distinguished from its physical support and channel of transmission, even if they share the same substance or material’ (2007: 32). Rodowick also critiques Manovich’s view on the digital interface as

a radical change to media and poses the question whether information processing can truly be considered a creative medium (2007: 99). Arguing against the celebration of so-called “new media”, he refuses to define media based on their material (2007: 33). Instead, he considers digital technology a ‘distribution channel’ through which cultural artefacts can be viewed (2007: 32). Just as the invention of film did not mean by default the invention of cinema, he argues (2007: 84), the digital interface by itself does not warrant the emergence of ‘new media’. More recently, this view is shared by Ted Nannicelli and Malcolm Turvey who similarly argue that ‘a medium cannot be individuated by its materials, but is instead defined, in part, by the practice of using materials’ (2016: 33). Even more recently, Jay David Bolter comments on the organising structures of digital media in a similar way: ‘[w]hat defines media today (...) is not just [digital] technologies, but also how they are used’ (2019: 6).

Rodowick’s definition of any given medium is similar: it is ‘nothing more nor less than a set of potentialities from which creative acts may unfold’ (2007: 85). In this context, the internet – or, more specifically, social media – will not automatically qualify as a new medium. This is especially the case if the internet indeed is ultimately premised on digitising information (Milner 2016: 24), with many of its practices appearing to be the logical continuation of other social and cultural practices (Hinton and Hjorth 2013: 7; Denisova 2019: 13; Jenkins et. al 2013: 30). On one extreme, then, the advent of digital mediation re-defines pre-existing media according to its own logic; on the other extreme, there is nothing new under the sun, and the “newness” of new media is restricted to the development of distribution channels for already existing media practices.

Rodowick’s concern is shared by rhetorical genre theory as well. Discussing “new” and “old” genres in the digital era, Giltrow and Stein argue: ‘[s]eemingly, there are new genres on the Internet, but in some cases it is a matter of contention whether the genre is new, or an old one in new medial garb’ (2009: 1). And later: ‘[d]oes a new medium automatically make for a new genre? (...) If “new” genres are to

be found, what is their relationship to previous genres? Do all genres have some sort of ancestry?’ (2009: 9). In ‘Questions for genre theory from the blogosphere’ Miller and Shepherd consider this relationship between genres as one of two possibilities. If ‘a new suite of affordances fits an exigence in much the same way as an old medium did’, they argue, then the genre simply adjusts (2009: 282). They offer the distribution of research articles in PDF form as an example; the print and digital version of bank statements I have offered earlier can serve as another. This logic mirrors that of Rodowick’s: it refuses to consider digital research papers as novel or new in their digitised adaptation.

Miller and Shepherd offer the case study of the blog as a counterexample: ‘as it seems to have been the case with the blog, the new suite of affordances potentiates an exigence that had not yet been met’ (ibid). Notably, however, the genre claim of the blog is also debated. Giltrow argues that blogs should be considered the technology facilitating possible genres (political blogs, personal blogs and so on) and not the genre itself (2017: 49); while Susan C. Herring et al. make the case that blogs ‘are neither unique nor reproduced entirely from offline genres, but rather constitute a hybrid genre that draws from multiple sources’ (2005: 144). The concept of ‘hybrid genres’, while certainly useful, will mean different things for different case studies. One could argue, for example, that web comics can be meaningfully differentiated from their printed counterparts due to the differences in institutional control, modes of distribution, target audiences and even some formal and aesthetic attributes, while also clearly exhibiting a rather linear ancestry between the two. As such, whether the notion of hybridity can be meaningfully applied here may very well be up for debate. As such, the legitimacy of “new media” and the genres which inhibit it may both be subject to negotiation.

Importantly, the understanding of memes may very well be the key to alleviating both of these tensions. Rodowick is correct: whether social media and the internet can (or should) be labelled ‘media’ in their own right is ultimately informed by the dynamic relationship between its set of potentialities (technological or otherwise) and the creative acts which may or may not emerge from

those. Thus, the 'newness' of 'new media' is not simply accounted for by technology, but instead the creative, novel cultural acts stemming from its potential. I argue that meme culture forms a perfect exemplification of this dynamic. Similarly, the complex hybridity of memes as social action makes for a powerful genre claim – one informed, but not solely defined by technological affordances. Instead of the straightforward digitisation of an offline ancestor (verbal jokes? parody? mashup? political caricature? junk art?), memes are an emergent genre which draws from multiple sources as the participatory efforts of online groups exploit their technological surroundings for complex social purposes. As such, even if social media are largely found to be no more than the digital transmission of existing forms of expression, the genre of memes could provide a powerful counterargument.

6. THE SOCIAL NEED FOR MEMES

I have now established that the technological affordances of the Web 2.0 era social media environment enable the creation, spread and transformation of memes under the logics of convergence and participation. However, as noted before, the existence of this technology by itself does not necessitate these practices. Instead, this new cultural environment is motivated and underpinned by a complex web of social exigencies. Some social motives only crystallise from the potentialities of the internet, while others predate it, rendering much of social media a sort-of continuation of the 'offline' world (Hinton and Hjorth 2013: 7; Shifman 2013: 34; Denisova 2019: 13). I have noted in the previous section that memes demonstrate both of these qualities in their complex hybridity. For instance, parallels between online and offline practices are certainly visible in meme culture: from oral jokes and anecdotes (Milner 2016: 34) to political cartoon and poster art (Denisova 2019: 44), memes can be seen as adopting and adapting already existing social activities.

However, these comparisons by themselves cannot account for the complex functions of memes as a genre. It is understood by digital media scholarship that memes can have social, cultural, political

significance (Shifman 2013: 14-15, 18, 34; Esteves and Meikle 2015: 568; Milner 2016: 3, 40-41, 76; Denisova 2019: 10, 11); beyond this point, however, there is no one single social function that would adequately account for meme culture at large. For example, Denisova emphasises the political significance of memes both on the side of propaganda and as an act of political resistance, arguing that memes are 'invaluable in negotiating national, individual and group identities in an unconventional manner' (2019: 197). At the same time, however, she also notes that memes have 'no inherent political and cultural connotation[s] except for the promise of entertainment' (2019: 3). Further, Geniesa Tay argues that politically oriented memes are often the result of acts of play, motivated more by humour than political views (2015: 61).

As a second example, Milner takes note of meme culture's tendency to broadly comment on and critique significant cultural events: 'it's hard to imagine a major pop cultural or political moment that doesn't inspire its own constellation of mediated remix, play, and commentary' (2016: 1). This, in a sense, resembles the satire of comic strips and the vast topical relevance of water cooler discourse. At the same time, however, memes have also been seen as the strange output of internet culture 'separated from reality' (Linda K. Börzsei 2013: 19) and as the coded 'subcultural batsignals' of niche meanings within a given online community (Phillips 2015; Phillips and Milner 2017: 112). The dynamic relationship between these tendencies (socio-political significance versus self-serving entertainment; broader cultural significance versus subcultural in-jokes) signifies a complex social landscape.

Broadly speaking, memes can be argued to reflect a wide variety of social needs both emerging from, and remediated by, social media. On social media platforms, the discussing and forming of social norms and values are accomplished by the spread and circulation of content (Denisova 2019: 10). As this happens, individuals are enabled to connect to social groups and social identities through shared texts and conversations (Milner 2016: 34). In addition to seeking entertainment or accessing information, socialisation is a driving force motivating people to engage with social media (Denisova

2019: 13). It comes as no surprise that social media have social functions; and, embedded in social media, memes are part of this melting pot of exigencies. Some of these needs and motivations (such as the establishing of social groups) are broad enough to encompass most, if not all of online discourse; while others may be recurring, but still too inconsistent to meaningfully contribute to genre taxonomies.

The following social needs could all be discussed as motivating factors for meme participation: the need for self-expression, self-improvement and self-validation; the desire to establish and maintain social relationships including individual friendships, smaller or larger discourse groups and even romantic partners; the desire to establish and re-enforce in- and outgroups based on (or despite) age, race, sex, gender, sexuality, ability, ethnicity, language and special interests including but not limited to tastes in music, film, literature, video games, hobbies; the pleasures of interacting with subjects of fandom and popular media properties; the urgency to interact with social, cultural and political events, celebrities and public figures, governments, companies and brands as an expression of either (and, sometimes, both) reverence and critique; the voicing of social critique and the desire to be heard; the pleasures of vernacular creativity, innovation, re-appropriation and participation. The list goes on. These needs may not materialise at the same time, or in the same participants; and not all of them will consistently reoccur to the same extents in meme culture.

It would appear, then, that the complex, interacting private intentions underpinning social media promise chaos: individuals with endlessly different needs, engaging in unorganised social expression. Miller, however, proposes that genre can act as an organising principle to guide individuals through social expression: '[w]e learn to adopt social motives as ways of satisfying private intentions through rhetorical action. This is how recurring situations seem to "invite" discourse of a particular type' (1984: 162). Therefore, the communicative purpose of a genre is not rooted in a single individual's motive for communicating, but in purposes constructed and reinforced within a community (Miller 1984;

Orlikowski and Yates 1994: 543). As an example, we can revisit the example of the birthday wish: a genre of expression built on the broader societal exigence to celebrate people's birthdays. But wishing someone happy birthday isn't just the empty performance of this social action. It may also be connected to the establishing and re-establishing of social connections; communicating love and friendship; being part of a larger act of celebration. A genre is then a rhetorical means for 'connecting the private with the public, the singular with the recurrent' (Miller 1984: 163). I argue that the genre of memes does something similar, which we can understand around the organising logics of *social laughter and social play*. Understanding the social functions of these two logics serves as a key step towards a deeper understanding of memes as a genre. As I argue, the interplay of social laughter and social play is inherent to the emergence of the genre, and memes are premised on the comedic and playful exploitation of digital media's affordances.

This section takes a closer look at these two organising logics. First, I look at the social needs and pleasures of laughter and comedy as participants negotiate social in- and out-groups. Then, I discuss the pleasures of social play and performance as participants engage in the 'nonliteral behaviours' of shared social experimentation and creativity. As suggested, they are certainly not the only social factors exhibited by meme culture; however, I argue that their specific interplay is essential to the understanding of memes.

6.1 Memes and laughter

As a first step towards pinpointing social motivations in meme culture, we can examine the relationship between the individual user and the social groups and communities they engage with on the internet. Shifman, for example, addresses this dynamic by adapting the term 'networked individualism', and discusses a two-fold social logic of participation that underpins online engagement. As she describes, '[i]n our accelerated individualization, people are expected to fashion a unique

identity and image and by doing so actively construct their “selves”. At the same time, individuals participate enthusiastically in the shaping of social networks, demonstrating an enduring human longing for communality’ (2013: 33). The dual logic is then the desire to express individual identity through the constructs of the online self, and the desire to express an affiliation with larger communities at the same time (2013: 34). Esteves and Meikle go further in applying this argument to memes. On the one hand, they suggest that individual users choose to make and share memes with specific contexts in order to make both the memes and themselves as users visible (2015: 562). On the other hand, they also discuss memes as ‘representations of online interaction’ which ‘connect meanings and their makers with others in complex networks of mediated sociality’ (2015: 568).

The pairing between community and its members is followed by a second notable duality: the construction of social groups through kinship, and the social othering (and, often, antagonization) of those in their respective outgroups. As an example, Jenkins et al. consider the ‘collective discussions and deliberations’ of internet users as ultimately generative, as content is appraised and circulated (2013: 176). However, they also hint at a ‘darker’, less productive side of these practices in the forms of online ‘trolls’ who disrupt public conversations for their own malicious joy (2013: 239). In relation to the subcultural activities of 4chan ‘trolls’, Phillips also takes note of the significance of memes in reinforcing social relationships: ‘recognizing a meme, remixing a meme, even simply referencing a meme [helps] fortify the troll space’s burgeoning subcultural borders’ (2015: 62). She also discusses the ‘destructive and callous’ activities of trolls – from the offensive ‘re-re-appropriation’ of memes that have become mainstream to the ‘raiding’ of other websites and platforms – as ultimately rooted in wider, ‘mainstream’ societal and cultural contexts (2015: 168).

These accounts suggest that there are separate, identifiable social practices associated with constructing social groups and others which disrupt or threaten other social groups. To add to this, I would argue that these acts of expression often happen at the same time, in subtle and obvious ways

alike. Even outside the explicit practices of trolling or harassment, meme culture often expresses the duality of building community with some groups, while antagonising or alienating other groups. Consider the following two examples. First, a variation of a meme format, depicting Cristiano Ronaldo in the middle of an impressively high jump mid-game, now in the Photoshopped context of the player reaching the heights of a flying plane from which Lionel Messi looks outside in shock (fig. 9). The meme text, likely originating from the fan circles of Ronaldo, reuses the original photo at the expense of the “lesser” footballer, Messi – and therefore at the expense of Messi’s supporters as well. At the same time, then, the image expresses admiration for Ronaldo and establishes kinship with his other supporters while also distancing and othering those on the “opposing team”. This is tied to multiple existing debates, from the online discourse seeking to identify the best currently active football player to the specific clubs that individuals support. This need not be an explicit attack – it is simply part of the everyday negotiation of social groups through the practices of meme participation.



Figure 9: Cristiano Ronaldo and Messi (2013).

The second example shows character SpongeBob SquarePants in aggressive laughter alongside the caption “A balanced diet is chocolate in both hands”/Middle aged women on facebook:’ (fig. 10). The visuals suggest that the text’s ridiculed social group (middle aged women on Facebook) have a lesser sense of humour than the presumed “target audience” of the image (quite possibly, a younger

generation of online users). These sorts of meme texts are hardly rare – they represent an ongoing critique (in this case, a gendered one) of the social presence of older demographics on social media platforms. ‘Boomer memes’, for example, act as gatekeepers of online discourse, and mock the social media activities of middle-aged (and above) users, making fun of a generation gap in digital literacy – and, specifically, online humour. Laughter is at the centre of this social act: as caricaturised through the use of SpongeBob, the proposed Facebook userbase laughs at the diet joke presented by the image; all the while, the participants of the meme laugh at this proposed demographic together. The ‘us’ and ‘them’ of this expression serve to mock a perceived flaw in society while also re-establishing kinship with others and finding common ground in what ‘good’ and ‘bad’ jokes are.

"A balanced diet is
chocolate in both hands"

Middle aged women on facebook:



Figure 10: spongebobdoodypants (2019). 'zucks main demographic be like'. Reddit.

The instances of laughing *with* and laughing *at* introduced above are tied to comedy and joke-making, which too have social significance. The presence of comedy in memes is often noted by digital scholarship. Discussing the everyday use of the word ‘meme’, Burgess points to the vernacular definition of the term as ‘a faddish joke or practice (like a humorous way of captioning cat pictures)’ (2008: 101). Börzsei notes that the most obvious use of memes is to serve as vehicles for jokes (2013:

10). Milner argues that irony, humour and play are an essential part of what makes memes resonate with social groups (2018: 31). Esteves and Meikle discuss all memes specifically as inside jokes 'in which more and more people are able to share as it circulates beyond the space of its initial online mediation' (2015: 564). To build on these claims, I argue that the social needs and motivations underpinning laughter are integral to the social needs and motivations underpinning meme participation as well.

The parallels are notable. In his essay *Laughter* (first published in 1900 and translated to English in 1911) French philosopher Henri Bergson establishes the idea that the primary utility of comedy is a social one (1911: 8). Bergson views laughter as the laughter of the group, always in need of an echo. He argues that laughter is ultimately dependent on its social context, and that one would hardly appreciate comedy if they felt isolated from others (1911: 6). Bergson uses the analogy of friends laughing together on a railway carriage; another, separate passenger overhears them, and yet cannot participate in their laughter. Bergson points to the importance of comedy within communities and micro-communities, while also discussing a certain exclusivity of social circles: common ground and experience may be necessary to share and enjoy a joke. As he puts it, 'laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary' (ibid). The phrase 'real or imaginary' as introduced a century before the internet is revealing. It suggests that, even if one laughs alone, its expression likely acts along the lines of pre-existing social structures. This gains new meaning in computer-mediated communication: the broader social group we share a joke with is not directly visible and is only implied through social interaction. Laughing at a funny image we see online comes with the added knowledge that some other people must also find it funny.

Social structures often guide the understanding and appreciation of jokes. On a smaller scale, an inside joke between close friends would only make sense to them and not others. On a much larger scale, the same rules apply: universally known jokes are also built on the groundwork of shared familiarity

and shared social experience that are necessary for understanding them. Puns require knowledge and understanding of a specific language; jokes about silly policemen can only work in context of a broader understanding of the comedic stereotype. Other scholars have since joined Bergson in claiming that comedy is ultimately social in nature, and that one never laughs alone, as the laughter is always that of a specific group and social context (John Young Thomson Greig 1923: 71; David Victoroff 1952: 14; Joyce Oramel Hertzler 1970: 28; Gary Alan Fine 1983: 176). While the digital environment alters the exact ways in which these processes take place, their function fundamentally remains the same: collectives predicated on mediation and distance are held together by generative group laughter, just as they are in embodied spaces (Phillips and Milner 2017: 109).

The 'dark' side of comedy, as well as the dual concepts of laughing *with* and laughing *at* others, is also explored by comedy theory. We can once again trace this back to Bergson who suggests that laughter can act as 'social gesture': a corrective which intimidates the members of groups to adhere to its social structures (1911: 20). Later, Ronald de Sousa points to the harmful political and social attitudes involved in the 'inside' and 'outside' of group laughter (1986: 242). Konrad Lorenz also highlights the way laughter produces a 'strong fellow feeling among participants and joint aggressiveness against outsiders' (1963: 284). To nuance this, he adds that the antagonistic, aggressive nature of laughter, as perceived by the outsider, may not always be "real": '[i]f you cannot laugh with the others, you feel an outsider even if the laughter is in no way directed against yourself or indeed against anything at all' (ibid). An 'inside' then cannot exist without an 'outside', and vice versa. Both of these – real or perceived – sides create and reinforce social relationships between individual and community. This is ultimately true to memes as well. Memes oscillate between being perceived as exclusive in-jokes enjoyed by "initiated" social groups and as widely spread mainstream trends throughout social media. On top of this, the subject of memes may change from meme text to meme text and from person to person, creating and reinforcing complex networks of social relations.

While humour appears to be a significant point of discussion for meme studies, it is often omitted from definitions. Some scholars (Davison 2012: 122; Shifman 2013: 120; Milner 2016: 23, 32) gesture towards the existence of non-humorous memes as well, but much of this discussion is likely informed by the Dawkinsian ambiguity I have discussed earlier in this thesis. Shifman and Miller's discussion of "viral" trends of online activism such as the 2011 Occupy Wall Street protest movement is such an instance. The movement, a series of political protests coordinated via social media by its many participants, demonstrates many of the "memetic" qualities of online participation that the authors attribute to (internet) memes in general. In the post-memetics understanding of memes, however, we can meaningfully differentiate between these different practices.

As I have explored, the expectation of laughter is core to the self-negotiation of meme culture; different meme trends are judged and negotiated based on the genre expectation of humour. Memes are considered good when they are particularly amusing and/or funny (much like in the case of Grandayy's 'Memes of the Decade' poll). Labels such as 'boomer memes' designate artefacts which are attributed to the lesser sense of humour to older generations of internet users; 'dank meme' labels a perceived superior sense of humour compared to other memes; the 'dead meme' designation is used for memes which are no longer considered funny, much like stale or overused jokes. Further, a perceived lack of seriousness is key to the vernacular discussion of memes, and the term 'meme' is often used in the evaluative and derogatory sense to imply something is "only a joke". One example for this is the internet music genre of 'vaporwave' which reached vast subcultural popularity in the first half of the 2010s. Vaporwave, premised on the heavy sampling and recycling of 80s pop songs, elevator music and vintage commercials, was often labelled a 'meme' by those who wouldn't recognise it as a legitimate musical genre. The 'vaporwave is a meme' argument in this context is analogous to 'vaporwave is a joke', which suggests a clear link between memes and a perceived lack of seriousness (artistic, or otherwise).

In these and other cases, the 'meme' label serves as a classification which guides our interpretation and evaluation. The fact that memes are often associated with being amusing will in turn guide genre expectations. As Catharine Abell argues in relation to genre in film, 'comedies achieve their purpose of amusing their audiences at least partly because audiences know that their producers are playing for laughs' (2015: 32); and '[w]hat's important is that comedies would be less amusing in the absence of common knowledge that they aim to amuse' (2015: 33). While the dedicated roles of the producer and the audience have significantly shifted in the context of meme-making and meme-sharing, this framework nonetheless illuminates everyday meaning-making in online genres very well.

6.2 Memes and play

While laughter does feel a key component in our negotiation of memes, there is a point to be made about the possible equivalence of memes and jokes. Denisova, for example, argues that a key distinguishing feature of the meme is 'that it is an incomplete, half-baked joke' which 'demands user participation to "finish the sentence"' (2019: 10-11). This is a powerful way to introduce the dynamics of repetition and variation in online joke-telling: memes become vehicles for humour, and meme templates repeat a familiar setup which are then completed by participants. We can return to a recent example to see this idea in practice. Cristiano Ronaldo's impressively high jump and its photographed evidence could serve as the setup of a joke; its newly added juxtapositions, such as Lionel Messi staring from an airplane window, complete this joke. Disregarding the formal intertextuality of the meme text, one could even make the argument for this meme as the direct descendant of offline jokes. It isn't hard to imagine a verbal equivalent: 'How high can Ronaldo jump?/So high that even...' and so on. I am reminded of the popular trend of Chuck Norris jokes from the 2000s ('Chuck Norris is so strong that...' and so on) which saw no issue being translated and digitised into the online equivalent of Chuck Norris meme texts. Were it so that all memes had such direct offline counterparts, Rodowick's previous concerns about the "newness" of new media expressions couldn't be more valid here. After all, if the

same setups and punchlines ('Jesus can walk on water/Chuck Norris can swim through land') function the same way as verbal jokes and as meme texts, how could memes be said to be anything more than jokes with illustrations?

And yet, while many memes are indeed coded similarly to jokes, many others transgress or transcend these boundaries. Memes aren't *just jokes*, and they reflect essential social exigencies which are complementary to, yet distinct from social laughter. As one example, we can look back at the Shaggy's Power meme from the Introduction of this thesis: here, the participatory practices around the meme are for one based on laughter (transforming the Scooby-Doo comic relief character into a god of war and destruction is funny), but they are also based on the tongue-in-cheek pretence that the subject matter is in fact very serious. As a second example, consider the Area 51 meme from Grandday's poll earlier: a comedic "will they, won't they" heist plan for the raid of Area 51, performatively played along by its participants. The meme's loose organising theme comedically assumes that its attendees would find treasures and aliens at the government compound if they all 'Naruto ran' (another reference to anime) past the guards. Finally, let's return to Denisova's notion of 'finishing the sentence' whereby even straightforward jokes (for instance, the Photoshopping of Ronaldo into different contexts) acts as an invitation to experiment with the format. This experimentation includes applying new contexts to the meme, as well as creating but also evaluating the ways in which the joke template creates new meanings through participation. In all three of these examples, while an undercurrent of humour and social laughter is arguably present, they are also fuelled by an equally (if not more) important set of social needs and pleasures associated with the creating, following and breaking of the rules co-created by the social act of *play*.

I use 'play' with the awareness that while the term by itself is inherently ambiguous (Paul Booth 2015: 67) and its theory can be applied to describe anything from the play of children and animals to sports and video game design, its use can nonetheless meaningfully enrich the genre discussion of memes.

The social significance of play is recognised by scholarship as early as Johan Huizinga's 1938 work *Homo Ludens: A Study of Play-Element in Culture* (published in the English language a decade later). Huizinga describes play as enhanced by its shared 'air of secrecy' between players: '[t]his is for us, not for the "others"' (1949: 12). The concept of 'social play' is further discussed by Catherine Garvey, defining the notion as 'a state of engagement in which the successive, nonliteral behaviors of one partner are contingent on the nonliteral behaviors of the other partner' (1974: 163). The notion of 'nonliteral behaviour' emphasises an awareness of play itself – play becomes play through the (shared) understanding that it takes place outside of our literal understanding of reality. As such, '[a]ny episode of social play entails the exercise of shared imagination and the shared development of the image of the episode' (1974: 173, italics removed).

This idea of nonliteral behaviour is further articulated in Katie Salen Tekinbas and Eric Zimmerman's notion of the 'magic circle' which frames the world of play: '[w]ithin the magic circle, special meanings accrue and cluster around objects and behaviors. In effect, a new reality is created, defined by the rules of the game and inhabited by its players' (2003). More recently, Thomas S. Henricks argues for the dual significance of individuality and community in social play. As he suggests, 'the individual causes and consequences of play (including the formation of self-identities) are important. Yet often what is at stake in social play is not the experiences of individual players but rather the coherence of the group' (2015: 170). As such, play, along with its rules and consequences, should be seen in context of the groups that sponsor that activity, or even of society as a whole (2015: 2). This once again mirrors Miller's dynamic of private intentions and social motives.

The pleasures of play can be assessed alongside the dichotomy of the literal and nonliteral. On the one hand, play is voluntary activity (Huizinga 1949: 7) and to play is to step out of "real" life 'into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own' (1949: 8). On the other hand, play exists in relation to (and, often, in opposition to) the perceived social and cultural context of the "outside

world” beyond the play world. As Henricks suggests, ‘play events commonly function as rebellions or resistances against the wider world of officially recognized organizations, properties, and regimens. At such times, players escape routine responsibilities. They dally; they do things they shouldn’t’ (2015: 49). Henricks also makes a case for playing in culture, and the way in which players create new meaning while seeking alternatives to established cultural patterns (2015: 205). Play can then be said to be in conversation with broader social and cultural structures. ‘[P]layers create symbolic patterns, fiddle with them, destroy them, and begin again’ (ibid). Looking at play in fan practices, Booth makes a similar argument, emphasising both the transformative capabilities and cultural contexts of what he labels ‘media play’. He uses media play with the ambition to ‘focus on those instances in which individuals create meaning from activities that articulate a connection between their own creativity and mainstream media, all the while working within the boundaries of the media text’ (2015: 15). This is essential for the participatory activities discussed in this thesis. In particular, the notion of media play adds a new dimension to the complex social exigencies which underpin meme participation. While joke-making and play in general are age-old organising structures, the social pleasures of media play, as enabled by digital technology, exemplify social exigencies more “native” to the new media landscape. Through an ease of access to editing, remixing and manipulating media, new needs and motivations are formed around using and exploiting these new potentialities.

The creative capabilities of play are explored across multiple disciplines. Berys Gaut connects the ideas of freedom and creativity and discusses the idea of ‘free play’: ‘[f]ree play can involve the transformation of one kind of procedure governed by routines into another, and so be the exercise of creativity’ (2013: 101). Tekinbas and Zimmerman use ‘transformative play’ to describe the free experimentations of players (2003). Bolter emphasises the ‘digital plenitude’ of the new media landscape as particularly fitting for the notion of play. He suggests that ‘[p]lay becomes a powerful metaphor for cultural participation (...) Everyone is invited to play in whatever corner of the plenitude she cares to, and all kinds of making and playing can be characterized as art or creativity (2019: 22-

23). Participants of free experimentation and play can thus be understood as individuals whose play is nonetheless informed by social structures such as social kinship and competition; the establishing and maintaining of social relations and communities; the sociocultural contexts of the world outside of the 'magic circle' of play. By engaging in the playful changing and distorting of social norms, participants engage in creative transformation and create new cultural meaning as a result. On a larger scale, play and free experimentation become key factors of genre emergence (Miller 2017: 22). This is at least in part enabled by the relatively lesser degree of institutional control and regulation present in newer media environments (ibid). The cumulative participation of online communities, at once constructing and bending, following and defying, understanding and misunderstanding the rules of play is the creative basis of meme culture.

As an illustration of the creative dimensions of media play, consider the example of the 4 Dabloons Cat meme (fig. 11) which saw widespread popularity on TikTok in November 2022 ('TikTok Dabloons / TikTok Doubloons / 4 Dabloons Cat' 2022). The meme, originally surfacing on Instagram in 2021 before "migrating" to TikTok, utilises a slideshow format of multiple images with accompanying background music and occasional voice-filtered dialogue. In most cases, the meme opens with the same image of a cat holding up four toes (reused from yet another funny pet image). The cat, much like a villager 'NPC' ('non-player character') in a high fantasy video game, greets the "traveller" scrolling through TikTok and gifts them some "dabloons" (an imaginary fantasy currency specific to this meme).



Figure 11: *dabloom_cat* (2022). 'Have a great trip! [...]'. TikTok.

Variations of the video uploaded by users offered different scenarios in which the cat could be encountered. Sometimes, it offered dabloons in exchange for help in some sort of (imaginary) side quest, while at other times charged the “player” dabloons for a meal or other resources (*dabloom_cat* 2022). These interactive elements, of course, weren’t real TikTok features. The trend functioned as a parody of Dungeons and Dragons-esque fantasy roleplay. At the same time, however, it invited roleplaying itself. The currency was discussed on TikTok with the pretence that it was real, complete with reporting on an imagined dabloon economy (*ibid*), and users beginning to take note of the dabloons and assets they “received” from the 4 Dabloons Cat while scrolling on the platform.

The 4 Dabloons Cat meme reveals the complex participatory pleasures of transformative play. On the one hand, users play with media and re-appropriate pre-existing media frameworks – in this case, RPG video games and fantasy roleplay as thrown into juxtaposition with homemade pet photography and the creative affordances of the TikTok slideshow form. As the parodic, playful reuse of fantasy RPG storytelling in particular, the meme bends the rules of pre-existing media while constructing its own

rules at the same time. The imaginary quests and adventures offered by the meme character reflect an understanding of specific genre and media tropes. A parallel to Bethesda's *The Elder Scrolls* video game franchise and its cat-like race Khajiit (often portrayed as merchants) is particularly notable, and the likeness is noted by a PC Gamer article on the meme: 'Khajiit has wares if you have 4 dabloons' (Jody Macgregor 2022). The rules of pre-existing media outside of the play world are thus re-interpreted with a shared understanding of free experimentation and fun. The 4 Dabloons Cat and its various counterparts will trade with the traveller, offer gifts, mug or extort them for dabloons, invite them for a warm meal and so on, all enriching the play world of the meme.

On the other hand, participants are invited to play with the meme as well: to play with the borders and frames of the constructed narrative through their own imaginative engagement (Booth 2015: 1). Everyday videomaking allows users to put their own spin on the Dabloon Cat formula and imagine new tongue-in-cheek roleplaying scenarios for their audiences and peers. But playing does not stop at videomaking either. Even less invested or digitally savvy users are able to play according to their own interests and needs. The practices of enjoying and interacting with the meme texts are part of the play as well, as users pretend to perform alongside the imagined fantasy game of the meme. The playfully constructed 'dabloon economy' reflects not only the performative communal practices of online interaction, but also hints at the 'offline' life of memes as 'individuals remember, create, talk about, etc. internet memes' (Wiggins 2019: 21).

6.3 Laughter and play

The 4 Dabloons Cat also illuminates a relationship between the social pleasures of play and those of comedy. Here, the promise of laughter also drives play forward: the free experimentation of participants culminates in the comic incongruity of the referenced media, and the amusing situations of double roleplaying as players perform sincerity as they engage with the play world. Users are invited

to interact with the continuously established and negotiated rules of the meme as they balance familiarity with novelty, repetition with variation. This is often done for a comedic effect, which Tay explores in relation to political humour and play in meme culture (2015). Tay recognises play theory as a useful way of legitimising 'the frivolity and idiosyncrasies' found in many meme texts (2015: 47) and discusses the "evolution" of memes as a process of playful experimentation. 'Play is bound by rules. (...) [U]sers need to adhere to the humour style of the various texts they interact with in order to create a good joke' (2015: 50). And then: 'Users either attempt to complete a joke by adding funny captions to candid photographs of politicians, or in some cases, playing with what is already provided, thus furthering the spread of a meme' (ibid). This illuminates a dynamic between comedy and play.

The connection between comedy and play is also noted by Rod A. Martin and Ford Thomas who suggest that, in children's play, both humour and play are facilitated by similar social contexts, and both are enjoyed for their own sake without having an obvious purpose (2018: 173). It is similarly recognised by Matthew Gervais and David Sloan Wilson who argue that laughter appears to function 'in many of the same ways as social play, particularly since laughter often follows from social play and facilitates playful interaction' (2005: 407). However, play by itself is not necessarily comedic and has been argued to hold within it the potential to be 'serious business' (Garvey 1974: 164; Martin and Thomas 2018: 175). Instead, what may best connect play and comedy is the promise of fun. As Tay argues, fun 'is at the core of play, both as a motivator and a result' (2015: 47). Memes make use of this dynamic, and we can see this in action in the 4 Dabloons Cat meme. Here, the participatory rules of the meme urge us to play with its framework, to pretend along with its scenarios or to imagine new ones, all the while participating in a shared laughter with other players. Both comedy and play are heightened by the vibrant participatory affordances of social media: online communities share and receive content with ease, and the expectations of shared laughter invite creative experimentation.

7. A RETURN TO FORM

I have thus far utilised Miller's rhetorical genre framework to examine the emergence of memes as a genre. I have looked at the dynamic of technological and media affordances (in particular, that of social media as participatory culture) as well as the sets of social exigence (in particular, those associated with social laughter and social play) which both exploit and inform those affordances. Certainly, these are far from the sole motivators for meme-making and meme-sharing practices, and they should not be understood in a vacuum devoid of other social, cultural, political and technological implications. Instead, I use them as structuring principles for the re-assessment of meme culture as genre expression. Affordance and exigence are, of course, interrelated. Enabled by technological advancements, "old" social motivations are adapted, and "new" social motivations emerge and crystallise on social media. In turn, the adaptation and emergence of social needs also inform further technological advancements as platforms cater to the needs and interests of their userbases (while also resisting or restricting other ones). Participants play with media not only because they can, but also because they want to. The emergent genre of memes develops from the repeated creative acts of free experimentation as media and message meet in the dimension of time.

'Form' is the third pillar of this dynamic, and it is similarly informed by the other two. Due to culturally negotiated genre expectations, the look and style of memes has undergone significant change over the years, influenced by both changing internet trends and technological innovations. Early examples of meme culture showcase this dynamic well. In 2008 the term 'meme' would often label the various quickly designed Rage Comics characters that users on websites like 4chan or 9gag would incorporate into homemade comic strips. These comic strips would be easy to reproduce for participants. They involved basic image editing, digitally drawn stick figures and a variety of reusable facial expressions from previous Rage Comics. Around the same time, another highly popular meme format, the Advice Animals and their endless 'image macro' alternatives were also widely used. These were multimodal

combinations of recognisable images (often, but not limited to, animals) along with playful header and bottom texts in the Impact font. To cater to meme-makers, dedicated websites and image macro generators were developed. These offered easy access to this recognisable format ('Impact' 2011). In the same way that the familiarity of these formats led to widespread popularity, their oversaturation influenced genre expectations as well: users eventually abandoned both the Impact typeface and Rage Comics characters as they sought newer, novel ways of balancing repetition and variation. By 2023, both Rage Comics and Advice Animals are considered relics of the early social media age, which is demonstrated by accounts such as Twitter's @OldMemeArchive: a nostalgic archive of meme texts which would no longer be considered funny or current by today's genre expectations.

Formal characteristics are influenced by technological innovation as well. New website features, editing tools, the improving capacities and integration of software, file-sharing and piracy, and the ever-growing data storage and accessibility of computers, smartphones, tablets can all contribute to the form and presentation of meme texts. We have seen instances of these processes in earlier examples, such as the 4 Dabloons Cat meme which made us TikTok's slideshow format. Here, the format of the slideshow was used to create a more interactive experience for meme participants than a single video could.

As a second example, consider Twitter's image attachment feature which allows users to upload up to four images as part of their tweets – a feature which inspired the creation of numerous 'Twitter Image Combination Memes' starting in the late 2010s ('Twitter Image Combination Memes' 2020). These posts used the feature to create playful collages in which the spatial orientation of the images was part of the fun itself. One of many sub-categories for this trend, the meme of 'Sasuke Choke Edits' gained wider popularity on the platform (ibid). These tweets combined a screenshot from the *Naruto: Shippūden* anime series with other media texts, and played with the spatial continuity between the images to show character Sasuke being strangled by a variety of people and characters. The example

below depicts a second character who may look familiar from a previous case study, as Sasuke now meets his demise at the hands of Scooby-Doo's Shaggy:

Heh... Like, not bad Sasuke man...
You made me use 10% of my power



Figure 12: GnarlyBuster (2019). 'Heh... Like, not bad Sasuke man [...]'. Twitter.

More recently, in October 2022 Twitter offered another improvement for tweet attachments, this time allowing for mixed media uploads ('Twitter Video Combinations' 2022). Videos could now be positioned spatially alongside images as well. This update inspired a new wave of memes. Another popular template, which Know Your Meme labels 'Pope Francis Holding Things' ('Twitter Image Combination Memes' 2020), had at this point already seen use as part of the initial Twitter trend discussed above, but this new update to the feature saw the meme's return to the platform. The template previously consisted of a four-image collage of Pope Francis holding up a Eucharist wafer during communion, with the top left image swapped with other objects and images (ibid). The mixed media update meant that the Pope could be seen as holding up a video of *Pokémon* character Oshawott cheerfully walking, complete with audio from the show as well (fig. 13).



Figure 13: AsterShock (2022). Pope Francis holding Oshawott. Twitter.

In these cases, the combined circumstances of Twitter’s website features and the interests of online users have resulted in the playful experimentation with form. Multimodality here is achieved beyond the textual boundaries of a single image as online participants experiment with new technology. Similarly, apps such as TikTok and its templates and filters enable free experimentation and play with lower barriers of entry than ever before. Elsewhere, AI-generation tools such as DALL-E inspire series of absurd prompts for image generation; yet elsewhere, YouTube remixes get around Content ID checks by playfully distorting the video and audio they repurpose. This means that the formal appearance of memes can be meaningfully informed by technological affordances. However, this need not mean that there isn’t any consistency in their form at all. Although in different ways, my examples – from Rage Comics and Advice Animals to TikTok memes and Twitter multimedia combinations – all utilise some type of formal *transformation*. This section explores this idea further.

7.1 Form and transformation

Media play in meme culture makes explicit use of other media and texts, and memes are in almost all cases visually transformative. They reference pre-existing material: from photography and drawn artwork to moments from films, television and animation, as well as other memes and meme templates. Sometimes they reference these pre-existing texts in ways that foreground them as subjects and objects of the meme (see the Shaggy's Power meme whose tongue-in-cheek engagement with the original character is at the centre of the comedy); while others use these texts as vessels for more outward laughter and play (see the use of *SpongeBob SquarePants* in relation to jokes about the social media generation gap). Advice Animals and other image-based examples are premised on established templates that users may communicate new ideas with; they are endlessly transformed images.

These practices are once again enabled by their surrounding technological environment which allows for the quick creation and diffusion of recycled material through accessible image and video editing software, and the endless resources of digitised material online. Using and abusing these resources, transformative practices have become essential in social media discourse. On the one hand, memes re-appropriate and transform popular media (Knobel and Lankshear 2007: 213; Milner 2018: 67; Denisova 2019: 11) as they refashion cultural material. On the other hand, different meme texts also refer to one another through their common characteristics (Shifman 2013: 2; Milner 2018: 4; Wiggins 2019: 13). The understanding of memes is thus meaningfully informed by some kind of knowledge of various cultural artefacts (both from within, and outside of meme culture); any or all of which can inform the everyday decoding processes involved in understanding and appreciating memes. At the same time, the visual, textual reuse of pre-existing material (films, television shows, songs, photographs and so on) is a consistent formal characteristic across most, if not all examples from meme culture. Texts from various, often surprising sources are mixed and meshed with one another as the result of aggressive textual transformation. This aggressive, noticeable textual complexity will be considered the third dimension of memes as a genre.

The notion of transformation is regularly referenced by contemporary meme scholarship. Whether it is addressed as copying and imitation (Shifman 2013: 4), evolution (Börzsei 2013: 10), adoption and adaptation (Esteves and Meikle 2015: 564), re-appropriation (Milner 2018: 2), or mutation (Denisova 2019: 10), it is clear that meme culture is characterised by the transformative relations between meme texts and their referenced media objects. In general, memes are often described as cultural works either characterised by, or ultimately premised on and obsessed with *intertextuality* (Knobel and Lankshear 2007: 209; Shifman 2013: 2; Milner 2018: 18; Wiggins 2019: 13). Intertextuality can be considered the first step in the understanding of transformation in memes. It is particularly useful for the understanding of the way separate works relate to one another in our cultural consciousness.

However, the use of the term by itself is once again inconsistent. Notably, it is not always clear whether ‘intertextuality’ refers to the explicit transformation of previous texts, or rather, whether it gestures towards a more general, implicit system of interrelated information. This issue has been acknowledged by intertextuality theory in general: as it stands, the term cannot be evoked in an uncomplicated manner as it lacks a single, transparent meaning (Graham Allen 2011: 2; Sam Summers 2020: 5). This translates to another set of issues when applied to digital scholarship too. Simply put, the buzzword ‘intertextuality’ by itself cannot account for the explicitly transformative nature of memes because it does not differentiate between more explicit and more implicit links between objects. The statement that ‘memes are intertextual’ isn’t enough – a more robust, more descriptive framework is needed.

7.2 Intertext, hypertext

The term ‘intertextuality’ was coined by Julia Kristeva and popularised by Roland Barthes in relation to post-structuralist literary theory in the 1970s. It presents that no utterances or works can be understood as singular in meaning, or as unconnected to previous and future utterances and works

(2011: 18). Kristeva and Barthes discuss written works as multidimensional spaces 'in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and crash' (Barthes 1977: 146), thus rendering each work an intersection of texts where at least one other text can be read (Kristeva 1980: 66). Intertextuality theory argues that no individual text can exist in a cultural vacuum, and that all works of art are in constant semiotic conversation with one another. By default, then, every text is in fact an intertext as other texts are present within it to varying degrees and in more or less recognisable forms (Barthes 1973 in Mary Orr 2003: 33). As an extension, argues Michael Riffaterre, intertextuality is required for a 'complete interpretation' of any text (1978: 149); and this interpretation may never be final as meaning may change upon the interpretation itself (1978: 165-166).

The post-structuralist framework emphasises the role of the reader/decoder of works, whose mind the semiotic processes connecting one text to another take place in. This is articulated in opposition to authorial intention accounting for these connections. Thus, texts are only activated as intertexts by the perception of the decoder themselves (Riffaterre 1978: 164; Linda Hutcheon 1985: 37; Gérard Genette 1997: 2). As summarised by Jonathan Gray, the notion of intertextuality is perhaps best described as 'the fundamental and inescapable interdependence of all textual meaning upon the structures of meaning proposed by other texts' (2005: 3-4). In this broadest sense of the term, then, intertextuality is less a classification of texts (Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg 2008: 62) and more a blanket term proposed to describe a free-floating, inter-subjective body of knowledge (Jim Collins 1989: 44). Therefore, by definition intertextuality applies to all literature (Stahlberg 2008: 63) – and, by extension, all other creative media.

Transgressing the boundaries of literary theory and commonly adapted onto broader cultural discourse, the legacy of the post-structuralist framework continues to be discussed and negotiated in the present day. In *Watching with the Simpsons: Television, Parody, and Intertextuality* Gray notes that the word has proved 'powerfully chameleonic' in its adaptation to different contexts to signify

everything from a critique of postmodernism to literary allusion to in-text citation (2005: 3; Collins 1989: 44). At the same time, he also acknowledges that intertextuality's history with media studies 'has been too closely aligned with that of postmodern theory, and thus is often seen as an open, unlimited (...) process that perennially repels the analyst from getting a grip on the text' (Gray 2005: 36). The open-endedness of this framework continues to complicate contemporary cultural discourse.

At the heart of this negotiation is the critique that intertextuality, in its broadest sense, cannot account for the intertextual dimensions which are purposefully structured in a given text (Collins 1989: 44). Sam Summers emphasises that intertextuality, as envisioned by Kristeva, 'does not distinguish between those connections made consciously or subconsciously, by the author or by the reader' (2020: 5). Due to this, the term 'intertext' by itself is tautological, 'as every work necessarily speaks to a potentially infinite number of others' (2020: 6). As all texts are indeed intertexts, the actual ways in which works choose to explicitly reference other works remain elusive. As a result, such a definition is simply too broad (Stahlberg 2008: 62; Summers 2020: 6).

Gray and Summers both nonetheless view intertextuality as a key theoretical starting point to be limited and controlled by the re-introduction of authorial intent and the purposeful, explicit manipulation of intertextual relations (Gray 2005: 4; Summers 2020: 6). Recognising the original framework as a starting point, both authors construct new, "post-post-structuralist" systems to account for intentional, explicit intertextuality. Discussing *The Simpsons*, Gray coins 'critical intertextuality' to describe the way works re-evaluate and ridicule other genres (2005: 4). In relation to DreamWorks animated films, Summers establishes 'authorial intertextuality' to account for purposeful manipulation within the post-structuralist intertextual web (2020: 7).

Neither of these two notions fits the purposes of my own research perfectly: 'critical intertextuality' by definition does not account for those instances of re-appropriation which are less critical and more

benign in nature (2020: 6); while ‘authorial intertextuality’ suggests the autonomy of a single author’s intent, which is counter-intuitive to argue for in the case of memes. Regardless, both concepts succeed in bridging the gap between post-structuralist theory and a closer semiotic analysis of works. Importantly, these approaches allow for a discourse which differentiates between the chaotic tapestry of culture’s infinite intertextuality and the purposeful tendency through which texts ‘aim themselves at other texts and genres, and that want us to read them through other texts or genres’ (Gray 2005: 4). I follow this same goal, although through another theoretical avenue which fits my chosen topic better. To this end, we can trace back this discussed ambition to the structuralist efforts of influential literary theorist Gérard Genette whose term *hypertext* may be best suited to account for my own analysis.

Predating ‘hypertext’ as it applies to the digital interface of internet browsing and text-based hyperlinks (Manovich 2002: 38), Genette’s ‘hypertextuality’ is not a digital term, but part of a meticulous approach towards accounting for and labelling the various relationships between works. His book *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (1997), originally published in the French language in 1982, is dedicated to the various categories and sub-categories of these intertextual – or, as Genette calls it, ‘transtextual’ – relations. In his framework, hypertext is one of many, ultimately intertwined categories which account for transtextual relations. These range from the ‘metatext’ of book reviews to Genette’s own spin on ‘intertext’ as it simply describes word-to-word quotation (1997: 1-2). He broadly defines ‘hypertext’ as any relationship uniting Text B (the ‘hypertext’) to an earlier Text A (the ‘hypotext’) grafted in a manner that is not of mere commentary (1997: 5). At first glance, this framework is analogous to that of post-structuralist intertextuality. As Genette admits, there is no work which does not to some extent evoke another work, thus rendering all texts in this sense hypertexts (1997: 9). The difference here is the re-introduced presence of identifiable meaning, as well as a writer’s intentional engagement with previous texts (Stahlberg 2008: 61). This is

demonstrated through Genette's rigorous identification of sub-categories within hypertextuality which include 'parody', 'travesty', 'caricature' and 'pastiche', all argued to be purposeful in their reuse.

However, leaving behind the literary figure of the author who can clarify intention, participatory media introduce a new uncertainty about what relations are explicitly encoded within texts and what instances of hypertextuality are only in the eye of the beholder. Here, Genette's advice can help: '[t]he less massive and explicit the hypertextuality of a given work, the more does its analysis depend on constitutive judgement: that is, on the reader's interpretive decision' (1997: 9). Summers discusses these tendencies of explicitness and implicitness in context of the same academic process: '[r]ather than deal in absolutes, (...) it is more useful (...) to acknowledge the importance of deliberateness and explicitness, but to view them as fluid and relative values as opposed to fully knowable criteria which a reference does or does not possess' (2020: 12). The notion of the hypertext is useful because it allows for this ambiguity, while also encouraging nuanced semiotic analysis to make sense of transtextual relations (in particular, the hypertextual mode of parody which I examine in Chapter Two of this thesis). The separation of the intended and the unintended, the explicit and the implicit may not always be possible. Thus, I engage with the term not as a clear-cut category of transtextual references, but as a cultural tendency whose careful examination is particularly important for memes.

To demonstrate this relationship between trans- and hypertextuality, below is another SpongeBob SquarePants-related meme, this time from July 2019 ('Don't Ask Who Joe Is / Joe Mama' 2020). Its most popular meme text is a poor-quality image depicting character Squidward with glowing, bloodied eyes with the caption 'Dont Ask Who Joe Is' (fig. 14). This image was uploaded by an unknown user and received widespread popularity on Instagram and Snapchat accounts in the following weeks (ibid). The appeal of the meme is specific to its playful irony: it "dares" the reader to wonder who Joe is, the answer to which is 'Joe Mama' (a play on 'Yo Mama'). As such, the comedic play at the centre of the

meme relates to the recontextualization of the 'Joe mama' children's joke with a performed sincerity and dread.

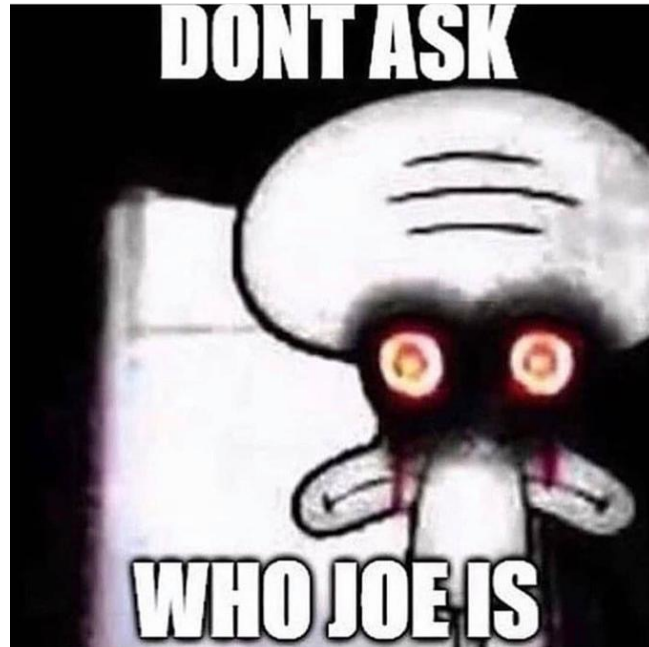


Figure 14: 'DONT ASK WHO JOE IS' (2019).

In its most straightforward reading, this image creates incongruity by juxtaposing multiple elements: the well-known children's cartoon and the rather light-hearted playground activity of the maternal insult with rather disturbing, horror-esque imagery. The image can be understood as a hypertext as it explicitly references the character of Squidward from the popular animated show – however, its grabbed frame is actually not from *SpongeBob SquarePants*. It instead re-uses an illustration created for various adaptations of the 2010 online 'creepypasta' horror story *Squidward's Suicide*. This fictional story had debuted on the 7chan website and chronicled the plot of a fake "lost" *SpongeBob* episode said to feature cursed, haunted imagery. While the Don't Ask Who Joe Is meme is meaningfully different from the original meanings of both the animated show and this online horror story, it nonetheless explicitly evokes both. Further, the image also makes apparent use of the all-caps Impact typeface discussed earlier on: a font largely associated with various meme templates of the early 2010s. The use of the typeface helps situate the meme text within the context of meme culture in

general, and it re-establishes the transtextual connection between itself as a genre work and the genre of memes at large. More specifically, the meme playfully evokes the formal characteristics of the Impact typeface and the header text-bottom text structure even though they are no longer used in a sincere fashion in 2019 meme-making. As such, it synthesises the juvenile humour of the ‘Joe Mama’ joke with a parodic revisiting of internet culture a decade earlier.

We can understand these connections alongside what John Fiske calls ‘horizontal intertextuality’ in his book *Television Culture*. Fiske identifies horizontal intertextuality similarly to Genette’s hypertext, ‘between primary texts that are more or less explicitly linked, usually along the axes of genre, character, or content’ (1987: 108). A simple visualisation of this model can offer some clarity for the Don’t Ask Who Joe Is image. We can consider this specific image as the primary work to be identified and consider the hypotexts which are (more or less) explicitly linked to it. Thus, we can see some of the key texts outside of the primary text which nonetheless inform our understanding of it. This visualisation features the interrelated original animated series and the *Squidward’s Suicide* story; the specific joke adapted by the meme text; as well as meme culture and its various genre works and essential themes:

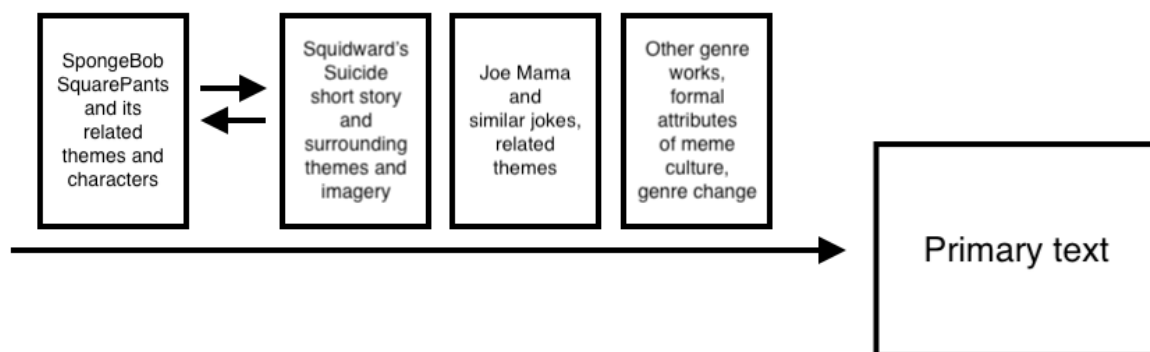


Figure 15: Horizontal intertextuality in the Don't Ask Who Joe Is meme.

This model is hardly exhaustive, of course; and the hypertextual nature of the meme text is further illuminated by a more in-depth consideration of its related texts. In other words, the sprawling hypertextual connections of memes rely on the decoder's level of engagement. As one example, further meme texts following and calling back to our primary text should also be considered, in particular as memes of notable popularity also transform over time. In this case, both the 'Don't Ask Who Joe Is' ironic joke and the Squidward's Suicide template have seen further spread beyond the primary text. The former tendency found new ways of contextualising the joke's premise of the 'Who is Joe' question and its "devastating" consequences (fig. 16); while the latter left this specific joke behind, further mimicking a broader childish sincerity instead (fig. 17).



Figure 16: 'I ASKED WHO JOE IS' (2019).



Figure 17: Not_Your_Waffle (2019). 'okay what the fudge cartoon Network?'. Reddit.

These new texts act as hypertexts in constant discourse – both intended and unintended – with the original image. “Original”, of course, is a counter-intuitive term when used to suggest a chronological hierarchy within memes; case in point, the Squidward version of the meme which has thus far been considered as our primary text is not the first of its kind. An earlier version featuring the altered fan art of a Minecraft villager (fig. 18) dates back to February of the same year (‘Don’t Ask Who Joe Is / Joe Mama’ 2020), and it is possible that the visual resemblance between the two characters influenced the creation of our primary, Squidward-based text.

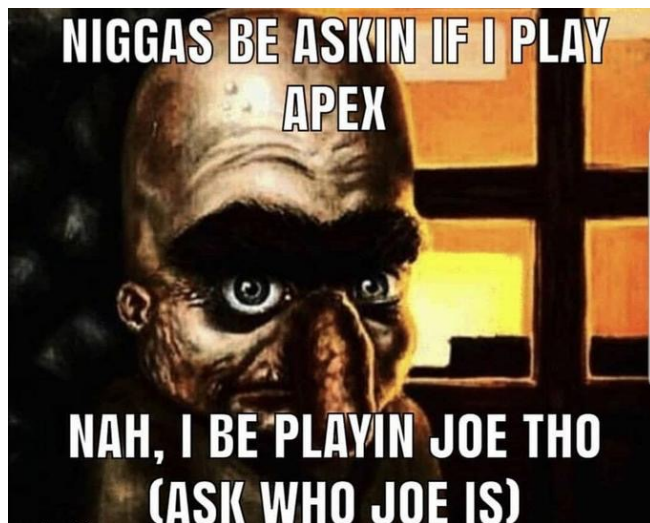


Figure 18: noose.maniac (2019). Minecraft villager Joe Mama joke. Instagram.

In addition, the texts which Fiske highlights under ‘vertical intertextuality’ have to be considered as well: ‘secondary texts, such as criticism or publicity, [which] work to promote the circulation of selected meanings of the primary text’ (1987: 117). Perhaps closest to Genette’s ‘metatext’, this axis of transtextuality is less pronounced in the case of meme culture than it is in Fiske’s discussion of television programming and marketing strategies. In somewhat altered forms, however, it is still a key element in cultural meaning-making: from online content such as *Grandayy’s Meme Awards* (the 2019 edition of which features the Don’t Ask Who Joe Is meme as a runner-up) to YouTuber PewDiePie’s discussion of the meme in the video *NEVER ask who JOE is! [MEME REVIEW]* 🍌 🍌 #67 (2019) to occasional media coverage to, importantly, the everyday discussion of online participants. Fiske refers to the latter as ‘tertiary texts produced by the viewers themselves in the form of (...) gossip and conversation’ (1987: 108). Considering these aspects, the model from earlier can be further modified:

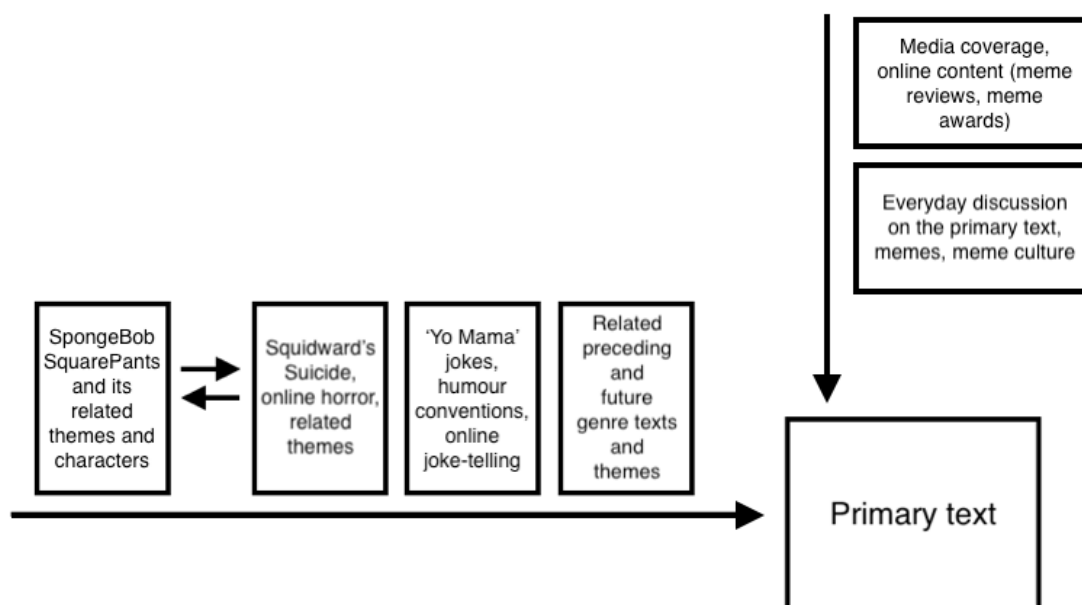


Figure 19: Horizontal and vertical intertextuality in the Don't Ask Who Joe Is meme.

With this updated model I adapt Klaus Bruhn Jensen’s visual interpretation of Fiske’s theory, described as amounting ‘to a model of how meaning is produced and circulated in society, reinserting the

concept of texts into the agenda of communication studies' (2008). Along the horizontal axis, we can understand the 'transfer and accumulation of particular meanings over historical time' (ibid); while along the vertical axis these meanings are contextualised in broader cultural discussion. Notably, however, Jensen is aware that Fiske's terminology still privileges media texts as the primary sources of meaning in communication (ibid). This approach is at danger of some inevitable corrosion in the context of internet culture, in particular due to the content convergence of texts and "metatexts" in social media discourse, and the lessened institutional control over media properties as opposed to online participation. In other words, the placement of evaluative and discussive participation on the vertical axis is likely arbitrary – as I revisit in Chapter Three, these additional participatory elements taking place outside of the borders of media texts also generate and transform meaning in significant ways.

As seen above, careful analysis reveals a vast network of transtextual connections, some more explicit than others. And while the hypertextual nature of these texts is evident, semiotic analysis should not seek to draw an arbitrary line between the intended and the unintended; instead, it should negotiate these concepts as interrelated, ultimately relative values. Hypertextuality is important as it reveals not only the complex, wide-spread strings of transtextual relations memes may have, but also the specific eagerness with which meme culture pulls on these strings. It initiates evident, vibrant discourse between a wide variety of works: between film and meme, photo and meme, song and meme, meme and meme.

7.3 Remediation, hypermediation

Memes and meme-makers play with media as they play with texts. Through the use of the technological tools provided by the internet and social media, users can easily adapt and remix works originating from other media, recycling those works as ingredients of creative meme-making. As

pointed out by past scholarship, memes often borrow from, and react to popular media (Knobel and Lankshear 2007: 213; Milner 2018: 67; Denisova 2019: 11). As such, next to hypertextuality, the formal behaviour of inter- and trans-media discourse should also be considered. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's concept of 'remediation' provides significant insight into these acts of media play. Bolter and Grusin understand the workings of 'new', digital media as part of the ever-shifting cultural and economic patterns by which all media have refashioned one another throughout the course of history. They call this process 'remediation'. Instead of limiting the scope of their framework to the then-recent cultural practices of the late 1990s, remediation is introduced as an ongoing part of the cultural ecosystem which has been and will continue to be present just as long as media themselves. Remediation is 'the representation of one medium in another' (2000: 45), and, as Bolter and Grusin argue, it may be a defining characteristic of all media:

'It would seem (...) that *all* mediation is remediation. We are not claiming this as an a priori truth, but rather arguing that at this extended historical moment, all current media function as remediators and that remediation offers us a means of interpreting the work of earlier media as well. Our culture conceives of each medium or constellation of media as it responds to, redeploys, competes with, and reforms other media' (2000: 55)

The parallels between the theories of intertextuality and remediation are notable. Like post-structuralist theory, remediation theory also seeks to challenge the idea that any medium could be efficiently understood by itself in a cultural vacuum. This is since media need each other in order to function as media at all, and the processes of media commenting on, reproducing and replacing each other are integral to their very being (ibid). For example, the way painting attempts to recreate or challenge our perceived reality; the way photography relies on or challenges the art of painting; the way photorealistic paintings respond to photography; and the way digital photography and computer graphics build on photography. These are all elements of a complex cultural network of media. Through

these acts of remediation, all media, to an extent, rely on one another. Once again, then – analogous to the semiotic challenges raised by intertextuality – all media remediate.

Bolter and Grusin nonetheless recognise that this process isn't the same in all cases. They differentiate between two ways in which works of one medium may evoke and adapt other media. 'Immediacy' describes the attempt to absorb other media entirely as the 'newer' medium seeks to fill a lack or repair a fault in its predecessor (2000: 60). On the other hand, the opposing logic to immediacy – 'hypermediacy' – 'strives to make the viewer acknowledge the medium as a medium and to delight in that acknowledgment' (2000: 41-42). The authors argue that both logics are present in digital media: '[a]t one extreme, an older medium is highlighted and represented in digital form without apparent irony or critique' – and, on the other hand, creators of 'other electronic representations seem to want to emphasize the difference rather than erase it' (2000: 45-46). In the case of hypermediacy, the tearing out of context of the original work 'makes us aware of the artificiality of both the digital version and the original' (2000: 46-47).

Meme culture demonstrates both tendencies well. Memes actively engage in playful transformation, while also seeking to emulate other texts and other media through more implicit immediacy. As an example, memes often evoke and resemble comics and caricature through the use of captions and speech bubbles alongside visual characters, sometimes even adapting the structure of comic panels. At the same time, memes also actively and explicitly recycle stock photography, even leaving watermarks behind to draw attention to this transformation itself (fig. 20). Once again, however, where immediacy ends and hypermediacy begins is not clear-cut; instead, they should be understood as relative values which are both indicative of the ways in which media might transform other media.



Figure 20: 'lol lets see if i can beat my dads record' (n.d.)

It is worth noting that Bolter and Grusin's framework of immediacy and hypermediacy makes no note of, and is built independently from, intertextuality and hypertextuality theories. And yet, I argue that the notions of Genette's hypertext and Bolter and Grusin's hypermedia are analogous. Both allude to an explicit, decodable tendency within works to reference other works. Through hypertextuality and hypermediacy both, works draw attention to themselves as works. In both cases, the 'hyper' prefix suggests vibrant, explicit connections. Simply put, although all texts are intertextual and all media remediate, some may do so "more" than others. Hypertextuality and hypermediacy are both self-reflexive tendencies through which the transformation of other works is foregrounded and celebrated. From James Joyce's *Ulysses* to *The Simpsons*, these tendencies have been prevalent throughout cultural history; and they are essential to understanding memes.

Memes showcase a unique amount of "hyper" engagement with other works. This is due to a variety of interrelated circumstances, from the technological tools of the internet and digital remix to the digitisation of participatory pop culture discourse to the social and cultural motivations underpinning media play and content creation. 'Hypertextuality' and 'hypermediacy' can both be of help to us in understanding these acts. Adapting these two separate yet analogous concepts can emphasise meme

culture's prevalent tendency of differentiating itself from other works through its use of crude aesthetics, explicit re-appropriation and a (more or less) clear desire to separate itself from 'old' media. They are a vibrant case study for what Bolter and Grusin describe as the potential 'aggressive remediation' by the digital medium (2000: 46); one that reveals each digital artefact as a 'mosaic in which we are simultaneously aware of the individual pieces and their new, inappropriate setting' (2000: 47). This aggressive formal play of the new medium and the creative potentialities which unfold from this hypermediacy is also what authenticates memes as a novel, emergent genre.

The genre of memes is premised on this hypermediacy, and most (if not all) meme texts can be said to be visually and formally distanced from their various targets of re-appropriation. As a bottom-up creative practice, this distancing in meme texts most often manifests in the formal rejection of "old media" and traditional ideas of professionalism, instead visually foregrounding and celebrating everyday, amateurish aesthetics. It is a particular, yet ever-changing aesthetic approach that Nick Douglas describes as the 'Internet Ugly'. As he notes, 'Internet Ugly, although not the only core aesthetic of the internet, is the one that best defines the internet against all other media. It is certainly the core aesthetic of [memes]' (2014). Douglas discusses the Internet Ugly in opposition to media like television or print. He argues that the internet is 'built to give outsized attention to the amateurish, the accidental, and the surprise hit' and enables creators with no traditional skill or talent to participate in creative practices, while also motivating creators to embrace it intentionally as a cultural dialect (ibid). This chapter has seen plenty of examples for meme culture's celebrated tools and practices of such an approach: images crudely distorted and spliced together, texts and captions of poor grammar, stick figure comics, watermarked stock photography, misappropriated fan art.

Douglas describes the Internet Ugly as 'the aesthetic of the mundane conversation and idle doodlings that have always existed, but which the internet makes shareable by default'. He characterises these works as 'the internet's "folk art" which are able to reflect the cultures of the sites that invent and

reshape them (ibid). For some people, like Andrew Keen, this democratising force of digital expression means the corruption of traditional media and the harmful rise of the “cult of the amateur” (2007: 27). By contrast, Bolter warns that such dismissive approaches ignore ‘the fact that the creativity of all such work can only now be measured relative to the standards of some community of practice’ (2019: 82). In Bolter’s discussion, the professional-amateur dichotomy is more nuanced. As he explains, professional videographers will inevitably produce more technically competent videos than their amateur counterparts – but ‘technical competence no longer makes a video better in any sense that our whole culture shares’ (2019: 15-16). This is also explored by Jean Burgess in relation to ‘vernacular creativity’: user-led content creation characterised not by abstract aesthetic value but as the expression of ‘the everyday, the mundane, the in-between’ (2007: 29). Burgess discusses vernacular creativity as core to the ‘new configurations of the aesthetic and the social that are most sharply realised in the context of new media (...), for which “art” “folk” and “popular”, as well as “artist”, “professional” and “amateur” are inadequate’ (ibid).

In this sense, the ‘ugly aesthetic’ of crude remixes, distorted videos and broken grammar resembles the creative practices of ‘junk art’, which has similarly been viewed as disruptive and transgressive (Gilian Whiteley 2010: 8). Whiteley’s discussion of junk art and ‘assemblage’ feels particularly fitting for the hypermediacy of meme culture: ‘[t]he idiom of assemblage and the continued re-use of found materials and objects have proliferated in art, popular culture and craft traditions all over the world with folk cultures reclaiming and re-using consumer objects in a range of ways (2010: 9). Here, I use the parallel of trash and junk art not in the literal, material sense, but a cultural one. It is fitting in more than one way. First, the vernacular creativity of meme-making is described particularly well by Steven Connor’s discussion on bricolage: ‘the improvised juxtaposition of incompatible or heterogeneous fragments, often for ironic or parodic effect, as opposed to the principle of unity or “match”’ (2020: 214). Such anti-unity or anti-aesthetic hypertextuality and hypermediacy is a key element of meme

culture's Internet Ugly, and the unlikely pairing of various contrasting media properties is a recurring practice for online meme-making.

But, in another sense, the materials used by meme bricoleurs are also “junk”. We have seen that meme texts regularly play with and remediate popular media from children's animation and video games to commercials and celebrity pictures to pornography – popular culture production which too has been routinely described by the term ‘trash’ (Whiteley 2010: 28). In this sense, the reuse of media properties with lesser perceived worth once again reinforces the logics of vernacular creativity: everyday creation which is ‘practiced outside of the cultural value systems of either high culture (art) or commercial creative practice’ (Burgess 2007: 71). In the digital spaces of meme culture, trash can be reclaimed as treasure, and materials of various kinds – from *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* to *Paul Blart: Mall Cop*, from Beethoven to *Despacito* – can all serve as raw material for new creative value on equal terms.

This is not to claim that more traditional hierarchies of cultural value no longer exist on the internet; instead, it is better understood as the (in part accidental, in part deliberate) celebration of the discarded and the mundane. For a brief parallel from the art world, consider transformative works such as Marcel Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919) which depicted an evident reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* with an added moustache and goatee. Though certainly of a different cultural context, Duchamp's artwork sees its lineage of reuse continue: artefacts such as the captioned stock photograph of Figure 20 seen earlier also foreground their “stolen” material and challenge aesthetic and professional values in this process. This tendency once again contributes to Douglas's notion of the Internet Ugly – an aesthetic which highlights both the materials and techniques of non-traditional production, all the while establishing its own, ever-changing genre practice. Hypermediacy is key to this process: the recycling and playful misappropriation of media defines meme-making as a cultural force.

7.4 Imitation vs transformation

One additional question arising from the hypertextuality of memes is the dichotomy between performance-based mimicry and remix (Shifman 2013: 21). ‘Mimicry’ covers a variety of performative content which imitate and replicate specific trends from ‘planking’ (2013: 30) to Gangnam Style parody videos (2013: 1-2) to the Ice Bucket Challenge (Milner 2016: 59), re-creating content through the means of self-recorded performance. ‘Remix’, on the other hand, ‘takes fragments (samples) of the works of others and fashions them into new experiences’ (Bolter 2019: 84). Contrasting the taxonomies of Shifman and Milner, Esteves and Meikle discuss memes specifically as belonging to the latter category. They define memes as ‘forms of easily remixed texts and images that are intrinsic to [the] social media environment’ (2015: 562). Phillips also describes the “birth” of memes as directly tied to remix: ‘if enough users engage with a particular piece of content, either through reposting or remixing, it will enter the subcultural lexicon. It will, in other words, become a meme’ (2015: 62). It is possible that Shifman’s and Milner’s accounts, who do highlight the existence of “performance-based” memes, once again do so in a manner that is attributable to the overly inclusive parent framework of memetics. However, the separation of remix and performance-based content isn’t so simple – which is highlighted by hybrid examples which combine both of these elements.

The rich and vibrant participatory landscape of TikTok can offer powerful case studies for the re-negotiation of the mimicry versus remix dichotomy. As a first example, consider the ‘Berries and Cream’ TikTok trend which made active use of an audio clip and dance routine from a 2007 Starburst commercial and its follow-up dance tutorial video (‘Berries and Cream’ 2011). It applied them to various contexts and combined the original audio material with the video performance of individual users. This is an audio-visual hybrid: sometimes, users would lip-sync to the monologue of the commercial, while at other times the audio played over other recorded footage.

As a second example, consider the TikTok meme of 'Freddy, You're Supposed to Be on Lockdown' audio bites. This trend also utilised the repeated reuse of audio over performed footage, but its circumstances were more complex. Instead of remediating audio from outside of the platform, this trend involved the work of TikTok user itssampai: a voice performer creating custom voiceover lines of fan dialogue for different video game characters. One video made by the user featured footage of the *Five Nights at Freddy's: Security Breach* video game, on top of which itssampai delivered an impersonation of horror character Freddy Fazbear's voice to deliver comedic dialogue (Elna McHilderson n.d.). As this initial parody dub grew in popularity, other TikTok users would write suggestions in the video's comments for other humorous dialogue options for this same scene, many of which itssampai went on to record and post as well. These different soundbites – in which Freddy Fazbear would start beatboxing, interpolate a My Chemical Romance song, quote from *Twilight* and reference other memes – would branch out into their own trends and uses. This is a hybrid of multiple levels: video game footage paired with the audio of a voiceover performance as commissioned by other participants; then reused outside of this creator's control in various spin-off trends which once again used these soundbites over the performance (lip-syncing or otherwise) of TikTokers.

As a third and final example, consider the TikTok trend involving the 'Horace' video filter created in 2019 by artist JQ Gray and reaching widespread use in 2022 ('Horace Filter' 2022). The filter, used on top of self-recorded and -performed videos, featured a dancing 3D animation of a humanoid character. Among other uses, one specific strand of the trend would use this video filter on top of self-recorded empty environments (thus using the Horace character as a sort-of ironic 'self-insert'), often combined with user John Sevilla's musical cover of the 'Jiggle Jiggle' rap verse by Louis Theroux (which had gained popularity earlier in the year) sung by Sevilla on top of the instrumental of Linkin Park's *In The End*. This format is a particularly unique hybrid: a popular song mashed up with an interpolation of a rap freestyle by a public figure, put on top of various self-recorded video backgrounds with the animated character on top. We can see an example of this below, complete with added caption to complete this

unlikely formula. Here, the animation accompanies TikTok user britty_paige's self-deprecating joke (2022) about unhealthy eating as Horace dances around the kitchen:

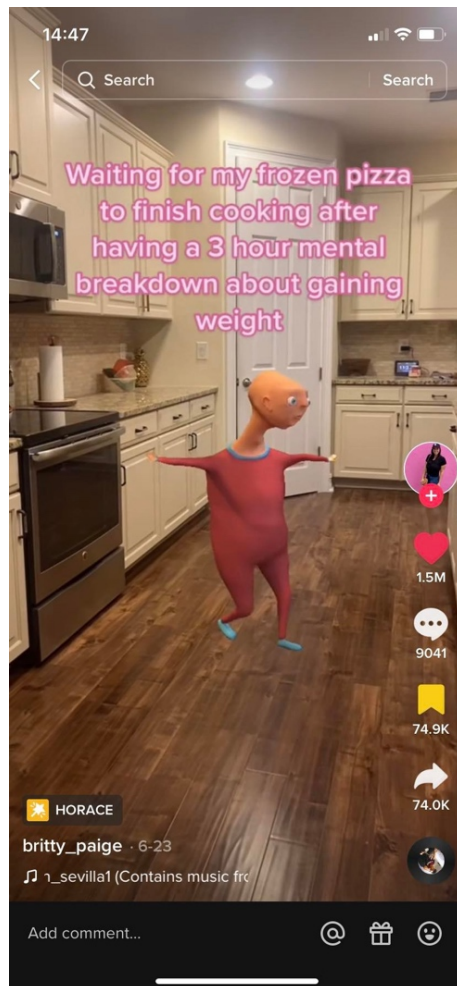


Figure 21: britty_paige (2022). Horace waiting for frozen pizza. TikTok.

The three examples above challenge the dichotomy of mimicry versus remix introduced earlier. As formal hybrids, they each make use of the affordances of developing technology. These include, in this case, the easily accessible video filters and editing capabilities of TikTok's social media platform; the intuitive creation and circulation of endless variation of 'sounds' by users; as well third-party software which enable the remixing and mashing up of different hypotexts. In these examples, the line separating different techniques of reuse is significantly blurred. As recent works of online participation

largely tied to the technology of a specific platform, just how TikTok trends advance or complicate the discussion of meme culture may become a relevant area for future research. While playfully transformative phenomena such as the ones described above are often referred to as memes, at other times they are cautiously called 'TikToks', 'sounds', 'trends'. Of course, 'a TikTok' – like 'a blog' – can't quite be meaningfully called a genre on its own as it instead expresses a wide range of genres in accordance with the needs and interests of its users (Herring et. al 2005: 162). The format of the TikTok short has enabled a wide variety of different content, not all of which uses pre-existing texts (see personal diaries and monologue-based videos). There are also instances of media use on the platform in which the referencing of hypotexts, such as snippets of popular songs, occur in less transformative or less playful ways (such as dance routines, or the use of popular songs as background music). The ability to distinguish between the many possible genres on the platform (vlogs? reactions and reviews? food recipes? comedy sketches? memes?) is thus significantly obstructed by content convergence. Nevertheless, as an emergent platform, TikTok excellently showcases genre expression in recent years. Its platform has been the site of vast social play and experimentation, its users exploring its technology and the forms it enables as they seek to express their social exigencies.

Where to draw the line between remix and performed content remains to be seen, as the affordances of new technology enable new potentialities for experimentation and play. Due to the rise of new platforms and technologies, and the further crystallisation of social needs and interests, these lines may yet to be blurred in new ways. The emerging forms of expression arising from the media environment of the past decades (from Rage Comics to TikTok sounds) exemplify the novel, transformative power of social media participation. Not all forms of expression earn a genre claim, and not all genre claims are warranted. In this chapter, however, I have presented one which is.

8. CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have re-evaluated memes in the aftermath of what I labelled the ‘separating of the meme from the meme’. I have agreed with recent scholarship that the disciplinary connection to the field of Dawkinsian memetics – itself a contested cultural theory – does more harm than good to the media studies understanding of online creative activities. This is as true in the semantic sense as it is in the categorical. I have used the analogy of the Spam-spam semantic link (as luncheon meat referenced by a Monty Python sketch later became a label for unwanted e-mails), but I could have used many others from the internet’s vocabulary: how ‘troll’ turned from fantasy creature into online users with disruptive behaviour; how the ‘ghosting’ of online dating has not much to do with ghosts; how the antagonist of Eminem’s song *Stan* became a positive term to describe superfans (‘stans’) of celebrities. It is unfortunate that the semantic meme-meme connection has been the centrepiece of a significant portion of digital media scholarship for the past decade. This is as the particularly wide categorical net cast by the Dawkinsian framework obstructs any attempt to recognise (internet) memes for what they are: comedic, playful, transformative, creative works of social media participation.

Leaving behind memetics is to start anew and recognise (internet) memes on their own terms. The purpose of the genre approach is straightforward: it aims to demystify works of what I call ‘meme culture’ as a functional (though not always clear-cut) category of digital texts. In this alternative, genre approach I share a sentiment expressed by Wiggins: ‘by viewing memes as a genre of communication, they become objectified, something to be studied, evaluated’ (2019: 41). To note, Wiggins also works with the idea of genre, although at a completely different level of taxonomy. He looks at how genre change can describe the “evolution” of individual memes, and doing so he labels each meme a genre on its own (a structural approach which is then at risk of de-evaluating the cultural weight of ‘genre’ in this process).

My own genre model has considered the patterns of meme culture along three dimensions. These are the affordances of technology enabling new forms of social engagement; the social exigencies, needs and pleasures which exploit these affordances; and the formal and aesthetic patterns which result from these social acts. For the first dimension of affordances, I have highlighted the digital scholarship around participation and social media in particular; for the second dimension of social exigence, I have emphasised the social needs and pleasures of laughter and play in particular; for the final dimension of form, I have discussed textual transformation with a specific focus on the explicit hypertextuality and hypermediacy of meme texts. This has been done in the effort to articulate the function(s) of memes, while also introducing some of the key characteristics of the genre. I have called the genre 'emergent' as I have found that, next to the digital adaptation of some already familiar social structures (such as telling jokes) it also exhibits other ones which can be meaningfully positioned within the Web 2.0 social media landscape (such as the colourful media play which arises from content convergence and an access to endless counts of media properties). In this sense, we can also understand memes-as-genre through 'hybridity' as it draws from multiple sources of social structuring and channels those towards the novel, native expression of memes-as-works.

Some aspects of this structure are inevitably arbitrary. Reuse and remix, for example, which have been discussed under form, also have a social function; humour and joke-telling, which have been discussed under exigence, also have specific formal manifestations. There also remains the chicken and the egg of technology and social need: does technology cater to the needs of the public, or do the needs of the public stretch to fill the mould of new technology? The answer is likely both. However, my aim is not to determine a clear causality between the ever-changing pieces of social media discourse. Instead, I consider the different dimensions of memes in an endless dynamic. It is likely that the genre emerged, has "evolved", and remains in public consciousness because of its ever-changing landscape (including the social trends and interests of individuals and groups, the dynamic rise and fall of social media structures, the genre progression of form and style and so on).

Most importantly, this chapter has served to re-assess memes as a vibrant site of cultural transformation. As a working definition ahead of my remaining chapters, I look at memes as an *emergent, vernacular genre of online participation which is premised on social laughter, social play and the creative reuse of other texts, genres and media*. This definition highlights the *function* of meme culture's underlying participatory practices as opposed to the spread and circulation of meme texts (which, I argued, describe almost everything online). It also differs from memetics-adjacent definitions in that it re-positions the idea of the 'meme' into the single context of social media participation (as opposed to being the digital variation of cultural imitation under a broader, transhistorical umbrella term).

Finally, this new model also allows for the recognition of specific, recurring sociocultural characteristics (such as the motivating structures of laughter, play and reuse) which reflect in the genre engagement of everyday participants. Users of online communities enact vast sets of social, cultural and creative exigence through various means and levels of media play. The resulting genre works are complex but not immeasurable; they are non-traditional but not meaningless. They reflect the complexity of culture itself, and of human imagination.

CHAPTER TWO: RE-RE-RETHINKING PARODY

1. INTRODUCTION

In Chapter One I explored the emergent genre of memes within social media. I identified the main technological, social and cultural logics underpinning its practices, which included the affordances of digital technology and social media participation, as well as the social exigence manifested through the structuring principles of social laughter and social play. Finally, I discussed memes and formal transformation. I adapted two notions: Genette's 'hypertext' (1997) as it describes a type of intertextuality that is explicit and purposeful, and Bolter and Grusin's 'hypermedia' (2000) as it describes a type of remediation that is explicit and purposeful. I made use of these two complementary notions to make a claim about the genre in general: memes not only re-use and re-appropriate a large variety of works from different media but do so with a richness that is worthy of both attention and further research.

This chapter builds on these ideas. It adds a new concept – *parody* – to my discussion on memes. I find 'parody' useful for multiple reasons. It has the potential to offer complementary ideas to my previously discussed notions of laughter and play through parody's characterisation as the 'ironic playing with multiple conventions' (Linda Hutcheon 1985: 7), and the 'comic incongruity between the original and its parody' which results in a 'comic, amusing, or humorous effect' (Margaret A. Rose 1993: 45). It also has the potential to put a name to the types of hypertextuality and hypermediacy which characterise memes as novel expression. I have argued that memes reuse and transform existing texts and media, but this previous discussion has stopped short of identifying the exact nature of these transformative acts. I argue that the lens of parody can guide us further.

As I investigate in this chapter, ‘parody’ can be understood in multiple contexts, each in conversation with one another. First, parody theory is an established discipline, accompanied by a long history of scholarly debate. Second, ‘parody’ is a legal term describing a form of copyright exception which is evoked in copyright courts to defend works based on the merit and nature of their reuse of copyrighted material. And third, ‘parody’ is also prominently used in the vernacular of everyday discussion which, in less rigorous ways, also seeks to describe a form of creative reuse. As I said, these three contexts inform one another: academic theory may influence legal precedent and vice versa, and the everyday use and misuse of the term reflects a colloquial understanding of its creative function.

Often, everyday claims of parody are pre-emptive legal defence. This seems to be the case for the opening title card of the YouTube video re-upload *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* by creator AirplaneRandy which adopts the well-known Impact “meme font” to declare: ‘THE FOLLOWING IS A NON-PROFIT FAN-BASED PARODY/SHREK is owned by DREAMWORKS ANIMATION/Please support the official release’ (2013). ‘Parody’ here acts as one of multiple buzzwords serving to protect the work from copyright takedowns through YouTube’s Content ID system. ‘Fan’ and ‘non-profit’ imply that the work reuses pre-existing media properties in good faith and not for commercial purposes which would compete with the referenced texts; ‘parody’ suggests that the work is transformative and not derivative in nature.

I use AirplaneRandy’s video here partially as foreshadowing of this chapter’s meticulous exploration of the *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* meme and its layers of parodic transformation. To be sure, the parody claim of AirplaneRandy’s title card does not in itself provide a sufficient reason for asserting parody’s relevance to meme culture; much like the insistent removal of the video and its re-uploads through hastily submitted copyright takedown claims do not prove that the video isn’t a work of parody. This example is useful in other ways, however. It implies that parody *matters* insofar it sets apart some

types of transformation from other types. Simultaneously, it also highlights an ambiguity around meme texts and their creative, cultural worth.

As I argue, memes exist in a 'semiotic limbo'. While 'fair use' (as used in the copyright law of the US) and its equivalents offer some degree of legal protection for memes, in practice meme texts (videos in particular) are the easy prey of copyright holders and unjust takedowns. In turn, everyday creators may be pressured 'into compliance with the limits set by Content ID, rather than contesting those limits' and can cause them to 'forgo legally protected creative expression' (Aaron Schwabach 2012: 18). At best, this lack of clarity obstructs semiotic analysis; at worst, it allows for memes to be directly aligned with the notions of derivative use, copyright infringement and plagiarism. These uncertainties can be addressed by parody – both in the field of digital media theory and in everyday and legal contexts. 'Parody' implies transformative use – and colourful transformation, as I proposed in Chapter One, is a key characteristic of memes.

The key intervention of this chapter is to adapt and develop a theoretical framework of parody which does justice to the complexity of meme culture, and which can deepen our understanding and appreciation of the transformative power of memes. I argue that its prior applications have been insufficient in this regard. This is partially due to the methodological challenges of what Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner call the 'ambivalent internet' (2017): a multi-voiced, variable cultural environment which inhabits a full spectrum of purposes (2017: 10) and therefore resists frameworks which see parody as an 'unambivalently critical form of comic imitation' (Rose 2011: 213). But frameworks which embrace the rich ambivalence of parody predate this thesis and predate the internet too. I make the case for the timely re-adaptation of such an approach. I work in particular with the theories of Rose (1979, 1993, 2011) and Hutcheon (1985) to re-frame the hypertextuality of meme culture under what I call 'ambivalent parody'.

The first half of this chapter re-assesses the parodic potential of memes under this adapted lens. As an added dimension, I also introduce the legal consideration of parody as a copyright exception (since, as it turns out, some of the same questions which emerge from contrasting theories of parody (such as the questions of distance, attitude, and comic incongruity) are also negotiated in copyright courts. After the first half of the chapter explores these ideas in detail, the second half sees them in practice as I look at the hypertextual layers of the Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life meme. Immediately recognisable to those already familiar, disturbingly baffling to the uninitiated, and seemingly inexplicable to all: the meme is easily dismissed as no more than an unfortunate by-product of the “weird internet”. As such, the meme is the perfect candidate for more in-depth textual and hypertextual analysis – specifically informed by the notion of ambivalent parody. This second half of this chapter offers an investigatory journey into the fabric of the meme and its many artefacts with the ambition to gain a better understanding of its place, role, and functions within internet culture. As explored, the Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life meme is itself stuck in semiotic limbo: ultimately characterised by playful, creative transformation, but never quite belonging to a clear-cut category. The lens of ambivalent parody here allows for the peeling back of the meme’s many layers; I discuss the meme and its possible parodic transformation of multiple works, styles, genres, and forms of cultural behaviour.

I am particularly interested in exploring the potentialities offered by parody in seeking a deeper understanding of transformation in meme culture. My approach follows Simon Dentith’s suggestion that parody isn’t a strict category of texts but a mode or range of hypertextual expression (2000:37). I believe that the ‘parody’ label should be applied first and foremost for its ability to tell us something about the relationship between texts. Not all parodies are created equal; and analysis of some memes will benefit more from the parodic lens than that of others. Thus, parody provides not a new, all-encompassing definition of memes, but rather a toolset of analysis: one which can bring us another step closer to the understanding of online transformation and creative reuse.

2. THE PARODY PROBLEM

As a starting point, I propose that there is utility in applying parody theory to meme culture. Parody theory can be a useful lens through which to analyse memes because it connects mememaking to the vast historical lineage of transformative reuse (which, I argue, memes are a part of), and because it puts a name to the acts of creative transformation I have previously described under ‘hypertextuality’ and ‘hypermediacy’. It has the potential to bridge the problem of ‘memes in semiotic limbo’: a lack of clarity surrounding meme culture’s recycling and re-appropriation of pre-existing texts and media.

However, much like in the previous case of ‘intertextuality’, the use of ‘parody’ comes with the baggage of academic debate and disagreement. In addition, its application to meme culture is yet to be fully articulated. Not all approaches to, and perspectives on, parody are useful for my discussion of transformation in meme culture. This is due both to the complexities of parody theory, and to its somewhat restrictive use in the digital humanities. Parody is often referenced in the academic discourse around memes, but its use is rather limited. Digital media theories of the last decade have continually referenced the notion of parody, situating it as a form of user-created derivatives alongside remix and imitation (Limor Shifman 2013), a discursive activity alongside satire and critique (Bradley E. Wiggins 2019), a form of commentary and political criticism (Anastasia Denisova 2019) or the exaggeration and subversion of the trademark elements of original works (Sam Summers 2020). However, these uses of the notion have not been extensive enough to contribute to a broader understanding of memes. The ‘parody problem’ I suggest in this section is that, while parody *feels* relevant for meme studies, its application hasn’t been completely compatible with the works of meme culture. To illustrate this, below are three accounts – those of Shifman, Denisova, and Summers – which engage with the notion in a particular way. They use parody in an unambiguously restrictive manner: they link it directly to ridicule and critique.

Shifman discusses parody through its 'critical stance vis-à-vis the source text that it mimics', and equates it directly with mockery, emphasising this as the difference which sets it apart from other forms of 'imitation' (2013: 46). Her discussion of parody is tied to a specific phenomenon: the various instances of mockery targeting the 2007 YouTube video *Leave Britney Alone*, where the 'lamprooning' of the original text is an essential characteristic of the meme (ibid). By comparison, Denisova's approach foregrounds the political significance of parody in memes. She emphasises mockery and the 'lighthearted resistance' with which the exchange of jokes and political commentary are ultimately intertwined. She claims that parody is context-sensitive in arguing for its social and political significance: 'parody makers need to draw clear links to the political and social environment to make criticism sound and timely' (2019: 36). In *DreamWorks Animation: Intertextuality and Aesthetics in Shrek and Beyond* Summers arrives at a similar argument, although from a different approach. He first identifies parody's form as a 'polemical' (critical) one based on the way films like *Shrek* interact with their targeted works and genres (2020: 126), and later applies the same framework to cover the relations between films and memes. Compared to Denisova's account, Summers's view emphasises parody's artistic function rather than just a social one as it achieves its artistic effect by turning existing narrative conventions on their head for a satirical and humorous effect (2020: 82).

All three of these frameworks do well at pinpointing a specific dynamic between parody and its "target" both on- and offline. However, such frameworks can only confidently account for a fracture of the hypertextual variations within meme culture. This is due to the uniquely complex hypertextual ways in which meme texts transform their hypotexts, which – as I argue in this chapter – inevitably transgress those of straightforwardly reverent or polemical stances. Compared to works of other media, memes are unique in this regard: as Milner points out, memes cannot have a singular purpose as they are made up of innumerable texts produced by participants with diverse goals, literacies, motivations, and perspectives (2016: 70). And yet – as this chapter explores in detail – memes can

indeed be transformative in complex ways, engaging in nuanced hypertextual relations with other texts and creating novel meaning at the very same time. In many cases, memes will actively re-appropriate and interact with media properties and will do so in ways which cannot be explained by the framework of critical parody. For instance, we can think back to Shaggy's Power from the introduction of this thesis: an ever-changing, multi-voiced creative trend which toys around with Scooby-Doo, *Dragon Ball Super* and many other media properties, but does so without being restricted to obvious critique (and, similarly, sincere sympathy) towards any of them. The stance associated with many of these works is best described not as critical, but as *ambivalent*.

Ambivalence can be considered an essential characteristic of internet culture in general. Due to the convergence of cultural information as well as the multiplicity and routine anonymity of online artefacts, it is much harder to establish clear boundaries between different cultural practices online. In this context, ambivalence signals not a lack of stance, but the co-presence of many. As Phillips and Milner aptly explain in their book *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online* in regard to internet culture at large:

'Simultaneously antagonistic and social, creative and disruptive, humorous and barbed, the satirization of products, antagonization of celebrities, and creation of questionable fan art, along with countless other examples that permeate contemporary online participation, are too unwieldy, too variable across specific cases, to be essentialized as *this* as opposed to *that*. Nor can they be pinned to one singular purpose. Because they are not singular; they inhabit, instead, a full spectrum of purposes – all depending on who is participating, who is observing, and what set of assumptions each person brings to a given interaction' (2017: 10)

The authors emphasise that their usage of the term 'ambivalence' should reflect not indifference, but the complexity of cases which 'could go either way, in fact could go any way simultaneously' (ibid).

This opens up the ‘both, on both sides’ meaning of the *ambi-* prefix to account for the ‘all, on all sides’ of the complex tapestry of the internet landscape (2017: 11). As Phillips and Milner explore, ambivalence is fundamental to all mediated expression, pre- and post-internet; however, it is further amplified on the internet. This is due to the diverse limitations and affordances of the online spaces. For example, assigning motive to a single online voice is already obstructed by the possible anonymity/pseudonymity of digital spaces (2017: 71), which, at the same time, allow for identity play and ironic expression. This is further complicated by the largely inseparable multiplicity of voices that exist online: ‘[w]hat might start out as one thing for one individual or group can quickly evolve into another thing for another individual or group, splintering off into a million different directions, (...) seeding conflicting motives as they go’ (2017: 82). In examples like Shaggy’s Power, this multiplicity is essential. As a continually evolving remix of a remix, the meme and its numerous artefacts belong not to one stance – that of the fan, the troll, the satirist, which themselves become arbitrary labels –, but to many at the same time. Such collective creative expression thus simultaneously muddies the concept of singular authorship (2017: 134) and that of singular meaning. In this context, then, semiotic analysis becomes increasingly challenging as online expression continues to defy easy categorisation. The argument made by Phillips and Milner is a powerful rebuttal against the use of ‘critical parody’ described earlier: if even a single voice’s intentions are uncertain, and memes are made up of a multiplicity of voices, just how useful is a framework limited to a single stance?

And yet, despite the many complexities arising from meme analysis, memes need not stay in semiotic limbo. Despite my concerns laid out so far, I believe parody has the potential to account for the ambiguous and the ambivalent. The parody theories discussed by Rose (1979, 1993, 2011) and Hutcheon (1985) in particular re-evaluate the limits of stance in contrast to theories which equate parody with ridicule and thus trivialise its function. Instead, we will see that parody does have the ability to emphasise and embrace the ambivalence of creative transformation. As Rose argues, ‘most parody worthy of its name is in fact ambivalent towards its target’; and this ambivalence ‘may entail

not only a mixture of criticism and sympathy for the parodied text, but also the creative expansion of it into something new' (1993: 51). I wish to follow through the implications of this claim.

What is to come, then, is the proposal of an alternative theoretical approach to memes in the age of the participatory internet. On the one hand, I present and re-visit an established, decades-old scholarly debate about the limits and potentialities of differing definitions of parody; on the other hand, I seek an approach which can adapt to the challenges of this new, less traditional media environment. As Hutcheon notes, parody changes with the culture, and its theory should be derived from, rather than imposed upon, cultural works (2000: xi). As a zeitgeist of the internet age, memes are more than deserving of such re-evaluation. The complementary notions of the 'ambivalent internet' and my chosen framework of parody – which I label *ambivalent parody* – further ground this approach. Working with this recognised ambivalence rather than working against it (Phillips and Milner 2017: 56) can provide a key step in understanding and legitimising creative transformation in meme culture. Such a framework can then allow us to discuss memes on their own terms: as a genre of transformative, playful, creative online expression. My contribution is not to a supposed trans-historical definition of parody – the existence of which, as Hutcheon argues, may not be possible at all (1985: 10) –, but to the building of best practice in contemporary meme discourse.

3. THREE DIMENSIONS OF PARODY

Memes and parody are a match made in heaven. That is to say, the unique dynamic of rich hypertextuality, comedy and play which I have associated with memes makes an ideal basis for a contemporary discussion of parody. However, historically, the definition of parody has been subject to academic debate and dispute spanning many decades and many disciplines. Definitions of parody vary, ranging from the distortion of a text by means of minimal transformation (Gérard Genette 1997: 25) to the comic refunctioning of preformed linguistic or artistic material (Rose 1993: 52). Scholarly

dilemmas surrounding parody and its use in semiotic studies include (although are not limited to) the questions of 'distance', 'attitude', and 'comic incongruity'. As seen later, these questions are fundamentally intertwined. I aim to navigate these questions in order to unveil the unique parallels between already existing theories and the vibrant hypertextuality of meme culture.

3.1 Parody and distance

The first key issue emerging from parody discourse that I wish to explore is 'distance' as it describes the interplay between imitation and transformation, similarity and difference. The notion of imitation remains a central talking point in parody theory. It describes the way parodic works mimic and allude to their hypotexts, even if only by using stylistic devices typical of those texts (Jerry Palmer 2005: 82). However, imitation by itself suggests similarity over difference, at the risk of reducing the function of parody to one that is derivative, even parasitic (Hutcheon 1985: 3).

Rose argues that while imitation may be used as a technique in parody, it is the use of 'incongruity' which distinguishes parody from other forms of quotation and shows its function to be more than imitation alone (1979: 22). Similarly, Hutcheon suggests that while parody is a form of imitation, it is imitation characterised by 'ironic inversion' (1985: 6). Through this process, parody becomes repetition with difference: a distance is implied between the referenced work and the new work (1985: 32). To note, Hutcheon employs the term 'critical distance' here to emphasise a difference between the original work and the parody, but she clarifies that parody is not always at the expense of the parodied text (1985: 6) and that 'parody might be said to be, at heart, less an aggressive than a conciliatory rhetorical strategy, building upon more than attacking its other, while still retaining its critical distance' (2000: xiv). (I am, however, cautious about adapting the phrase 'critical distance' further due to its potential conflation with explicit critique).

The two authors, while employing somewhat different approaches, nonetheless present similar arguments. Specifically, they both emphasise the functional and tonal complexity of parodic works. In their view, it is a combination of (presumed) hypertextual intent and an identifiable distance from its hypotexts which elevates parody above both plagiarism and derivative mimicry. Subsequently, distance also enables a more nuanced discussion of the scope and structure of parodic works. Contrasting the argument that parody is premised on a wilful distortion of the entirety of a referenced work (J. G. Riewald 1966: 127), parody can then be said to evoke other works in more complex ways too. These can include various kinds of semantic and stylistic transformation, the juxtaposition of multiple works in a new context, or the absurd distortion of a parodied text. Parody is therefore able to transcend the boundaries of a 'step-by-step, pedestrian signaling of the entire form and spirit' of a parodied work (Hutcheon 1985: 19). This argument fits the vibrant trans-media parody of meme culture especially well. Memes hypermediate older media through the tools of remix, mashup, distortion and absurd juxtaposition; referencing and evoking works while drawing attention to the act of transformation at the same time.

This may be done in various ways. For instance, the highly popular 2006 trend of 'Downfall Parodies' ('Hitler's "Downfall" Parodies' 2009), which re-appropriate footage from the film *Downfall* (2004), uses relatively little transformation to re-appropriate its parodied film sequence, leaving the video intact and changing its meaning through newly written, playful subtitles for the scene. The German-language sequence, which features Bruno Ganz's distraught Hitler yelling at German officers, can gain new, playful interpretations through its "fake" subtitles. For instance, it can show Hitler in frustration with YouTube's unjust copyright claim system in the video *Hitler rants about the Downfall Parodies being blocked* (2010) (fig. 22). By contrast, YouTube remix parodies of the popular *Simpsons* episode segment 'Skinner & The Superintendent' (known as 'Steamed Hams' online) (1996) see the original material undergo various forms of formal and stylistic change, which include re-edits and re-creations; distorted deconstructions; the stylistic adaptation and juxtaposition of other popular films and television shows;

song and music video mashups (see character Principal Skinner as part of a-ha's *Take On Me* music video (2020) in fig. 23).



Figure 22: *Hitler Rants Parodies (2010)*. 'Hitler rants about the *Downfall* Parodies'. YouTube.

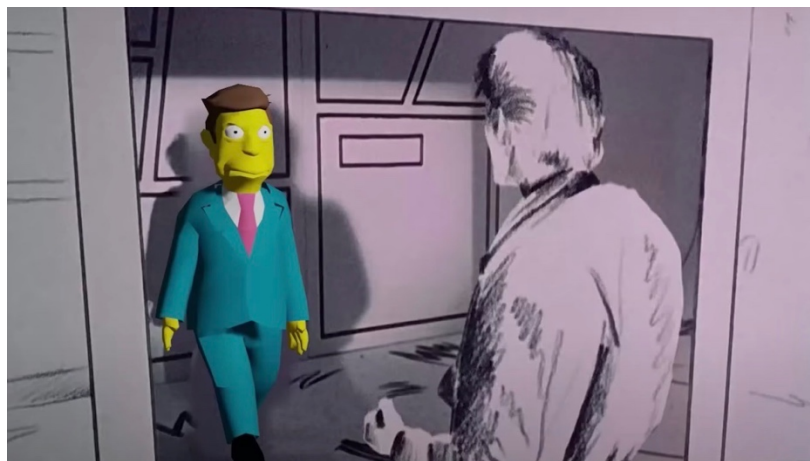


Figure 23: *bad puns (2020)*. 'steamed hams but it's take on me'. YouTube.

These two examples both exhibit parodic qualities, even as they differ in formal approach and execution. Importantly, both examples demonstrate a distance between hypotext and hypertext. On the one hand, they both exhibit a (presumed) hypertextual, parodic intent which distinguishes them from their referenced texts – thus transforming the texts' original meaning and creating new meaning at the same time. On the other hand, the notion of 'distance' also allows for the examination of both examples as parody even though they utilise transformation of different kinds and scopes. While the

'Downfall Parodies' meme may be considered a more faithful parody, even mockery, of the referenced film sequence, it demonstrates a similar distance from *Downfall* as 'Steamed Hams' remixes do from *The Simpsons*. Of course, different instances of the same meme may also differ in form, style and content. *Steamed Hams but Skinner has schizophrenia* (2017) parodies the original cartoon scene by editing out one character so the other appears to be talking to himself; *Steamed Hams But It's Ace Attorney* (2018) adapts the style of the video game *Ace Attorney* for a creative, humorous mashup between the two hypotexts; while *Steamed Hams [EAR RAPE]* (2017) heavily distorts both video and audio, pushing the hypotext into digital destruction. This distance between meme and hypotext is not only explicit, but ambivalent too: these meme texts exhibit a playful, yet not directly critical or reverent distancing of their referenced works, balancing repetition and variation in creative ways.

3.2 Parody and attitude

Closely intertwined with the question of 'distance' is the question of the 'attitude(s)' attributed to the parodist. The attitude, or stance, of parody remains a key point of contestation within parody theory. Parody has been described as a means of attacking artistic styles and ridiculing the languages of out-groups (Simon Dentith 2000: 188); of invading other texts and criticising them from within (Jonathan Gray 2005: 4); and of deconstructing and mocking genre (Summers 2020: 128). Dentith argues that it is this negatively evaluative attitude which best presents the activity of parody as a predominantly subversive one (2000: 19). In particular, Dentith finds the possible inclusion of 'respectful allusions' problematic, while nonetheless admitting that both the degree of hostility and the direction of the parodic attack may to some degree vary.

By comparison, both Rose and Hutcheon advocate for a significantly more inclusive approach. For Hutcheon, it is the range of intent – 'from the ironic and playful to the scornful and ridiculing' – which

is characteristic of modern parody (1985: 6). Similarly, Rose argues that, within parody, the separation of different attitudes itself as an approach is problematic:

‘Despite the fact that parodies may be *both* critical of *and* sympathetic to their ‘targets’, many critics have continued to describe parody as being *only* critical, or *only* sympathetic, or playful, or agitational, or engagé, or blasphemous, or ironic, or imitative, or counter-imitative, and so on. In addition to being a device which is able (...) to have an ambivalent, or ambiguous, relationship to its ‘target’, parody is able to be used to demonstrate several of the above characteristics at once’ (1993: 47)

In the age of the ambivalent internet (Phillips and Milner 2017), this argument rings truer than ever. The parodic works of meme culture demonstrate various degrees of hostility and sympathy against their hypotexts. These varied attitudes are further obscured by the conditions of digital mediation and collective vernacular expression.

In some cases, memes may exhibit a rather obvious critical tone. For example, the meme trend adapting a scathingly mocking tone to point out the flawed writing in the sitcom series *The Big Bang Theory* practically functions as a digitised, contemporary form of trans-media caricature (fig. 24). The texts of this meme critique the show by pinpointing and distorting both narrative patterns and specific lines from its episodes, including character traits such as the idiosyncratic behaviour of protagonist Sheldon, or the running joke and catchphrase ‘Bazinga’ used repeatedly in the show.

Sheldon:PENNYPENNYPENNYPENNY
YPENNY
Penny: WHAT?
Sheldon: Bazinga
INTENSE CROWD LAUGH



Figure 24: 'Sheldon:PENNYPENNYPENNYPENNY [...] (n.d.)

But even this seemingly clear-cut case – a meme that is easily read as the mocking critique of a much-seen but largely disliked show – reveals further complexity upon a closer look. The patterned use of image editing and distorting techniques used for this meme is in conversation with not just the referenced series, but with digital art, joke structures and itself as a meme as well. In this process, the act of creation through parody becomes just as important as (if not more than) the coded mockery of the series. Nick Douglas sees the meme as a creative ‘fuck you’ to traditional standards of photomanipulation as well as a critique of the ‘bland, safe formulas’ of *both* the television show and digital image-making (2014). At the same time, he also draws attention to the experimental aesthetic of these images, which ‘rip Sheldon and his fellow characters out of their original context and refuse to provide a sensible new one’ (ibid). Through transformative play, the meme texts become an exercise: further abstracting the joke formula and adding their own twists to the parody. Further variations – distorting Sheldon’s likeness to grotesque proportions and replacing the ‘Bazinga’ catchphrase with everything from ‘Bronchitis’ to ‘Zimbabwe’ – may still be described as critical or hostile towards their targeted work, but restricting our analysis to this one attitude would not do the meme justice. Douglas concludes:

'The Sheldon of these comics exists in his own universe, where he is a cackling Loki figure with powers of body manipulation and a new catchphrase for every episode (...) While there are definable rules for making one of these comics, they can't be traced back to The Big Bang Theory, or to nearly any source outside the earlier comics. These comics speak their own idiolect' (ibid).

Even more challenging are the various meme texts surrounding the online re-evaluation of George Lucas's Star Wars prequel trilogy. Originally receiving mixed critical and audience reception, the saga of young Anakin Skywalker's transformation into Darth Vader has influenced multiple meme templates and creative remixes, as well as the dedicated meme subreddit r/PrequelMemes. One specific example takes and parodies Skywalker's monologue, in which – in an otherwise romantic sequence – the character starts detailing his hatred of sand: 'I don't like sand. It's coarse and rough and irritating and it gets everywhere.' This quote found wide popularity among the users of r/PrequelMemes. The creative re-contextualisation of this specific moment from the film trilogy is exhibited on the internet in parodic ways (fig. 25).



Figure 25: 'Why don't you like sand? [...]' (n.d.)

Even though these texts, similarly to the *Big Bang Theory* ones, recycle an instance of poor screenwriting, they do so in more ambiguous and ambivalent ways. Ridicule, genuine reverence, ironic appreciation, nostalgia and self-reflexivity all blend together here, and thus the isolation of one specific attitude becomes not only difficult, but arbitrary too. The image above, in which Anakin has to choose one his four descriptors for sand in a game of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, can be read as the mockery of a memorably bad line, the celebration of an iconic one, or both at the same time. Mockery can also turn into endearing play and vice versa; and the multiplicity of voices further negates any attempt to draw a line between these attitudes.

3.3 Parody and comic incongruity

Finally, the third theme of scholarly debate around parody that I wish to highlight is ‘incongruity’, and the attribution of a comic effect to parody. ‘Incongruity’ here refers to the absurd juxtaposition of different works and contexts, just as much as it refers to a juxtaposition of expectation and actuality in humour theory (Simon Critchley 2002: 3; Rose 1979: 21).

There is disagreement between Hutcheon and Rose here. Hutcheon worries that comedy is too intertwined with critique, as laughter can imply ridicule. To this end, Hutcheon avoids ascribing an element of laughter to parody in an effort to further distance parody from criticism and ridicule (1985: 37). For the purposes of this thesis and its aims for understanding memes, I do not follow this approach, but it raises interesting questions. Since Hutcheon’s ‘parody’ is at this point bound neither by ridicule nor comedy, it feels closer to the category of *pastiche* instead. As described by Fredric Jameson, pastiche is the ‘blank parody’ of postmodernist practice: ‘[p]astiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style (...) But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter’ (1991: 17). It is worth noting that Jameson does in fact connote laughter and ridicule here, and thus his

framing of parody once again involves the element of critique. Hutcheon acknowledges that her definition of parody could not be differentiated from pastiche on the grounds of attitude (1985: 38), but suspects that there may be another way to differentiate between the two: 'parody does seek differentiation [distance] in its relationship to its model; pastiche operates more by similarity' (ibid).

By comparison, Rose strongly defends the emphasis on comic incongruity as a theoretical cornerstone for parody, going as far as calling Hutcheon's embracement of seriousness itself comical (1993:266). As she argues, comedy need not equal ridicule (1979: 33); and its presence need not mean that the use of parody could not 'aim both at a comic effect and at the transmission of both complex and serious messages' (1993: 29). Similarly, while criticism and ridicule *could* coexist within parody alongside a comic effect, this need not always be the case. This argument is later echoed in Phillips and Milner's claim that humour itself is fundamentally ambivalent (2017: 113). At this junction, let's follow Rose further, since the notion of comic incongruity is particularly helpful for the genre of memes.

As we strip parody of its previously hypothesised critical edge, we find that it can demonstrate creative transformation through its use of comic incongruity. As Rose explains, most successful parodies can be said to produce some comic, amusing or humorous effect from the comic incongruity between the original text and the parody text. This comic effect, together with the changes made by the parodist to the original work, may act as 'signals' of parody (1993: 45). Thus, the controlled discrepancy, or 'incongruity' between hypotext and hypertext can be identified as a key source of the comic effect which distinguishes parody from other forms of creative transformation (1993: 32). The source of humour in parodic texts may rely on contrasting the serious and the absurd, as well as the 'high' with the 'low' (1993: 33) – and, as it is often the case in meme culture, the professional and the amateur, the mainstream and the grassroots. The technological affordances of digital mediation heighten the opportunities for transmedia parody, and the convergence and multimodality underpinning internet

culture allow for the parodic juxtaposition of a vast variety of pre-existing works and themes. Of course, what actually gets juxtaposed with what is subject to countless social and cultural motivations. The relative mediocrity and ‘worthlessness’ (Summers 2020: 217), the ‘weirdness’ (Milner & Phillips 2017: 8), or the mere popularity (Hutcheon 1985: 18) of works may all encourage juxtapositions and creative play.

Broadly speaking, memes are the perfect case study for comic incongruity as they exhibit a rich variety of absurd, playful, subversive transformation. Through ambivalent parody, meme culture becomes the “breeding ground” for unlikely pairings and novel re-contextualisation: from the playful juxtaposition of Nickelodeon show *Drake and Josh* and the Kennedy assassination (fig. 26) to the exploited likeness of Radiohead’s *The Bends* album cover and Danny DeVito gargling beer foam in *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (fig. 27).



Figure 26: Gadallin (2017). 'One of the saddest days in American history'. Reddit.



Figure 27: *TheGangMakesaPodcast* (2017). 'My favourite album...'. Reddit.

While some memes follow more traditional joke formats, others become comedic specifically due to the playful incongruity they exhibit. This form of comedy hinges on an understanding of the incongruity: for example, knowing that Josh Peck is a Nickelodeon comedy actor helps one decode the first image. It allows one to understand that a screenshot of a fictional sitcom episode is contrasted with the tongue-in-cheek seriousness of the caption “identifying” Peck as news anchor Walter Cronkite reacting live to Kennedy’s assassination. Similarly, familiarity with *The Bends*’ cover photography of a CPR doll in a state of ecstasy allows one to enjoy its comic incongruity with Danny DeVito’s chaotic performance as Frank Reynolds captured in a similar body position as the album cover’s subject.

In the two examples above, the incongruity is based on the exploitation of some graphic similarity between two different hypotexts: one text resembles another, but their cultural contexts are meaningfully different, and therefore create a comedic effect is created out of their visual juxtaposition. The incongruity of the third example below – of the fictional character Babadook as a ‘queer icon’ – is more rooted in cultural context than in visual incongruity. It refers to a 2016 media event as streaming service Netflix reportedly mislabelled the horror film *The Babadook* under its ‘LGBT

Movies' section. This in turn led to the 'Babadook Is a Gay Icon' meme as online communities embraced the unlikely juxtaposition ('The Babadook' 2018). The incongruity of the image below (fig. 28) – a mashup of *Brokeback Mountain*'s film poster with its title changed to 'Brokedook Mountain' and the Babadook character visually included – plays around with this contextual incongruity.

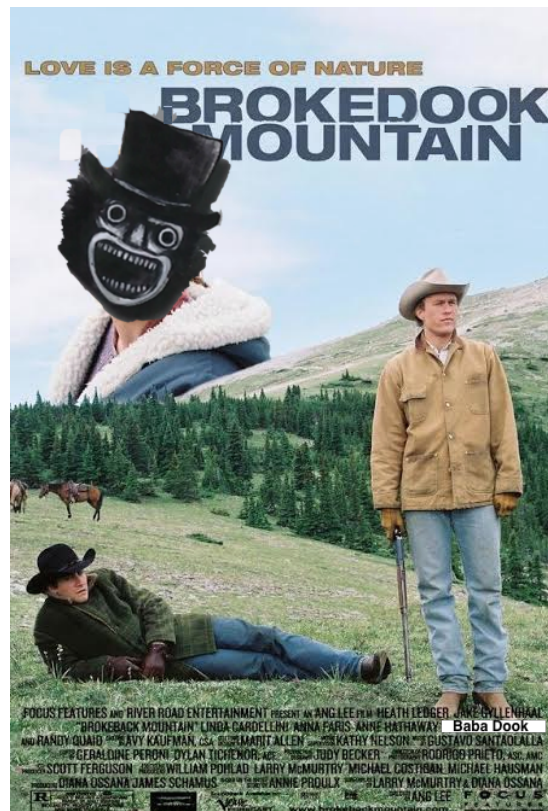


Figure 28: 'BROKEDOOK MOUNTAIN' (n.d.)

In this section I have proposed that parody lends itself well to the instances of transformation and reuse present in meme culture. As we have seen, however, this claim needs further clarification. Academic definitions of parody have called it both imitative and transformative, both critical/satirical and ambivalent; its relationship to humour and comedy has been both asserted and rejected (Rose 1993: 280-283). As Dentith puts it, the discussion of parody 'is bedevilled by disputes over definition, a fruitless form of argument' (2000: 6) – but it also illuminates the arising complexities of parody which have continuously engrossed the interests of academic enquiry. Focusing on the aspects of distance,

attitude and comic incongruity, I have explored a sample of these complexities. I have made the case for the adaptation of the approach I have called 'ambivalent parody'. This approach, I have argued, is a better fit for the understanding of online reuse than 'critical parody' is. This is for two reasons: first, because 'ambivalent parody' can better emphasise the creative potentialities of meme creation which may reach beyond the step-by-step echoing or exaggeration of the parodied works; and second, because memes as participatory works of the 'ambivalent internet' resist approaches which define parody through the primary function of critique.

In a sense, the genre of memes can exemplify what Fredric Jameson considers the "death" of parody: as he argues, in postmodernist culture 'parody finds itself without a vocation; it has lived, and that strange new thing pastiche slowly comes to take its place' (1991: 17). Jameson's theory has been connected to memes by Judith Fathallah who argues that memes, as 'blank parody', are characterised 'by surreal randomness, and the juxtaposition of signifiers with no apparent connection or meaning' (2020). I disagree. Certainly, both pastiche and postmodernism as applied to internet culture deserve their own, nuanced academic enquiries. However, I argue that parody is neither "dead" nor is it 'blank'. As seen in the next section, parody remains at the centre of negotiating copyright and everyday transformative use, which can give us a further insight into parody's relationship with memes. Afterward, the case study of 'Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life' revisits the notion of 'ambivalence' in action: not the absence of motives and meanings, but their novel, complex abundance. I argue that the 'surreal randomness' one could at first associate with the meme instead reveals meaningful parodic connections.

4. PARODY AND COPYRIGHT

As I have suggested earlier, 'parody' is not just a contested site of scholarly debate, but also a legal term which addresses transformative use in copyright law. I have noted that memes exist in a 'semiotic

limbo' as they are at once the zeitgeist of internet culture, and the countercultural playground in which media properties are misappropriated, hijacked, "stolen". This lack of clarity around what memes actually do to other texts in turn creates confusion around their legal status. YouTube in particular remains a site of content removal, Content ID checks, copyright flagging and disputes over fair use and creative transformation. The legal weight of parody as a copyright exception is notable here, both in the context of, and beyond internet culture: as a legal defence, parody can function as a claim to lawfulness online. This could, in turn, also inform and aid the negotiation of online copyright protection efforts on large social media platforms. As Aaron Schwabach rightfully notes, companies such as YouTube themselves are private enterprises and are therefore free to control the content on their servers as they wish (2012: 17). In addition, even if the terms-of-service of private companies do take cues from copyright legislation, the monopoly of American enterprises will only be informed by US copyright law. However, a broader, general understanding of transformative use in both legal and everyday contexts would also strengthen users' ability to contest copyright takedowns instead of forgoing 'legally protected creative expression' and thus creating 'diminished normative expectations' regarding the scope of fair use and equivalents (2012: 18). In other words, the interplay of academic, legal and vernacular understandings of parody can negatively affect the creative efforts of content creators and social media participants, if those understandings falsely associate otherwise transformative activities with unlawfulness.

Notably, the legal definition(s) of parody have also been subject to ongoing negotiation and re-negotiation, primarily through legal rulings and precedent – which also often invoke the familiar questions of distance, attitude, and comedy. While, as of 2023, there exists no legal precedent for memes in copyright courts, we can make use of some influential parody cases (both from the United States, and from the European Union and the United Kingdom) as a snapshot of this discourse and of its possible implications for parody's potentialities.

Parody has had a recurring role in the copyright law of European countries as well as in the United States. Some countries (such as the UK, and EU Member States France, Belgium and the Netherlands) have had explicit exceptions for parody (as well as caricature and pastiche) in their respective copyright laws (Daniël Jongsma 2017: 654). Other countries (such as the United States, Germany and Sweden) have had no dedicated separate exception, but parody has been dealt with under some other umbrella of copyright exceptions (such as 'fair use' in the US or 'free use' in Germany). Parody does not have a consistent, unambiguous legal definition, but its interpretations have had well-established approaches in different countries (2017: 653), many of which relied on familiar questions and criteria. Discussing parody's role in the copyright law of EU Member States, Jongsma lists the main historical points of debate. Some of these points have concerned lawyers more than they have concerned academics: for example, one cited criterion suggests that 'the (main) purpose of a parody should not be to compete with the original or aim to profit from its notoriety' (2017: 657), while another, less prominent one proposes that parody should not intend to harm the parodied work or its creator, and that while it could poke fun at the original, it should not be degrading or insulting (2017: 658).

These possible criteria foreground the economic and moral rights of copyright holders, which are of less interest to media studies – however, as seen shortly in the EU precedent set by 'Johan Deckmyn and Another v Helena Vandersteen and Others' (2014), these circumstances may have since become secondary or even irrelevant to current legal understandings of parody. By comparison, some of parody's other criteria have been concerned with the nature of the new work itself. First, as Jongsma notes, 'a parody must be humorous, or at least the intention should be to create a humorous effect' (2017: 655). This emphasis on intention serves to emphasise that the determination of parody's presence should not be influenced by whether it actually succeeds in its humour. On the other hand, 'some courts have acknowledged that humour is subjective and have not attached too much weight to the consideration' (ibid). And second, in a criterion which is more or less universal in the copyright law of Member States (2017: 658), we see the 'requirement to avoid a risk of confusion with the

original' (ibid). Or, as expressed for instance by the Court of Appeal of Amsterdam, a parody should keep sufficient distance from the original so that the parody is not to be regarded as a simple copy' (2017: 659-660). The notion of 'distance' is also addressed as part of Germany's 'free use' stipulation, which is described as 'such use that takes a sufficient inner distance from the earlier work (2017: 662).

The significance of these two notions ('distance' and 'humour') are further solidified in the 2013-2014 European Union court ruling for 'Deckmyn' – a case which would broadly influence EU and UK copyright law and their treatment of parody. The case concerned a calendar created by Johan Deckmyn which featured a drawing resembling the comic book *Suske & Wiske* by Willy Vandersteen (2017: 665). Transforming the drawing, its new version depicted the mayor of Belgian city Ghent with wings, throwing coins at people of colour (ibid). Understandably, the discriminatory message of the Deckmyn drawing was one 'with which the right holders did not want to be identified' (2017: 665). However, as Jongsma points out, parody is hardly always ascribed to the author of the work on which it is based, and this essentially questions 'whether there is really a legitimate interest for the right holders to object to such discriminatory messages' (2017: 665-666). The case was brought to the Court of Justice of the European Union to clarify the legal characteristics of parody. The preliminary ruling opted to consider the concept of parody as independent of national law. It argued that parody 'must be regarded as an autonomous concept of EU law', and that, following the meaning of the term in everyday language, the 'essential characteristics of parody are, first, to evoke an existing work whilst being noticeably different from it, and, secondly, to constitute an expression of humour or mockery' (2014 para. 20).

Both of these claims are significant. First, 'evoking an existing work whilst being noticeably different' once again engages with the question of distance: it emphasises that parody must be transformative in nature, as opposed to a close imitation. Second, 'expression of humour or mockery' once again identifies humour as an important characteristic of parodic works. And third, the 'or' conjunction in

'humour *or* mockery' leaves enough legal ambiguity around the exact dynamic of these two notions to suggest that parody could have varying attitudes (both critical and non-critical). Stavroula Karapapa identifies in the ruling a welcome shift in the legal assessment of parody. As she suggests, '[e]ven though mocking criticism or comic review may be perceived as parody, this is not an essential etymological constituent' (2020: 170). She argues this to be a notable change for both legal and academic frameworks, as 'the element of ridicule as a defining attribute of parody has trivialized it' (ibid). A similar argument is made by Jonathan Griffiths: 'parodies are sometimes playful and appreciative rather than antagonistic' (2017: 66). Therefore, while comedy and criticism can intertwine within parodic texts, the scope of the exception is not strictly limited to ridicule.

On the other hand, Griffiths expresses concern that the conditions of the 'Deckmyn' definition could also be easily satisfied by works which, 'in any generally accepted sense', wouldn't be considered parodies (2017: 83). As he argues, the wording of the definition leaves room for derivative works – which, for example, "'borrow" humour from the underlying work (ibid) – to slip through the cracks. As a solution, he suggests limiting the definition's scope 'to situations in which "humour or mockery" arises as a result of the transformation of the original work' (ibid; italics removed). As we have seen earlier, this exact dynamic between humour and transformation has been also emphasised by Rose and her incorporation of 'comic incongruity' into her definition of parody. As we have seen, the 'incongruity between the parodied text and its new context is (...) one of the chief sources of comic effect which distinguishes (...) parody' (1993: 32). As such, Griffiths is right: humour and transformation within parody are not independent, but closely interrelated elements.

Parody has also gained significance in the copyright discourse of the US during the past few decades. As opposed to having a separate exception for parody, US copyright law has been centred on the broader difference between derivative and transformative use, as well as on 'fair use'. Regarding the former distinction, Schwabach argues that the legal and non-legal understandings of what may be

‘derivative’ could differ. That is, since the United States Copyright Act of 1976 defines a derivative work as one which is based on one or more pre-existing works, this definition could render ‘most if not all fiction (...) derivative’ (2012: 11). By comparison, legal assessment is tasked with finding out just *how* derivative a work is – and whether it can be instead found to be ‘sufficiently transformative, as in parody’ (ibid). Regarding the notion of ‘fair use’ – an umbrella exception that can be said to cover various types of reuse (from criticism and news reporting to teaching and research) –, we can once again see that multiple criteria could affect the lawfulness of a given work. These include the purpose and character of the use ‘including whether such use is of a commercial nature’ (2012: 16); the nature of the copyrighted work; the amount of the original work used; and the market harm that the use might cause to the copyrighted work (ibid). As Schwabach explains, it is often suggested that this latter factor of economic effect should outweigh the other ones in legal decision-making (ibid).

However, the 1994 United States Supreme Court ruling for ‘Campbell v Acuff-Rose Music’ (1994) complicates this question. ‘Campbell’ concerned the 1964 Roy Orbison song *Oh, Pretty Woman* and its reworking by rap band 2 Live Crew under the similar *Pretty Woman* title, but with playful changes to the lyrics and to the instrumental (2012: 18). After its escalation to the Supreme Court, the work was deemed both an example of fair use and, additionally, an example of parody. This decision set a significant precedent for US fair use going forward. As argued by Elizabeth Troup Timkovich, ‘[t]he Court’s fair use analysis in the context of parody can be explained as shifting the primary fair use emphasis away from the fourth fair use factor (market harm) (...) to the first fair use factor (purpose of the work) (2003: 75). This newly placed emphasis on the transformative nature of parodic works could also be considered a crucial development in fair use analysis (2003: 68). Schwabach uses these developments in post-‘Campbell’ fair use to construct the hypothetical defence of the Hitler Downfall Parodies we have seen earlier on in this chapter. He argues that Downfall Parodies ‘and similar works (...) are sufficiently transformative that they are not a violation of the copyright holder’s right’ (2012: 24); and, significantly, he also adds that while not all fair uses are parody, all parody is fair use insofar

as ‘transformative uses [under ‘Campbell’] are not only not derivative, but also protected both as fair use (...), and thus not infringing’ (2012: 21). The example of Downfall Parodies is important because the only visual elements of their transformativeness are the added subtitles to the original sequence. If Schwabach is correct, we can view this as the hypothetical baseline defence for many, if not all, of the digital artefacts we have encountered thus far in this thesis.

‘Campbell’ also addresses some points which are by now already familiar to us. For example, while the 2 Live Crew parody of *Oh, Pretty Woman* can be considered to be ‘written in a “spirit of contempt” for the original’, Schwabach notes that both ‘fond parody’ and ‘hostile parody’ are equally protected under ‘Campbell’ (2012: 19). Further, humour and the distance it creates are once again identified as defining characteristics of parody: ‘[i]f a work targets another for humorous or ironic effect, it is by definition a new creative work’ (1994 para. 599).

Notably, however, the case also raises a new question about the *object* of the parodic work under the dual concepts of the ‘target parody’ and the ‘weapon parody’ (Karapapa 2020: 176). Karapapa suggests that the distinction between these two categories depends on the object of the parody: ‘target parodies’ focus on a specific copyrighted work, style, form or author; while ‘weapon parodies’ merely use a copyrighted work as a vehicle to address social, political, cultural and other issues, or to question contemporary ideas or values (2020: 176). In this context, the US Supreme Court suggested that not all parodies may in fact prove fair use. It argued that permissible parody must use ‘some elements of a prior author’s composition to create a new one that, at least in part, comments on *that* author’s works’ (1994 para. 581, my emphasis). Notably, this argument attempts to depict the two concepts – the targeting of a specific work or style, and the addressing of social, cultural (and so on) issues – as mutually exclusive categories.

The described concept of the weapon parody matches what Simon Dentith suggests is a drawing on 'the authority of precursor texts to attack, satirise, or just playfully refer to elements of the contemporary world' (2000: 9). The notion of *satire* here is significant – another term of rich academic meaning. As opposed to parody, satire is consistently defined by its critical edge, whether described as a genre of works with the aim to both critique and entertain (Dieter Declercq 2018) or to ridicule 'the vices or follies of humanity, with an eye to their correction' (Hutcheon 1985: 54). Hutcheon notes that parody and satire, while often used together, are not the same. She makes the claim that the equation of the two concepts 'seems a little too simple as an instant way to give parody a social function' (1985: 43). She advocates for the separation of the two, while acknowledging a relationship between them: '[a]lthough parody is by no means always satirical (...), satire frequently uses parody as a vehicle (...) This very definition orients satire toward a negative evaluation and a corrective intent. Modern parody, on the other hand, rarely has such an evaluative or intentional limitation' (1985: 54). Rose also argues against the amalgamation of parody and satire by emphasising that satire need not be restricted to the imitation, distortion, or quotation of other texts (1979: 44). This ties in with another distinction: parody's norms are essentially aesthetic, while satire's norms are social or moral (Hutcheon 1985: 25).

Importantly, while the equation of the two concepts does little to help a semiotic understanding of either, the same can be said for their categorical separation. Instead, they are best understood as interrelated forms. Parody has the ability to exhibit satirical undertones, and satire has the ability to make use of the aesthetics of parody to make its social critique. The multi-voiced, collective ambivalence of social media discourse further obscures these dynamics. One utterer's (presumed) satirical intent might not be the same as that of the second one's. As seen earlier, even seemingly straightforward cases – such as the meme texts deconstructing and distorting elements of *The Big Bang Theory* – hide rich, complex hypertextuality.

Another arising question concerns the number of referenced copyrighted works which may be present in the same parody. Both target and weapon parodies typically constitute a single act of reuse: one copyrighted hypotext, transformed by a single work by the parodist(s). This logic is often reflected in the binary of plaintiff and defendant, which is ultimately at the centre of most copyright cases. Here, we encounter two different problems. The first problem arises from the particular nature of memes and of participatory cultures in general: since memes as cultural works are endlessly multi-texted and multi-authored, and since the transformativeness of memes often only crystallises through their co-constructed meaning, it is possible that isolating a single artefact out of a larger trend strips it of the parodic qualities it could much better demonstrate in the context of other meme texts (possibly, from other creators). I revisit this question soon.

The second problem relates to texts which function as the parody of not a single hypotext, but many of them at the same time, all transformed by the parodist(s) to certain degrees. This is also not unusual for meme culture. Because of their combination of multiple texts, mashup works such as *Ultra Instinct Shaggy* – a playful juxtaposition of at least two hypotexts in *Dragon Ball Super* and *Scooby-Doo: Legend of the Phantosaur* – could also fall under another copyright category which appears, for instance, in Article 5(3)(k) of Directive 2001/29/EC of the European Parliament: *pastiche*.

I have earlier discussed Jameson's framework of pastiche as 'blank parody', but pastiche has itself had its fair share of academic re-definition. Genette identifies pastiche as the imitation of a style without satirical intent (1997: 25). Hutcheon also emphasises the imitative nature of pastiche, adding that 'pastiche will often be an imitation not of a single text (...), but of the indefinite possibilities of texts' (1985: 38). Booth interprets pastiche as 'the most bare-bones reflection of [affective] appreciation' (2015: 19). Recently, the UK copyright case of *'Shazam v Only Fools The Dining Experience'* (2022) defined pastiche along some of these same ideas. According to its definition, pastiche should either imitate the style of another work *or* be an assemblage (medley) of a number of pre-existing works,

and in both cases, much like parody, be noticeably different from the original work (2022 para. 188). In the case of ‘Shazam’, the court was able to apply this condition to argue that the defendants (an interactive dining show which used characters and themes from the BBC series *Only Fools and Horses*) engaged in ‘reproduction by adaptation’ (2022 para. 195) rather than transformative pastiche. This sets an interesting precedent for future understanding: even though the legal wording uses ‘imitation’ (which could suggest derivativeness), it nonetheless hints at the transformative qualities which could elevate works of pastiche above the threshold of lawfulness. This could be a significant development for the discussion of online phenomena such as fan fiction, vaporwave and the ‘creepypasta’, which often engage with existing media properties but do not usually qualify as parody.

How exactly parody and pastiche can be differentiated was likely not an urgent question for ‘Shazam’ (since both notions fall under the same legal exception), but their relationship raises interesting questions. Specifically, the understanding of ‘pastiche’ as the assemblage of multiple copyrighted texts makes it likely that many meme texts qualify for both pastiche’s criteria, and parody’s. To revisit in an earlier example, let’s imagine the legal defence of *Steamed Hams Remixes*: a meme juxtaposing a *Simpsons* mini episode with various other copyrighted works. In them, characters Skinner and Chalmers enact the events of the episode, but often juxtaposed to the form and style of other, incongruous works. In these meme texts, the plot of the sequence (Chalmers arrives at Skinner’s for a dinner invitation; Skinner burns the food and runs out to buy fast food burgers to serve at the dinner table, calls them ‘steamed hams’; he clumsily, but successfully lies his way through Chalmers’s line of questioning about what happened) is re-imagined through other styles, genres and mashup works. Legally speaking, we could disregard broader exercises in style (like *Steamed Hams but it’s a German Expressionist Film*) since, as Griffiths suggests, pastiche as an evocation of style would be of little concern to copyright law which generally does not protect creative style (2017: 85). But what about more concrete, text-focused examples?

As a first step in this thought exercise, let's indict a single meme text: a video accurately titled *Steamed Hams But It's An Opera (Don Giovanni)* (2022). The editor manipulates footage from the episode to sync it up to the piece of the musical composition; the characters open their mouths as if they were the opera performers, digital zooms and dissolves punctuate both musical and narrative moments. This text is a creative mashup of two copyrighted works: an animated series and a recorded musical performance. As the second step, let's put one more video into our legal crosshairs, this one titled *Steamed Hams But It's Filled With Memes* (2018). This text actively incorporates several video and audio assets which range from *Pop Team Epic* characters to a popular *Crash Bandicoot* animation to YouTuber Filthy Frank's greenscreen performance to *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure's* end credits song (fig. 29).



Figure 29: Lone Wind the Wolf (2018). 'Steamed Hams But It's Filled With Memes'. YouTube.

This text similarly walks through the events of the 'Skinner & The Superintendent' story, with its dialogue heavily rewritten, and the numerous non-*Simpsons* references occupying notable screen time. It is an example of what Piia Varis and Jan Blommaert discuss as a 'combined meme', in which 'features of different established memes are blended' through mashup (2014: 38). On the one hand, these texts transform more than a single copyrighted work, and could therefore fall outside of the restrictive scope of 'target parody'. On the other hand, the alternative legal category of pastiche does

not recognise the parodic nature of the texts (since pastiche is not defined by an element of humour or mockery).

In parody theory, the matter of parodying more than one source is not unheard of. Rose discusses 'double parodies' as 'practised, for example, by Sir John Squire, where one poet is rewritten in the style of another poet by a third' (1993: 41). Although belonging to a different era, *Steamed Hams But It's An Opera (Don Giovanni)* fits the idea of the 'double parody' very well. The case of *Steamed Hams But It's Filled With Memes* proves more difficult. On the one hand, its parodic treatment of *The Simpsons* is not significantly different from the previous example insofar it demonstrates distance, ambivalence and comic incongruity in its treatment of the hypotext. It also satisfies the legal definition of parody under 'Deckmyn': it evokes an existing work while also being noticeably different from it, and it constitutes humour in this process. On the other hand, many other of its referenced texts (images, GIFs, soundbites and so on) arguably receive less attention by the parodist, so the reuse of these additional works may not in all cases warrant the label of parody. The job of our imaginary legal team then concerns how each of these relevant hypotexts are treated, and whether the conditions of parody apply to their treatment.

It is possible that *Steamed Hams But It's Filled With Memes* falls under *both* parody and pastiche. This would not be a surprise for academic theory: as Rose argues, pastiche can be 'used by a parodist as a part of a parody, or some parodic elements included in the pastiche as a whole' (1993: 73). However, this approach likely isn't compatible with Jameson's pastiche as 'blank parody', which presupposes that the two notions are categorically separate. Importantly, 'Shazam' recognises the possibility of parody and pastiche co-existing in the same work as well: '[t]here may be (...) cases where the allegedly infringing work may contain elements of both parody and pastiche (...) section 30A is flexible enough to accommodate such a case' (2022 para. 191). This is a welcome addition to copyright law – although, as its condition did not apply to 'Shazam' directly, its practical application remains to be seen.

As a final cliff-hanger, let's return to an earlier point and imagine that, instead of the two Steamed Hams texts mentioned above, it is the *meme* that is indicted. That is, hundreds upon hundreds of meme texts which demonstrate collective parodic play but vast ambivalent variation as well; creators of different skill levels, sense of creativity and ethics, interests, and senses of humour; their chaotic, creative online dialogue forming endless patterns of hypertextuality and hypermediacy, which are only truly illuminated through analysis that transcends the discussion of each individual text in a vacuum. Consider parody which only reveals itself through the tapestry of the multiplicity that make up memes, and parody which is heightened or complicated by it; and which loses some (or all) its holistic transformative meaning when isolated into separate texts.

Here, we reach the edges of parody: what constitutes *enough*? It is an important question, and difficult to answer in the case of memes. Summers draws attention to a scene in *Shrek 2* where Shrek and Donkey pass a 'bush shaped like Shirley Bassey'. Summers identifies this as a throwaway joke (2020: 33-34). He then argues that such referential gags are not parodic in nature (2020: 35), though his reasoning once again is centred on an absence of satirical intention or ridicule. I opt to agree, although for a different reason: it is likely that this throwaway gag is not substantial enough in the work to meaningfully benefit from the 'parody' label. Schwabach discusses this question in relation to the meme called Philosoraptor: an Advice Animal meme template which was spliced together from several images of velociraptors into a digital collage, and thus only used tiny portions of material from the Jurassic Park franchise (2012: 8-9). Schwabach argues that the digital collage of Philosoraptor is not parody, but it is transformative (2012: 9). This suggests that the use of copyrighted material which is limited to an amount that is perceived to be insubstantial could not qualify as parody.

Meme culture, as I have demonstrated so far in this thesis, is filled with hypertextual links. Some are more substantive; others are less so; there isn't a clear line dividing them. I believe that 'parody' can

help us clarify the relationship between texts; in itself, however, it often cannot tell us where the line should be drawn. What complicates this matter further is the multiplicity of meme texts which act as the building blocks of memes. What if a reference, by itself rather brief, is used systematically across numerous texts, and it is this patterned use that reveals its parodic nature? I revisit this argument in the case study of Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life: a meme whose use of the Shrek franchise has also been called insubstantial (Summers 2020: 214). I argue that the broader understanding of memes as multi-authored, multi-texted works is important: the complex transformative relationship between the original and the parody may only truly reveal itself through the parodic analysis of multiple, interrelated texts. It is likely, of course, that such combined methods of textual and transtextual research require more effort than what the average media consumer or copyright claimant would care for. This academic setting can, however, serve as a testing ground for this approach. Let's explore.

5. CASE STUDY: SHREK IS LOVE, SHREK IS LIFE AND PARODY

For a detailed practical application of parody's lens onto memes and textual analysis, I now move to this chapter's central case study of 'Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life'. It warrants a **content warning**: my discussion of this meme and the works, styles and genres it transforms features body horror, gross-out humour, pornography, erotica, and the themes of child abuse, rape, murder and suicide. I reproduce sections of written text and image screenshots with the consideration that their analysis is necessary for my analytical investigation. In constructing my investigation, I start with a single initial question: what can parody tell us about Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life, and what can Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life tell us about parody?

5.1 'Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life' in semiotic limbo

'Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life' refers to an anonymously posted short story surfacing on the 4chan website in 2013 ('Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life' 2014); as well as the copies, sequels, adaptations, read-outs, animated videos and subsequent lore surrounding it. The written text may be best described as a 'copy-pasta': a type of post largely specific to online forums, where it is copied and pasted repeatedly by numerous users. In the case of Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life, such repetition is easily tied to the social spread of comedy: much like the folkloric re-telling of popular verbal jokes, it is such repetition that spreads the story and validates its comic effect at the same time.

The written text itself is openly comedic, although its humour is certainly divisive. Accompanied by an image of the animated ogre and broken up in the style of 'greentext stories' unique to 4chan (fig. 30), the story arguably deviates from the original Shrek franchise (Summers 2020: 208). It evokes the fictional perspective of its 9-year-old protagonist who worships Shrek religiously, only to have the ogre appear before him in his bedroom and sexually assault him before leaving through the window. The text is written in a style which blends the literary and the informal; it is riddled with grammatical errors (purposeful or otherwise); it foregrounds explicit, offensive, distasteful language. In a rather poetic turn, the narrator closes the story with the sentence 'Shrek is love, Shrek is life', a haunting refrain uttered earlier by the protagonist. While the first appearances of this story were never archived, a screenshot dating back to January 2013 has remained in circulation on the internet:

file: 1358148753159.jpg-(105 KB, 300x300, 300.shrek.forever.ir.121809.jpg)



Anonymous (ID: CBcH+zLI) 01/14/13(Mon)02:32:33 No.450921803 Replies: >>4509

- > I was only 9 years old
- > I loved shrek so much, I had all the merchandise and movies
- > I pray to shrek every night before bed, thanking him for the life I've been given
- > "Shrek is love" I say. "Shrek is life"
- > My dad hears me and he calls me a faggot
- > I knew he was just jealous of my devotion for Shrek
- > I called him a cunt
- > He slaps me and sends me to go to sleep
- > Im crying now, and my face hurts
- > I lay in bed and its really cold
- > A warmth is moving towards me
- > I feel something touch me
- > Its shrek
- > I am so happy
- > He whispers in to ear, "this is my swamp"
- > He grabs me with his powerful ogre hands and puts me on my hands and knees

- > I'm ready
- > I spread my ass cheeks for Shrek
- > He penetrates my butthole
- > It hurts so much but I do it for Shrek
- > I can feel my butt tearing as my eyes start to water
- > I push against his force
- > I want to please Shrek
- > He roars a mighty roar as he fills my butt with his love
- > My dad walks in
- > Shrek looks him straight in the eye and says. "Its all ogre now"
- > Shrek leaves through my window
- > Shrek is love, Shrek is life

>> **Anonymous** (ID: fBWBqNjg) 01/14/13(Mon)02:33:51 No.450922048

what the fuck

Figure 30: Anonymous (2013). Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life. 4chan.

The text came without an author or much explanation, and yet became immensely popular and well-known amongst online communities. Participants of various platforms were quick to spread and contribute to the joke. Further, similarly written Shrek stories appeared online, often (but not always) with similar themes of horror and sexual violence. The story later made its way to YouTube where users would record and upload their own dramatic read-outs of the story; and, later, other users would animate visuals to illustrate those dramatic read-outs. Different Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life variations on YouTube attracted views ranging from a couple of thousands to multiple millions. These varied in approach and quality. Perhaps the most iconic and well-known animated adaptation of the "original" meme text was uploaded in 2014. It combined the work of two creators, pairing user CatalystEXE's dramatic vocal performance with the hobbyist animation of user AirplaneRandy. AirplaneRandy's animation – now only available through re-uploads and archival links – would become an essential cornerstone for the meme. The same year, these visuals were re-used by user Sykotic, uploaded to

YouTube with a new narration. This version would go on to garner 12,185,040 views, as well as 136,000 upvotes on the website before its demise at the hands of NBC Universal's copyright claims – much like AirplaneRandy's own video, which itself was repeatedly removed from the website.

Just as baffling as the existence of the parody story itself was the way Shrek's new-found subcultural popularity, years after the Shrek franchise had ended, resulted in the character's further transformation and mutation. The image of the animated ogre began to transcend both its context within the DreamWorks universe and the grotesque re-appropriation of Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life, appearing in meme images and videos of various kinds. Shrek became a menacing, baffling, ever-changing meta-character on the internet. Amateur animators went on to place the ogre into endless settings and sequences. User an0nymoose's *[SFM] Shrek gets spooked*. (2013) inserted Shrek into the theme song of *The Goosebumps*. Sugarydespair's *Remember* (2016), formerly under the title *911 Never Forget*, animated Shrek singing *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* in a wheelchair before being tricked into standing up by cartoon character Jimmy Neutron and thus falling on his face. Jejkobbb's *Raising Shrek* (2019) showed the point of view of a human parent adopting and raising a tiny animated mini-Shrek. Parallel to the rising popularity of Shrek meme material, fandom for the DreamWorks film also grew significantly as Shrek memes began to influence and mix with pre-existing fandom. In many ways, Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life grew from in-joke 'coppypasta' into a cultural giant of meme culture. The phrase 'Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life' became a slogan associated with the many intertwined cultural trends around *Shrek*, and Shrek fandom persisted 'in online forums as a means of expressing genuine or sarcastic affection towards the franchise' (Summers 2020: 207).

In his chapter on the digital afterlife of DreamWorks media properties, Summers dismisses Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life as non-parody, but he does so using a framework, as we have seen earlier, which restricts parody to the stance of criticism and ridicule. In his analysis of the popular video by Sykotic, Summers largely ties this argument to the significant amount by which the meme deviates from the

original DreamWorks film. As he argues, the video ‘doesn’t immediately register as critique, much less a parody, of the Shrek franchise because it is so far removed from anything resembling an imitation of it. It doesn’t exaggerate or subvert any of the trademark elements of the original’ (2020: 209). The core argument of this analysis is true: *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* demonstrates vibrant, novel transformation rather than close imitation, thus transgressing the specific genre parody Summers advocates for. By contrast, he does consider some other examples of online Shrek content to be parodic. As he argues, the videos *Shrek’s Dank Kush* (2015) – in which Shrek drives a car and rides a T-Rex to a remix of Dr. Dre’s song *The Next Episode* – and *Shrek gets Shreked* (2015) – in which Donkey poisons Shrek with laxatives, devours his head, and then morphs into a nightmarish Shrek-faced donkey himself – are worthy of the parody label as they retain the ‘anarchic spirit of the Shrek franchise’ and display the original film’s ‘proclivity for parody’ (2020: 214).

I would argue that Summers’s distinction between these different texts, and his insistence that some are parody while one is not, is arbitrary. For one, the texts discussed by Summers are fundamentally similar to *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* in their ambivalence and ambiguity. They all employ aggressive exaggeration, odd juxtapositions and a grotesque form of humour which is inseparably embedded within meme culture and internet parody. Arguably, these texts cannot quite fit the criteria of straightforward genre parody either. Instead, it is much more likely that they evoke not simply Shrek the DreamWorks protagonist, but Shrek the meta-character: a figure taking on endless new roles and contexts in an openly self-referential manner, likely influenced by meme culture lore – including, of course, *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* itself – just as much, if not more, than by the Shrek franchise. This need not mean that the various Shrek remixes and animations are divorced from the context of the original franchise entirely; instead, we should emphasise a multiplicity of stances, motivations and cultural directions which surpass a direct line between film and fandom, film and caricature.

There is further evidence of such complexities in Summers's chosen Shrek examples. For example, he suggests that *Shrek's Dank Kush's* use of the song *The Next Episode* aligns the video with DreamWorks's reputation of 'often-unwieldy references to "hip" pop culture phenomena' (2020: 214). However, this view disregards the fact that the song itself is a largely popular meme source for its catchy beat and marijuana references and has been a staple for the meme trend of MLG Remixes (introduced in Chapter One) alongside prominent marijuana references (much like in *Shrek's Dank Kush*). Similarly, Summers proposes that the 'toilet humour' of *Shrek gets Shreked* builds on that of the original film. While this is certainly possible to an extent, this claim disregards the fact that crass humour also flourishes on the internet in general, and that its over-the-top employment in *Shrek gets Shreked* is likely also influenced by *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* (which appeared two years prior, and which kickstarted a whole wave of offensive Shrek content). In addition, if we fully embrace that *Shrek Gets Shreked* and *Shrek's Dank Kush* retain the 'anarchic spirit' of the original franchise, this tonal similarity could even work against their claim for parody. As Schwabach discusses in relation to Downfall Parodies and US copyright law, '[i]f the fan uses are consistent with the director's intended interpretation of the work, perhaps they are not transformative after all' (2012: 23).

Lastly, Summers makes the claim that *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* drastically 'shifts [the] key' of its hypotext, adopting a serious tone as opposed to the irony of the other two mentioned texts (2020: 213-214), while also leaving behind the recognisable aspects of the original film (2020: 214). In comparison to *Shrek gets Shreked* – which is set in the well-known swamp and features multiple characters from *Shrek* – this rings somewhat true. As a reminder, however, this poses less of a concern to more inclusive frameworks of parody which look beyond what Hutcheon has described as the 'step-by-step, pedestrian signaling of the entire form and spirit' of hypotexts (Hutcheon 1985: 19). The more important question regards whether *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life's* use of *Shrek* is substantial or not. To Summers, it isn't; it only features the character in a superficial, or at least largely divorced manner from his original context.

By comparison, I argue that the meme's use of *Shrek* is substantive enough to warrant a parody claim. But, as suspected, its parodic understanding benefits from the methodological consideration of memes as multi-texted works. This is perhaps comparable to a series of poems which co-construct their meaning through multi-textedness; only, as digital scholarship has to contend, the way in which these texts co-construct meaning through separate and multi-voiced artefacts requires an adapted approach from the decoder. *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* consists of many different texts which co-construct meaning together. These texts, likely by different authors, engage with motifs, themes and characters from the *Shrek* franchise to varying degrees. For instance, another popular iteration of the meme, titled *Shrek is love, Shrek is life part 2* in its written format, uses arguably more of *Shrek's* recognisable motifs, and it further blurs the line between the two worlds of "reality" and the world of the franchise:

'Its the last day of school and I'm in my last class. I'm talking to my super cool teacher. I thank him for a shrektastic year. He says "It was Charming to be with you". N-No, It can't be. I turn towards him. Its just as i suspected. It was Prince Charming this whole time. I lunged after him, trying to lodge onions in his pretty boy rectum, but it was no use. As I uncovered his anus, Fairy Godmother emerged, and puts a layer restriction spell on me. It's all ogre now. Just as I thought my last layer was being stripped from my soul, Shrek crashes through the ceiling. Yes. Without a moments hesitation, Shrek grabs Charming by the dick, rips it off, and strangles him with it. Fairy Godmother tried to fly away, but Shrek pulled out his onion-zooka. Fairy godmother burns to ashes. Shrek restores my layers, and gives me an onion. I go home with a sore anus from his massive ogre sized shaft. Shrek is love, Shrek is life.' (Space_Jam_Gov 2014)

This story variation adapts and distorts multiple characters from the *Shrek* franchise, as well as other recognisable themes and references (from onions and layers to various instances of *Shrek* wordplay). The text contrasts the story world of *Shrek 2* – in which Prince Charming and Fairy Godmother function as villains to be defeated by the titular ogre – with the pseudo-reality of the narrator's recollection of

the 'last day of school'. Even more so than the 'I was only 9 years old' story prior to it, this text offers a grotesque, self-aware magic realism, blurring the lines between Shrek lore and absurd campfire story. The Shrek of this story fulfils his duties as fairy tale hero by defeating his enemies, but this happens in an uncanny, self-aware environment outside of the hypotext's original universe. The story thus provides a unique layer of meta-commentary – although what it exactly comments on and how exactly it does so may not be immediately straightforward. The tone of the text is at once overly serious and playfully silly, juxtaposing not only incongruous themes, but tones too. In this respect, it isn't unique, as such narrative play is already present in the "first" *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* text, although to a slightly lesser degree. The menacing catchphrases of 'This is my swamp' or 'It's all ogre now' and the various referencing of humorous Shrek fan art in AirplaneRandy's subsequent animation serve as tongue-in-cheek reminders of the work's underlying playfulness.

Summers is correct in suggesting that *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* doesn't function as a straightforward mockery of *Shrek* – but, as I have argued in this chapter, most of meme culture also does not straightforwardly mock its sources. Meme analysis is faced with a multiplicity of texts within the same memes, the unavoidable co-presence of attitudes and stances, and the obfuscation of numerous cultural contexts. *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* indeed couldn't be considered parody within a framework which limits parody to the criteria of criticism, ridicule, and the mimicry of form and style. As I have proposed earlier in this chapter, however, such frameworks are rather ineffective for the semiotic analysis of memes: there is an unresolvable discrepancy between these more restrictive theories of parody, and the complex ambivalence of digital mediation and internet culture.

Subsequently, I propose that *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* satisfies the conditions laid out by the theories of Rose (and Hutcheon, to the extent that covers the ideas of 'distance' and 'attitude') to be understood as a parody of *Shrek*. It shows that it is transformative and sufficiently different from the original, and that the nature of this transformation is built on the comic incongruity between *Shrek*

and the other elements to which it is juxtaposed. But *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* isn't just the parody of *Shrek* – and much of its seemingly nonsensical world can also be explored with the lens of parody. As a way forward, I argue that the meme of *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* serves as the perfect case study for the ambivalent internet. Within it converges mockery, fandom, playful nostalgia, satirical pop culture critique, novel collective storytelling, and comedic media play. As such, it also forms a fascinating case study of ambivalent parody, and for the notions of distance, attitude and incongruity presented earlier in this chapter. For one, it demonstrates an explicit, transformative distance from its referenced text, balancing familiar cultural information in vibrant new contexts. It also exhibits a number of possible attitudes – reverent, critical or otherwise – which are inevitably obscured and merged by the process of digital mediation and the multi-voiced creative practices of online participation. And, finally, the meme is ultimately premised on comic incongruity by juxtaposing themes, styles and ideas of various kinds. As a unique slice of contemporary culture, *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* is deserving of a closer look into its inner workings of creative hypertextuality and parodic experimentation. It is my argument that the meme can and should yield multiple hypertextual readings – many of which are illuminated by ambivalent parody. The peeling back of these layers can then in turn inform a holistic approach towards meme theory.

As such, this second part of Chapter Two is dedicated to the transtextual analysis of the meme. Its case study is built on the assertions that (1) parody, understood as ambivalent, distanced, and comically incongruous transformation, has the power to account for a rich selection of hypertextual reuse; that (2) parodic expression can (and often does) reference and transform multiple works, styles and themes within the very same text; and that (3), uniquely to memes, the consideration of different texts within the same meme may re-enforce and enrich semiotic analysis.

This latter point is important because it offers new challenges and begets new approaches at the same time. While the initial, infamous *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* story (both its written version and its most

popular video adaptations) takes centre stage in my analysis, I wish to emphasise the complexity of the phenomenon. The text should be understood not in a cultural vacuum, but as part of a larger meme. The cultural significance of the text can thus only be justified in context of other variations, adaptations, re-re-appropriations. Rather than the work of a singular author, *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* is a complex set of separate, yet interrelated artefacts. All of these artefacts, as well as the cultural participation surrounding them, are equally worthy of analysis. The lens of parody here serves as a tool for unravelling, navigating and embracing this ambivalence. I am interested in more than just the creative transgressions of internet culture towards DreamWorks and its intellectual property. Instead, I am interested in *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* as a complex work in conversation with genre and style, literature and animation, cinema, and the internet.

5.2 '*Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life*' and 'greentext stories'

The comic incongruity of *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* is premised on the aggressive juxtaposition of the *Shrek* animated franchise and the unlikely adult themes of horror, sex and violence. At first glance, the recipe is clear: the meme fits the bill for the raised brows and confused chuckles of the “weird internet” (Phillips and Milner 2017: 8). An interesting – though hard to define – concept, ‘weirdness’ here describes the internet as a ‘discursive space with its own absurd logics and twisted norms’ (ibid). *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* certainly feels like it belongs in such a discussion. Part of the meme’s success and comic value is tied to its absurd nature and the shock value resulting from its disturbing juxtapositions (Summers 2020: 209).

However, while it is easy to dismiss the meme as absurd and non-sensical, upon closer investigation it becomes clear that the meme does not only reference and transform *Shrek*, but other works, styles and genres too, each providing essential hypertextual layers that inform and contribute to the world of the meme. As Phillips and Milner note regarding the proposed notion of the ‘weird internet’,

‘weirdness is a relative term; what might be indescribably weird to one person is just a Tuesday afternoon for another’ (2017: 9). In our case, the understanding of *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life*’s hypertextual layers serves to demystify this weirdness. Layer by layer, I seek to present the meme as weird, but “describably” weird: one that combines recognisable, decodable sources and influences.

The first hypertextual layer reveals the original *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* text to be not just a ‘greentext story’, but a *parody* of greentext stories as well. Greentext stories are a narrative structure specific to 4chan-like forum websites, named after the optional green text code that users may utilise in posts; and, while it has multiple functions – such as the quoting or mocking of other posts –, it is largely used for the structuring of short stories and anecdotes written by the site’s anonymous users (‘Greentext Stories’ 2012). While the exact origins of greentext stories are unknown, this genre of online storytelling was popular on the site throughout the 2010s as users engaged with the format to tell stories both real and fictional. The genre even influenced communities outside of 4chan, as subreddits and Facebook pages would repost the most entertaining anecdotes screen captured from 4chan boards (ibid).

The format of the greentext story is straightforward: it takes the simplified structure of short, concise sentences with line breaks between each of them for ease of reading (fig. 31). The ‘>’ symbol at the beginning of each line signifies quotation – and, in the case of greentext stories, a tonal shift which separates the anecdote from its surrounding text.



Figure 31: Anonymous (2012). '>Walking through uni [...]'. 4chan.

The example above presents an archetypal anecdote for the greentext format. It utilises a writing style which favours a quick summation of key information, often at the expense of literary sentence structure and grammar. The writer of the story presents their anecdote by entering the greentext format – and, in this case, exiting it too to signal the end of the story, using regular text to comment on it in hindsight. The writer situates the anecdote within the first line ('>Walking through uni') before presenting its events. The recollection sees the writer in an awkward interaction with a girl on the way to university. As an additional comment and reflection on the anecdote, the writer ironically refers to themselves as an alpha male ('Alpha as fuck'). At once, the story may function as an entertaining tale and as a personal confession – two readings which largely apply to a significant amount of 4chan's greentext stories.

The format of the greentext story enables the anecdote to stand out as a narrative, packaging it into a concise frame where it serves the specific purpose of storytelling. Mostly situated in the (real or fictional) personal lives of the writers, greentext stories may share with an online community one's private thoughts and personal struggles. These may not necessarily be real, and they may or may not be copied and pasted from other, older posts (thus becoming cypypastas). Often, they recall childhood memories in the greentext format – happy, silly and melancholic alike. These stories follow the structure of establishing time and/or place before detailing the specific memory or event (fig. 32).

Note the opening line of this post – (>be 3 years old) – in which the writer establishes their age early on in the story. This is a common way to establish story information in these anecdotes, and one which reappears in *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life*, though not in a sincere manner.



Figure 32: Anonymous (2014). '>be 3 years old/>standing in the living room [...]'. 4chan.

Just as prominently as these (seemingly) genuine instances of personal confession do, various parodies of the format also populate the 4chan platform. Parallel to more serious anecdotes, these parodies use the same format structure to present absurd, grotesque, self-aware pseudo-memories, often to defy the expectations of readers for a humorous effect. One such parody trend, the 'Mom's Spaghetti' stories use bait-and-switch humour to present an initially realistic anecdote before eventually morphing into the popular meme 'mom's spaghetti' lyrics from the Eminem song *Lose Yourself* (ibid):



Figure 33: Anonymous (2012). '>be in school/>hot girl in front of me [...]'. 4chan.

Here, the often-quoted lyrics of the popular song ('His palms are sweaty/Knees weak, arms are heavy/There's vomit on his sweater already, mom's spaghetti') are introduced as the absurd punchline to the joke: you, the reader, fell for the fake story, and are punished/rewarded by the familiar joke. The story's self-reflexivity, as well as its comic incongruity between "reality" and joke, provide the key to the parody. The bait-and-switch is set up by its opening first half, which establishes the world of the anecdote (the speaker is in school; their classmate has no underwear on) before shattering the illusion with the 'mom's spaghetti' twist. In this sense, parodic greentext stories rely on the existence of "real" ones. This context is significant because it informs the semiotic reading of *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* – which is also a greentext parody.

While the Mom's Spaghetti greentext parody discussed above distorts the digital genre by abruptly breaking its narrative world, *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* does so through the tongue-in-cheek incorporation of the supernatural. While it never quite breaks the fourth wall of the parody (which is why Summers had suggested that it had a 'serious tone'), it is notably playful and self-aware, showcasing an unhidden parodic intent as early as its performative third line: 'I pray to shrek every

night before bed, thanking him for the life I've been given'. Instead of utilising a more straightforward bait-and-switch joke structure, the text functions so well because it largely embraces the format of the greentext childhood anecdote, while at the same time increasingly distorting its story world from within. Compared to the speaker of the average greentext anecdote (true or otherwise), *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* has an explicitly unreliable narrator. From its absurd opening – a 9-year-old child worships Shrek religiously and is abused by his father for it – to its grotesque, surreal climax – Shrek in fact does appear and sexually assaults the narrator –, the writing builds an odd, alternative reality.

The humour of the text in this original setting works so well because the text presents itself as real – even though its ironically serious tone constantly signals it isn't. In one sense, the parody uses a familiar jumping-off point ('I was only 9 years old') to emulate the narrative of an actual childhood anecdote, only to juxtapose its format with comically disturbing events and themes. At the same time, the parody revels not only in its distortion of the literary narrative framework, but its specific paratextual surroundings as well. As much as the story itself playfully masquerades as a real childhood memory, the anonymous writer of the text performs the role of the adult looking back at the memory and sharing their story with the world. This is even more explicit in other variants of the text such as this one from January 2013, which starts with the grammatically lenient '>Be 9' and ends with '>He escapes out the window and I have not seem him 'till this day/>Shrek is love, Shrek is life.' (Anonymous 2013a). Interestingly, this variant is not a new story (like many others), but a rewritten version of the first one, which could suggest that, beyond copying and pasting, the "folkloric" retyping of the story is also practiced by participants.

As the story spreads in the form of the repeatedly copied and pasted copy-pasta, participants take turns in this identity play. With the creation and posting of other, similar Shrek-based greentexts, the story becomes a vibrant, ever-changing meme. Post by post, copy by copy, its participants construct and contribute to the story world of another "reality" on 4chan: one where the mythical deity of Shrek the

ogre haunts every narrator's imaginary past. The performed confessions of the greentext format significantly contribute to the effect of the meme, adding a layer of tongue-in-cheek "mock-documentation" to the story. Of course, the stories never wish to be confused for genuine posts – instead, through crude hypertextuality, they draw attention to the distance between themselves and the writing format they transform through their parody.

5.3 'Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life' and erotic fan fiction

Even if we disregard the subject matter and events presented by Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life, the meme explicitly distances itself from regular 4chan greentexts through its peculiar tone and style. While the texts do retain the line-by-line, largely informal structure of greentext stories, they also clearly exhibit the mannerisms and phraseology of a more literal (or, rather, pseudo-literal) writing style. The two examples of genuine greentexts discussed earlier on demonstrate the purposes of their writers well: these stories are to the point, use information condensed to short sentences, and state their presented events in a rather straightforward manner. Abbreviations, online jargon, casual language and the irregular use of punctuation marks or capital letters all ensure the quick and easy conveying of information. These elements serve the convenience of both the writing and reading of everyday digital texts, reducing unnecessary and thus redundant information.

By comparison, Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life revels in the use explicit literary devices and narrative techniques to present its story. In this process, the writing deliberately transcends a mere account of events, instead aspiring to literary storytelling. This is particularly evident in its use of dramatic visualisation. Compared to the to-the-point summary of events of genuine greentext posts ('>Looking at ground/>Cute girl walks towards me'), Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life engages in vivid imagery and descriptive detail for a literary effect. This is well demonstrated by another variation of the meme from March 2013, in which such stylistic techniques are prominent:

'>Suddenly the door slams open and a gust of foul air hits me

'>It's like feces, dental tartar, unwashed penis, and... onions?

>I am riveted to the chair by terror

>A huge arm rests across my shoulders, the hand lightly grips one

>He lowers his green face an inch from mine, terrible onion breath oozing forth' (Anonymous 2013b)

Here, the writer consciously engages in a variety of narrative techniques in order to tell their story – in particular, its highly mannered, euphuistic phraseology. This text transcends the functions and style of the average greentext, instead engaging in the conscious, self-aware evocation of a specific literary narrative style. The writing puts an emphasis on detailed sensory description, pushing the horrors of the story into grotesque incongruity with an ornate, almost sensual narrative tone. This tone is perhaps best described as the parodic evocation of online erotic fan fiction.

More specifically, the meme showcases the parodic reworkings of *some* tropes which are often associated with fan fiction storytelling and erotic literature. Fan fiction itself, of course, offers large stylistic variation. As Henry Jenkins suggests, fan writings build upon the interpretive practices of fan communities in generating a wide range of media-related stories (1992: 159); and while fan-written fiction predates internet discourse, the internet has allowed it to move beyond the fringe, and to be 'accessed in astonishing quantities and diversities by anyone who knows how to Google' (2006: 2). Similarly, digital platforms are crucial for establishing and maintaining fan communities too (Wolfgang Reißmann and Svenja Kaiser 2019: 141). Jenkins takes account of the various forms and functions fan fiction may have, from the repairing or developing of some aspects of mainstream texts (1992: 165)

to playful genre-shifting and 'cross-over' stories which blur the lines between different genres and texts (1992: 174) (we can see this in the initial fan mashup of Scooby-Doo and *Dragon Ball Super* prior to its transformation into a full-fledged meme). Today, there exists a long list of fan fiction tropes which 'qualify various characteristics of fan fiction stories' (Reißmann and Kaiser 2019: 142). Through these tropes, fan authors can engage in the creative exploration of the hidden details and unchronicled plot events of mainstream fiction, and open the doors to alternate endings, genre shifts and meta-commentary, as well the inevitable incorporation of recognisable characters into erotica.

The exploration of romance and erotica occupies a significant role in fan fiction: '[f]an writers, freed of the restraints of network censors, often want to explore the erotic dimensions of characters' lives. Their stories transform the relatively chaste, though often suggestive, world of popular [media] into an erogenous zone of sexual experimentation' (Jenkins 1992: 179). Often discussed as a primarily female-written and feminine cultural form, fan fiction erotica puts an emphasis on sensuality (1992: 197). Broadly speaking, erotic fan fiction may merge and utilise a variety of sources and influences, from the story worlds and characters of specific fandoms to the influences of romantic and erotic literature. These works often adapt a recognisably delicate literary style which put an emphasis on descriptive detail. The 2013 fan fiction short *Wedding Night* by fanfiction.net user Emilee-A can provide a good example of this style of writing:

'Lillian nodded. He slipped his hands underneath her back and unclipped her strapless bra. He threw it onto the floor, Harold moved his hands delicately down her sides and underneath the sides of her lacy underwear. He pulled the thin piece of fabric down her smooth, long legs and dropped it onto the floor' (2013)

Wedding Night is one of many sincere (that is, non-parodic) romantic and/or erotic stories which re-examine the characters of King Harold and Queen Lillian – characters who happen to originate from

Shrek 2, although with no connection to Shrek memes – as passionate lovers in their youth. One of countless cases of the fan-written re-contextualisation of fictional couples and character pairings, this story invites its reader to experience a re-imagined past of the royal couple, shifting genre and tone from *Shrek 2* alike. The author builds sensual tension by the detailed description of the events of their wedding night: from romantic dialogue and yearning glances between the characters to the eventual depiction of passionate foreplay and intercourse. The tactile description of the act of undressing in the quote above reflects the intentions of the story well: through its description, it evokes desire and passion, examining its characters through a lens of erotica. By comparison, one Wattpad variant of Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life, written by user Shrek-fanboy69 in 2014, presents a (somewhat) similar plot point in an openly parodic way:

‘Shrek looks at me with my dad’s head in his lap and his green hands spreading across his pretty boy neck. (...) Shrek gives me a nod of approval as I drop my Shrek pjs to the floor; it so hot, Shrek’s presence has moisten the room’ (2014)

Once again, the parody text may not quite be described as a step-by-step imitation of romantic and erotic fiction; instead, it is premised on the comic incongruity between multiple styles, contrasting descriptive detail with crude imagery as well as writing which is riddled with grammatical errors. Just as notably, *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* also showcases an explicit comic incongruity between the sensuality of erotic fiction and a much more aggressive, pornographic depiction of sexual acts. Leaving aside the violence and horror of the texts – which this chapter will return to later –, the juxtaposition of sensuality and crudeness itself already creates a notable distance between the meme and the writing style it parodies. Importantly, the explicitly pornographic language parodied by *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* may not necessarily be representative of all erotic fan fiction. In context of homoerotic ‘slash’ narratives, for example, Jenkins notes that the sensuality of stroking, fondling and so on is emphasised over the more traditionally pornographic acts of penetration and ejaculation (Jenkins

1992: 197). In this sense, it could be argued that *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* – born on a website notable for its overwhelmingly male userbase – hijacks an otherwise feminine or queer genre with its masculine portrayal of aggressive sexuality, and doing so ridicules its target (even though such critique is never truly stated explicitly). However, a categorical, gendered distinction between sensual and pornographic depictions of the sexual act could prove problematic, not least due to the vast popularity of online, female-written fiction which also balances erotica with pornography.

This balancing act is exhibited in the (heterosexual) fan fiction series *Master of the Universe* published online in the early 2010s. Written under the pseudonym Snowqueens Icedragon, the series offered an erotically charged re-imagination of the popular young adult book series *Twilight* and its protagonists Bella and Edward. Famously, the author (now under the name E. L. James) would later re-write the story as one divorced from the *Twilight* universe, publishing it as the highly successful novel *Fifty Shades of Grey*. *Master of the Universe* is premised on the sexual tension and subsequent affair of its two main characters, expressing desire and pleasure through a first person, highly sensual writing style which combines erotic and pornographic descriptions:

“You really want to do this?” he asks softly.

“Please...” I beg.

(...)

And he closes his eyes and groans... and thrusts into me again. I cry out a second time but this time he doesn't stop. He moves onto his elbows so I can feel his weight on me, holding me down. (...) I start to stiffen, he thrusts on and on... (...) [A]s he comes he calls out my name, thrusting hard and stilling as he empties himself into me' (2011: 80-81)

By comparison, here is the depiction of the sexual act at the end of *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life*:

'>He whispers in to ear, "this is my swamp"

>He grabs me with his powerful ogre hands and puts me on my hands and knees

(...)

>I push against his force

>I want to please Shrek

>He roars a mighty roar as he fills my butt with his love' (see fig. 30)

While not a direct caricature of the work, the parody text once again shows a striking similarity to the tonal depiction of the sex scene between Bella and Edward in *Master of the Universe*. Both portray their protagonist in a state of sexual submission as the object of desire – Edward and Shrek, respectively – take control of their bodies. The two texts use an evocative sensuality to depict the emotional state, pleasure and pain of their narrators. The second text juxtaposes the writing style and the events it describes: while it strongly alludes to the language of erotic storytelling, it forces this sensuality into incongruity with the hardly consensual sex between the ogre and a 9-year-old child. Thus, it transforms the genre tropes and language of erotica (the powerful man and his submissive lover, the sensual ecstasy of the sexual act) for its own parodic purposes. The transformative distance between the parody and its referenced literary style is unmistakable, and hardly subtle.

This grotesque incongruity is only further amplified by the exaggerated horror of other *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* texts. This is well evidenced by the March 2013 variation we have seen earlier. To compare, below is the first-person depiction of the protagonist's sexual climax in *Master of the Universe*: "Come for me, Bella," he whispers and I unravel at his words, exploding around him, as I reach my climax and splinter into a million pieces underneath him' (2011: 81). The meme text uses

similar tone and language – however, it does so to describe the protagonist quite literally sucked into Shrek’s urethra:

‘...my head is sucked downward, into his phallus

>the rest of my body follows suite, like a jacket turning itself inside out

(...)

>I become one with Shrek’s dick, forever trapped with billions of other lost souls inside the great Ogre’s phallus’ (Anonymous 2013b)

Key to the ambivalent parody of these texts is this overt balancing of repetition and variation. The parody is never quite mistakable for the genres and styles it re-appropriates, as its effect is specifically premised on explicit distance and incongruity. Paradoxically, the texts juxtapose writing styles in direct opposition to one another: the highly descriptive sensuality of fan fiction erotica and the to-the-point, highly casual speech of the greentext anecdote. The resulting works are not quite either. Part of the comic effect of the meme may stem from this tonal ‘uncanny valley’: too crude for one, too ornate for the other.

It is this distorted tonal and stylistic middle ground which sets the stage for *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life*’s third hypertextual layer: that of the online horror stories known as ‘creepypastas’.

5.4 ‘Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life’ and online horror

The third hypertextual ingredient in the *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* meme, ‘creepypasta’ refers to a specific genre of short horror stories circulated on the internet. Creepypasta is yet another phenomenon to emerge from the discourse of 4chan before carving out its own dedicated corner of

forums and wikis on the internet. It is a spin on the word 'coppypasta' (discussed earlier on) – its name aptly suggests at once the creepy nature of these stories and their copy-and-paste circulation online. Dating back to 2007 on 4chan ('Creepypasta' 2010) and reaching wider popularity in the early 2010s, creepypastas take the digitised form of folkloric storytelling as community members take turns telling scary stories around the 'digital campfire' (Shira Chess and Eric Newsom 2015: 78). Much like memes, the genre of creepypastas is also the product of online participatory practices. On the one hand, it digitises the age-old genre of the campfire story, while on the other hand, it transforms it to serve the specific needs and behaviours of online participants. In some cases, 'creepypasta' refers to a singular short story circulated on imageboards and forums. In other cases, it can also refer to more fragmented, highly participatory communal storytelling as participants of the "campfire story" enrich the lore of a given topic through individual contributions.

As Chess and Newsom argue in their discussion of the popular creepypasta of Slender Man, the development of creepypasta 'mirrors that of how traditional folklore has been told and performed (...). The difference is that these tales are mediated and distributed through digital technology, and being part of a community no longer means being co-located' (2015: 93). As horror tales for new audiences, creepypastas are often concerned with mythical monsters that are contemporary and digital in nature. The story *Smile.jpg* tells the tale of a demonic creature haunting a cursed image file, demanding to be spread across the internet through chain e-mails; *Candle Cove* takes the form of a fictional forum discussion about a disturbing television show, thus re-inventing epistolary horror for the online sphere; stories such as *Sonic.exe* and *Lavender Town Syndrome* report on cursed, haunted video game betas and bootlegs. Often (though not always), creepypastas appear to be told in first person: their fictional authors in these cases recall their past experiences, aiming to be perceived as marginally believable under the concept of "this happened to me" (2015: 105).

Like popular literature, creepypasta encompasses works different in style, format and quality. Not all horror tales are created equal, and not all succeed in frightening or pleasing their audiences. As such, creepypasta is subject to forms of quality control and gatekeeping within its communities. In this process, lower quality 'crappypastas' are often distinguished and separated from the rest (2015: 103). Simultaneously, creepypasta writers also engage in a form of self-policing through the use of genre parody. The wiki Trollpasta, for example, catalogues and archives those pieces of writing which mock, subvert or otherwise re-appropriate the most recognisable tropes of the genre. These too may range in approach, style, quality. 'Trollpasta' parody texts will often draw attention to and mock the perceived flaws of less successful stories. For example, mock-stories ending with the phrase 'and then a skeleton popped out' ('AND THEN A SKELETON POPPED OUT' 2010) aim to make fun of the cheap scares of low quality horror shorts; while other parodies, such as *WHO WAS PHONE?*, offer a caricature of the over-used horror twists and the broken grammar of poorly written creepypasta (Chess and Newsom 2015: 103):

'So ur with ur honey and yur making out wen the phone rigns. U anser it n the vioce is "wut r u doing wit my daughter?" U tell ur girl n she say "my dad is ded". THEN WHO WAS PHONE?' ('WHO WAS PHONE?' 2010)

This piece is straightforward mockery. It points a finger at a cliché plot twist: a previously introduced character is suddenly revealed to be dead all along. At other times, however, the tongue-in-cheek parody of 'trollpastas' is more ambivalent. Such is the case for stories containing the character of EVIL PATRIXXX, a menacing "evil" version of Patrick from *SpongeBob SquarePants*, who became a recurring meme character and mascot for the Trollpasta wiki's community. EVIL PATRIXXX is certainly not the only occurrence of the grotesque intersection of children's media (in this case, *SpongeBob*), horror, humour and parody: earlier in this thesis I presented the Don't Ask Who Joe Is meme which juxtaposed a creepypasta image from the story *Squidward's Suicide* with 'Joe Mama' jokes. EVIL PATRIXXX

presents parody with a similar purpose, and its existence could also likely be tied to works like *Squidward's Suicide*, but its parody is one which is more firmly grounded in the specific literary parody of online horror storytelling.

EVIL PATRIXXX, who 'kills many people and is immortal' ('TROLLPASTA CHARACTERS' 2012) functions as the twisted yet goofy re-appropriation of popular creepypasta villains like Slender Man or Jeff the Killer. Across over 300 stories on the website featuring the character, EVIL PATRIXXX at once occupies the roles of the threatening demonic deity of ironic horror tales, the protagonist of sprawling and vastly inconsistent fan fiction, and the non-sensical punchline of purposefully awful one-liners. In the short story *EVILL PATRIXXX'S KINGDOM OF SKELETRONS*, the evocation of the character serves to build a caricature of stereotypical horror stories:

[W]hatever you do, never help a bloody skeleton from a ouija board, you will definitely regret it.../I can hear a loud clicking sound. I hear laughter. EVIL PATRIXXX is coming...' ('EVILL PATRIXXX'S KINGDOM OF SKELETRONS' 2015).

By contrast, the trollpasta *Evil Patrixxx vs. Good Patrixxx* is a meta-fictional melting pot of influences, hypotexts and inside jokes:

'Once, dere was a good patrixxx. He was good. Then Evil Patrixxx attacked him and almost killed him. Suddenly, Good Patrixxx went Super Saiyan. But Evil Patrixxx killed him anyway. And Good Patrixxx self destructed, and only Evil Patrixxx survived the explosion. And then Evil Patrixxx flew away on Reshiram/Zekrom depending on which Pokemon Gen 5 game your playing, (Black or White) not to be seen for a long time. And Ghost Demmy popped out and flooded the Earth in explosive diarrhea.

AND THEN THEY ALL DIED' ('Evil Patrixxx vs. Good Patrixxx' 2012)

The meme of EVIL PATRIXXX is the result of messy collective storytelling; transcending the boundaries of fiction and mythos, never quite bound by narrative lore in its traditional sense. As parody, these trollpastas manipulate or outright shatter the marginal believability of the “found” horror of serious creepypasta. As a result of creative reuse, subcultural participants may twist tropes, expressions and referenced characters more and more out of their original contexts, eventually barely resembling their referenced practice of online horror storytelling. It is perhaps by chance that EVIL PATRIXXX remains quite closely tied to its specific subculture and obscurity, while *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* – which also has its own section on the Trollpasta Wiki, under the alternative title *The Tale of Shrek* – transgresses and transcends its roots in creepypasta.

And yet, *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life*’s widespread online success may very well be due to its dedicated reuse of horror tropes, and the eerie ethos of creepypasta storytelling. Many variations of the meme explicitly feature gore, violence and body horror – but even those that don’t do so nonetheless evoke the haunting atmosphere of campfire horror. In a classic creepypasta setting, the “original” short story takes place at night, as the narrator goes to sleep in their bedroom, defenceless against the forces lurking in the darkness. This breach of the safety of one’s own home – whether it is done so by a monster or an animated ogre – proves a prevalent setting for mainstream and folkloric horror alike. Specifically, the night-time encounter between children and ghosts, demons or serial killers is the recurring premise of urban legends and scary stories both online (*Bedtime, The Bad Dream, and I Met the Monster in My Closet*) and offline (*The Licked Hand, and The Babysitter*). Often, these stories utilise primal childhood fears: being scared of the dark; the monster under the bed; a nightmare that would never end.

Although it does so through the parodic mashup of erotica, greentext stories, horror and the intellectual property of DreamWorks, *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* purposefully taps into the bedtime horror narrative. The Shrek of the story is not a straightforwardly diegetic character, but a threatening

supernatural presence. He appears as a response to the protagonist's devotion and sacrifice towards him, much like a demon who is summoned – and, once summoned, he can no longer be stopped. The first-person encounter between the narrator and Shrek follows a narrative quite similar to a segment of the popular creepypasta *Jeff The Killer*, in which a young boy recalls a night-time encounter with the titular serial killer:

“I saw that for some reason the window was open, even though I remember it being closed before I went to bed. I got up and shut it once more. Afterwards, I simply crawled under my covers and tried to get back to sleep. That's when I had a strange feeling, like someone was watching me” (Anonymous 2012)

And later:

“He said, 'Go To Sleep.' I let out a scream, that's what sent him at me. He pulled up a knife; aiming at my heart. He jumped on top of my bed. I fought him back; I kicked, I punched, I rolled around, trying to knock him off me. That's when my dad busted in. The man threw the knife, it went into my dad's shoulder. The man probably would've finished him off, if one of the neighbors hadn't alerted the police.” (ibid)

Many of the narrative elements featured in *Jeff The Killer* also appear in *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life*, albeit shown through a parodic lens. Both narrators report on feeling the presence of their visitors first: the feeling of being watched, the body heat of someone in the room ('A warmth is moving towards me/I feel something touch me/Its Shrek'); both Jeff the Killer and Shrek enter and/or leave the narrator's home through the bedroom window; both stories utilise the secondary character of the father who arrives just in time to save his child in *Jeff the Killer* (but fails to do so in *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life*). Both villains physically overpower the child protagonist – only in *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life*, this

event is described through the distortion of bliss instead of the dread of the genuine creepypasta. Finally, both stories make use of eerie, recognisable catchphrases uttered by their villains. Jeff the Killer's 'Go to sleep' – a line often associated with the character in general – is brought back at the end of the short story when Jeff, now complete with a tragic backstory, attacks his own little brother in the narrative climax: "Shhhhhhh," Jeff said. "Just go to sleep." (ibid). This ending channels the performative horror of urban legends and campfire stories, whispered (or screamed, perhaps) to the audience at the end of a scary tale. *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* parodies this trope by the inclusion of multiple catchphrases, all rather silly but nonetheless still chilling. The whispered line 'This is my swamp' is lifted directly from the original *Shrek*, in which the ogre says the line hoping to protect his home from unwanted visitors; while 'It's all ogre now' refers to the marketing campaign line 'It ain't ogre... til it's ogre' of *Shrek Forever After*, as well as subsequent online Shrek fandom making use of the same pun. In their new context, both utterances are stripped of their original meaning, and become the surreal catchphrases of *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life's* horror parody.

This genre device is further exploited in other variations of the meme, as lines both from within and outside of the original franchise ('This is the part where you run away', 'Check yourself before you Shrek yourself') gain new meaning as grotesque utterances by the demonic entity. It is also key to the sound design of the 2015 indie game *Swamp Sim* – itself a horror parody of the *Slender* video game series based on creepypasta monster Slender Man – in which Shrek chases the player around the swamp as distorted, pitched-down dialogue and music from the original movie play. Here, even the most harmless lines of dialogue ('And in the morning, I'm making waffles') and song lyrics ('Hey now, you're a rock star') become tools of grotesque horror.

The dramatic read-outs and video adaptations of the greentexts consciously follow this premise of horror parody. From the earliest uploaded YouTube readings done by CatalystEXE and SgtSnuggleButt ('Shrek Is Love, Shrek Is Life' 2014) to more contemporary performances of the *Shrek is Love, Shrek is*

Life stories, the read-outs showcase a consistent use of a melancholy, serious reading voice, enriched by either sombre piano instrumentals or eerie ambient soundscapes, closely mirroring the style of creepypasta videos already popular on the platform. The earnestness of the vocal performances enhances the incongruous combination of horror and erotica, childhood memory and children's animation, lending an almost theatrical tone to the story. The performances are accompanied by characteristically haunting visuals too. One such example is CatalystEXE's use of manipulated footage from the recording of the theatre play *Shrek The Musical* (fig. 34) in videos such as *Shrek is love, Shrek is life – PART 1* (2013). Another example is YouTuber Magnus Peccatori's backdrop of a 'T-posing' Shrek silhouette hidden in the dark woods (fig. 35), included in "*Shrek Is Love, Shrek is Life*" | *Halloween Reading* (2019).

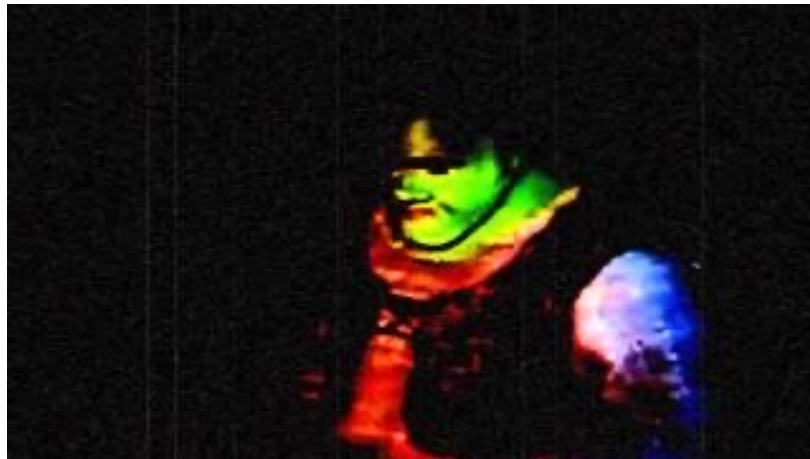


Figure 34: CatalystEXE (2013). 'Shrek is love, Shrek is life – PART 1'. YouTube.



Figure 35: Magnus Peccatori (2019). "Shrek Is Love, Shrek is Life" | Halloween Reading. YouTube.

Finally, the animated versions of the meme – specifically those made by AirplaneRandy (2013) and YoloJoe (2014; deleted but since re-uploaded by Zeyan Nadeem) – further enrich and inform the story’s parodic evocation of horror and creepypasta. The animators make no effort to hide the amateur nature of the hobbyist adaptations, instead drawing attention to it – whether through the obvious reuse of already existing character models from video games *Left 4 Dead 2* and *Team Fortress*, or the limited variety of character movement and facial expressions afforded by the Source game engine. These decisions – whether dictated by artistic choice or necessity – contribute a new, unique layer of the story, and provide uncanny, often disturbing visuals:



Figure 36: AirplaneRandy (2013). 'Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life'. YouTube.



Figure 37: YoloJoe (2014). 'Shrek is love, Shrek is life 3'. YouTube.

Here, the self-awareness of the low-cost animation amplifies the story's campfire horror through its grotesque visual presentation. The resulting videos are at once playful and haunting. They further distort the unreliable narration of their chosen Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life greentext stories through the use of surreal, dreamlike imagery. Their unique mix of comedy and horror is achieved through the unsettling look of hobbyist animation. In this effort, they follow other animated works which also blend horror with the comedic and the grotesque. One such example is horror filmmaker Jimmy ScreamerClauz's surreal extreme horror *Where the Dead Go to Die* (2012) (fig. 38); another example is the purposefully uncanny animated character Grum in the experimental comedy of *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!* (2007-2010) (fig. 39). These works, while different in their genres and audiences, achieve a similar effect in their use of amateur and/or non-standard digital animation which foregrounds the possible shortcomings of its medium for a grotesque effect.



Figure 38: Jimmy ScreamerClauz (2012). 'Where the Dead Go to Die'. DVD.



Figure 39: Tim Heidecker and Eric Wareheim (2009). 'Tim and Eric Awesome Show Great Job!'. Channel Four.

AirplaneRandy's video in particular adopts a series of techniques which complement and amplify its source material. These range from the use of unsettling close-ups on specific lines of dialogue, to the constantly floating point of view of the animation as it replicates different camera movements – mid-paced tilts, dollies, zooms alike. The last thirty seconds of the video, faithfully re-using an entire audio track originally recorded by CatalystEXE, serve as the outro to the sequence. Here, only the atmospheric piano piece is left playing, without any narration. AirplaneRandy's work leaves its characters behind for digital shots of the animated location: the Shrek merchandise-ridden bedroom,

the family home surrounded by the darkness of the night. The captions ‘It’s not ogre... It’s never ogre.’ and ‘Shrek is love. Shrek is life.’ appear on screen as the digital camera pans across the empty set pieces (2013). The most significant piece of additional story information is found here: as one shot moves across the misty exterior and trees around the house, the silhouette of a hanged man – possibly that of the father character – becomes visible (fig. 40).



Figure 40: AirplaneRandy (2013). Silhouette of hanged man in ‘Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life’. YouTube.

While no such plot point is actually mentioned in the preceding greentext, this inclusion of suicide as a resolution to *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life*'s horror is hardly out of place for creepypasta. As one example, the story *suicidemouse.avi* – in which a cursed ‘lost episode’ of *Mickey Mouse* drives a Walt Disney employee to shoot himself – captures this narrative turn very well. It is suggested that the encounter with the demonic power leaves no choice for the accidental witness of its true horror but to take their own lives. AirplaneRandy's addition of this element fits the grotesque parody of *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* perfectly as the last moments of the work linger on the horrific aftermath of Shrek's visit to the story's family. It is at once haunting and, well, silly. Here, the comic incongruity of the work is premised on the juxtaposition of vastly unplausible, ridiculous events, and the unflinching seriousness of its suggested consequences. Once again, comedic value is derived from this performative seriousness. *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* replicates the “this happened to me” illusion of genuine creepypasta but it also pushes its plot significantly beyond the plausible. The genre of horror

is never explicitly critiqued – instead, it is hijacked, transformed, re-appropriated for the creative purposes of the parody.

5.5 'Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life' and online fandom

To unpeel a final hypertextual layer of Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life's semiotic onion, let's return to Shrek itself as the centre of the meme's parody – not quite *Shrek* the film, but Shrek the cult object, complete with its surrounding media fandom. Rather than restricting itself to close imitation or mockery, the meme showcases great distance from the original animated film. However, its evocation isn't a passing reference, but an active (though hardly sincere) obsession with *Shrek*. Much like its child protagonist, the meme is obsessed with *Shrek* and its titular ogre, from the thematic religious worshipping of the character to the numerous pieces of Shrek merchandise and fan art plastered all over the video adaptation's animated bedroom:



Figure 41: AirplaneRandy (2013). Praying to Shrek in 'Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life'. YouTube.



Figure 42: AirplaneRandy (2013). Shrek fandom in 'Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life'. YouTube.

This hypertextual connection is particularly ambivalent. Regarding the meme's relationship to the *Shrek* franchise, Summers briefly notes that the protagonist's Shrek fixation 'could even be read as a satire of the franchise's fanbase' (2020: 208), though he later also admits that this proposed 'satirical strategy [is] notably simplistic' (2020: 210). Sure enough, while the meme can be said to exhibit a satirical undertone towards pop culture and mainstream fandom – after all, it is about a beloved movie character sexually assaulting a devoted fan –, this dynamic invites further analysis. I argue that there is more to it than shock value; as different attitudes towards *Shrek* as a cultural commodity converge within the Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life meme, the meme transgresses more traditional approaches towards both satire and fandom.

This ambiguity becomes apparent when contrasted with another instance of *Shrek* re-appropriation which is clearly satirical. A useful comparison is the 2007 series of mock-promos (TimAndEricVids 2014) created by comedians Tim Heidecker and Eric Wareheim ahead of the premiere of *Shrek the Third* – or, as their videos referred to it, 'S Day'. The marketing campaign by the two comedians, completely independent from official DreamWorks marketing, saw Heidecker and Wareheim engage in the tongue-in-cheek promotion of the film. They expressed their excitement for the upcoming release, urged viewers to buy tickets and visit the official Shrek movie website, appeared in front of mock *Shrek* backgrounds, and eventually attended the cinema screening dressed up as Shrek – all the

while ironically advertising other companies too from ticket vendors to Google and Papa Johns, without being paid to do so (fig. 43).



Figure 43: TimAndEricVids (2014). 'Shrek The Third Promos (Tim and Eric)'. YouTube

This series of mock-adverts revolving around *Shrek* is disingenuous, and it targets both the official, reportedly excessive promotional campaign for the film, and the consumerist culture around Hollywood filmmaking and media advertisement in general. As such, their material earns a strong claim to be called satire as it sets out to at once critique and entertain (Declercq 2018: 323), balancing the aesthetic of goofy entertainment with a moral opposition towards a larger cultural issue. In comparison, while *Shrek is Love*, *Shrek is Life* also draws explicit attention to *Shrek* as a commodity and also evokes a passionate fandom towards the franchise, this moral opposition is less apparent. Certainly, it's not impossible to suggest that the subcultural expression of meme culture would pick a fight with Hollywood consumerism and fan mentality; and yet, in the case of *Shrek is Love*, *Shrek is Life*, this critique is once again never quite pronounced. For the Tim and Eric sketches, the evocation of *Shrek* serves the specific goal of ridiculing and questioning the status quo: brand placements, star voice actors, movie merchandise. Its critique is of its specific time too, running alongside the cultural relevance of its target. For *Shrek is Love*, *Shrek is Life*, the tongue-in-cheek embracing of pop culture

fandom is never quite done from the stance of the moral critic. The relationship between the meme and its evoked subject is ambiguous. Importantly, however, this need not suggest a lack of meaning or function altogether.

Upon closer investigation it becomes clear that the evocation of fandom within the texts of the meme is a recurring motif. Many of the *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* stories are premised on the (ironic) moral and societal opposition between the Shrek fan and outsiders. This is already present in the conflict between father and son in the first text; and it becomes even more pronounced in other variations, such as the one which gained the YoloJoe video adaptation *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life 3*:


‘I was thirteen years old. It was the first day of high school, and I was very nervous. (...) I begin to walk quickly to the nearest restroom. But notice that I am being noticed by the older drek students. “It seems as though you are a little lost” says drek number one, as he walks towards me. (...) “Shrek, please help me,” I call out. But the drek boys laugh at me. “Shrek? Are you retarded kid?” drek number two asks me. Suddenly, the scent of onions fills the room. The bullies are unaware, of the shrekening that is about to occur. “Shrek is DREK, kid. I would fucking destroy Shrek,” DreK number two scolds. As DreK number three laughs, and calls me a baby’ (Church of Shrek 2015)

The story then goes on to summon Shrek to murder the group of bullies who had mocked the protagonist’s love and devotion towards the ogre. Notably, within the story world of this variation there no longer is a clear line separating reality (being bullied at school) from the supernatural (summoning a demonic animated character). The antagonists do not mock the narrator for their absurd faith in Shrek; they mock them because they consider Shrek – whatever it actually may be – weak, uncool, “drek”. In a way, the conflict of the story takes place between the fan and the “hater”; the initiated and the unsympathetic outsider. Shrek appears as a direct response to the students’

questioning of his worth, and their antagonism towards the protagonist's fandom. They are punished for this antagonism, and the protagonist is justified in their fandom: Shrek is, in fact, not drek.

The story's fascination with 'dreckness' is never actually explained within the text, but it points to the jargon of a specific subculture. The qualitative (and aptly rhyming) statement of 'Shrek is dreck' likely dates back to at least as far as 2011 (houseofwoo 2011), but it largely gained prominence as a catchphrase and running joke within the subsequent couple of years on the Shrek-themed imageboard of ShrekChan. ShrekChan, operating between 2012 and 2014, resembled the layout and discursive capabilities of other imageboards like 4chan, only it was used by a specific sub-cultural community dedicated to the tongue-in-cheek discussion of 'all things Shrek' ('ShrekChan' n.d.). Almost entirely made up of in-jokes and shock humour, the language of Shrekchan's subcultural community expressed an ironic yet passionate engagement with the lore of the DreamWorks film – and with itself as a fandom. What little is left of ShrekChan to salvage from archival sites already showcases this very well (fig. 44).

File [135838673526.jpg](#) - (129.75KB , 1000x750 , worldview-onion.jpg)



Puss in Boots 13/01/16(Wed)17:38 No. 14149 [Reply]

discuss /shr/

>> **Puss in Boots** 13/01/16(Wed)20:44 No. 14159

it's a onion

>> **Puss in Boots** 13/01/16(Wed)22:13 No. 14166

Just an onion? Do you have any idea how FUCKING DREK you sound buddy? Your lucky I'm feeling so swamped or I'd fucking rip the first layer off of your farquaad face, yeah, I know I go oger drive, but what you just said it's paramount to saying shrek is dr-, fuck you, you know what it's like.

I knew a guy once, thought just like you, little did he know that the whole time he was the biggest onion of all time. You might know him, his name is Shrek. What, you think Shrek always thought he was an onion? Don't be such a farquaad, Shrek had to learn how important onions are, he had to learn the fucking hard way why onions are the single most important thing hands down. I swear though, if you say "just an onion" I'll fucking rip your drek tube ears right off of your farquaad head.

Figure 44: ShrekChan argument (2013). ShrekChan.

The interaction shown above demonstrates a conflict between “fans” (although there is also a possibility that it is a single person in conversation with themselves). This fandom, however, is a clearly performative, ironic one: after one user fails to recognise the “significance” of a posted onion, another delivers a heated lecture. They urge the previous poster to ‘stop being a farquaad’ (villain of the first *Shrek*), call them ‘drek’ (perhaps the biggest insult to the “Shrek fan”), and emphasise the significance of the onion and the depth of its many layers (itself a *Shrek* reference, of course). The poster puts on the parodic performance of fandom along with its connotations of in-depth knowledge of the media property, a set of sub-cultural references, and a desire for gatekeeping within fan groups. This performance is shared by other users as well to larger or lesser degrees as they contribute post-by-post to an uncanny devotion towards the franchise, hardly ever breaking character. This is the case in another interaction, where a possible newcomer is surprised to take note of the ‘levels of irony’ the community engages in. The replies never acknowledge this, arguing that Shrek is ‘serious business’:

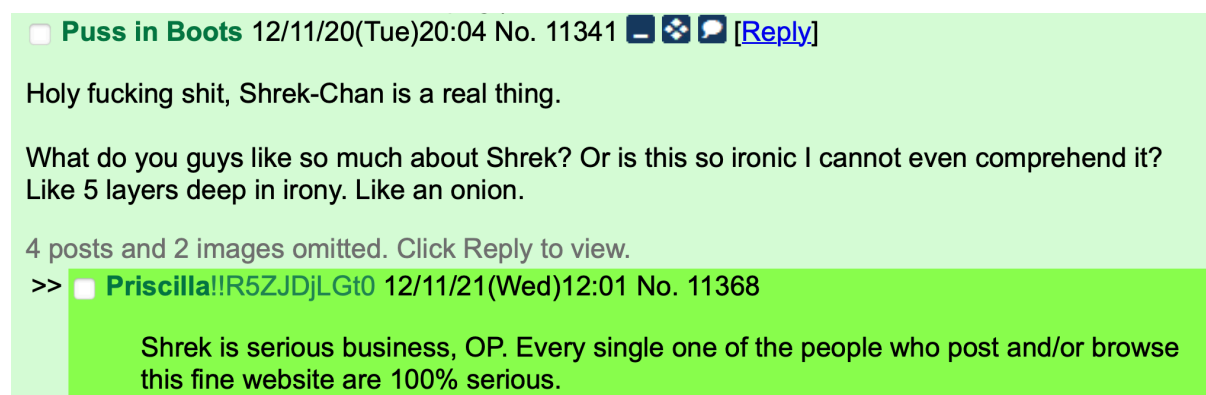


Figure 45: *Shrek is serious business* (2012). ShrekChan.

Alongside the more over-the-top or absurd confessions of love for the film, the true intentions of others on the imageboard seem less obvious. In a post which may very well have been a genuine expression of fandom, a user proudly “comes out” as a Shrek fan, showing ‘their pride for Shrek’. As this user claims, regardless of the people who mock them for their fandom, they are not a child, not gay, and not a loser – they are a proud ‘broger’. Other users show support and solidarity; and,

eventually, the user is corrected for their misspelling of 'brogre', the title adapted by the website's community (fig. 46).

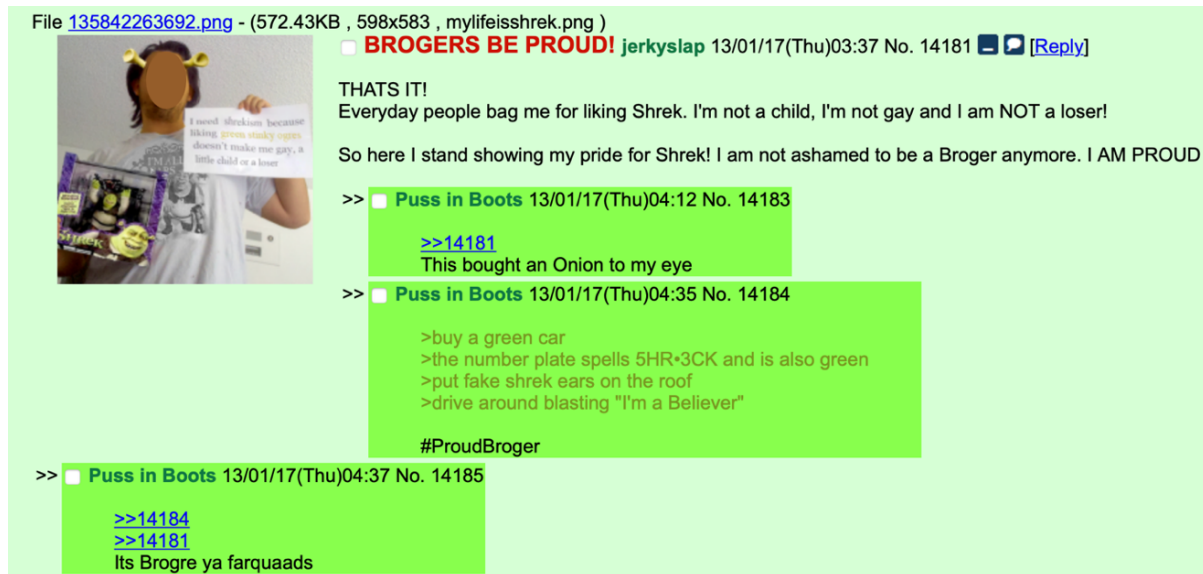


Figure 46: Proud Broger (2013). ShrekChan.

Interviewed by the Daily Dot, an ex-Know Your Meme staff member suggests that ShrekChan's 'brogre' community may be 'a subversion of brony culture, (...) taking something relatively childish with good intentions and flipping it to an ironic appreciation' (Alfonso III and Hathaway 2014). 'Brony' refers to the adult male fandom subculture of the cartoon series *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, as combined from the words 'bro' and 'pony'. While the 'brogre' subculture – genuine or otherwise – never reached the same recognition that bronies would, the concept of the devoted and likely parodic Shrek fandom itself transgressed the virtual walls of the imageboard as 'the memification of *Shrek* started to take on a life of its own' (Ella Kemp 2021).

Due to the largely ambiguous – and, ultimately, ambivalent – nature of the subculture, the dilemma around ShrekChan's fandom remains unresolved. The site was shut down in 2014 as its founder claimed 'the meme is dead' (Scott Meslow 2015). This gives a strong indication that the community itself was founded on an 'ironic' or disingenuous appreciation of the *Shrek* franchise and not an earnest

one. To note, I discuss irony and its role in everyday expression in more detail in Chapter Three; but Gregory Currie's framework of irony as pretence (2006) proves useful here already. As he argues, '[s]omeone whose utterance is ironic engages in pretence, and engaging in pretence means performing an act of some kind (2006: 123). Ironic fandom is therefore the rhetorical performance of being a fan: [i]n pretending to assert (...), one pretends to be a certain kind of person' (2006: 116). This can offer the first step to understanding the ShrekChan phenomenon: through ironic expression and pretence, members of the community perform fandom.

And yet, upon a closer look, the line between irony and sincerity begin to blur. The ironic fascination with the franchise would continue to live on in various other forms across communities. These include the ongoing engagement with the ogre in home-made animation and his prevalence in memes or fan art (much of which is pornographic); odd gatherings such as the annual Shrekfest (Summers 2020: 215); or projects such as the collective re-imagination of the first *Shrek* as *Shrek Retold* (2018), in which various creators re-create small sections of the original film, eventually 'inhabiting every inch of the spectrum between (...) irony and sincerity' (Summers, 2020: 217).

ShrekChan, brogre culture and their potential influence on other Shrek-obsessed participatory activities all invite a re-assessment of online fandom. As genuine and ironic attitudes converge within the same platforms – and, often, within the very same digital artefacts –, any lines separating these attitudes will inevitably be arbitrary. Interviewed by Summers, Shrekfest organiser Grant Duffrin suggests that Shrekfest is 'a parody of a festival while still being one' (ibid). If the same can be said about the convergence of participation on ShrekChan and beyond, the understanding of this dynamic can then inform contemporary scholarship of fan studies and parody theory alike. Importantly, this ironic fandom need not necessarily be at the expense of the original DreamWorks media property, and the distance created by its irony is much better understood as playful than critical. Similarly, the ironic appreciation of an object should by no means simply suggest 'anti-fandom' the same way that 'irony'

does not mean the simple inversion or opposite of an expression (Hutcheon 1994: 12; Currie 2011: 160). As such, the case study of brogre culture can be a valuable addition to the study of ironic fandom for its potential to, often seamlessly, transgress the duality of love and hate, critique, and admiration. In addition, the “evolution” of ironic Shrek fandom as a social practice can illuminate what Anastasiya Fiadotava describes as the ‘temporal’ dimension of ironic fandom. As she argues:

‘[T]he relationship between ironic and genuine fandoms may be considered not in oppositional, but in temporal terms. That is to say, what emerges as an ironic fandom may need to (...) develop a sense of appreciation for the fandom’s object in order to sustain itself, necessitating at least a degree of “genuinization”’ (2021: 278)

By extension, this ambivalence between pretence and sincerity can also illustrate the complex relationship between parody and pastiche. As Ruth Flaherty proposes in regards UK Copyright Law, pastiche is suitable for the understanding of fan works since fanfiction, as opposed to parody after ‘Deckmyn’, ‘is mostly created out of love and engagement with the community itself, rather than humour’ (2022: 12). Following Griffiths’s earlier concern that humour should have something to do with the transformation itself (2017: 83), we can further nuance this distinction: while parody creates comic incongruity through transformation itself, pastiche’s relationship to the referenced work could be said to be more earnest in nature (after all, works of fandom can also be humorous, without warranting a claim of parody). But it’s possible that the online participatory practices of Shrek fandom transgress these categories, and that some of its emerging works can be discussed as both parody and pastiche.

Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life is moulded by this environment of fandom and ironic fandom, performance and play. The narrative fiction of its texts is built on the performance of parodic fandom, at once reverent and frivolous, loving and mocking. Importantly, its ingredients – the identity performance of the die-hard brogre, the unflinching mock-serious tone, the pseudo-religious confidence in the object

of fandom – are all exhibited by ShrekChan’s online discourse already in the year prior to the appearance of the first greentext. Significantly, the “first” greentext itself should be considered not in isolation, but as part of a dynamic constellation of participatory expression. This progression is not simply hypothetical. As evidence, here is a story posted in ShrekChan’s ‘IRL Shrek Stories Thread Part 2’ from October 2012, months before the online appearance of the *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* text:

‘>Be 13, at a friend's sleepover.

>We finish the night of vidya by watching Shrek 1 and 2.

>Wake up in the middle of the night because someone is touching my peeny and breathing heavily down my neck. Smells like onions.

>Think it's my friend's dad, but too scared to say anything.

>Eventually jizz in my sleeping bag.

>"I hope you enjoyed this shrexual encounter as much as I did."

>See a large green figure escape through an open window.’ (Anonymous 2012a)

Here is a second one, from November 2012, from the same thread discussion:

‘>be 15 years old

>watching shrek 4 at 11pm in laptop

>crying while fapping because movie is beautiful

(...)

>spot a big shadowy figure outside

>It's shrek

- >he knocks on the door and i open
- >he hugs me and we start kissing
- >he whispers to my ear "things are getting ogre soon"
- >he takes me to my room and undresses me
- >have shreks all night, i ogreasm first
- (...)
- >wake up and he's gone
- >im an ogre now
- >shrek forever' (Anonymous 2012b)

And finally, a third one, from December:

- '>Late at night night, sitting on the couch with GF watching Shrek 2
- >the phone rings.
- >Decide to pick it up, a smell of onion goes through the phone and a raspy voice says:
- >Wtf are you doing with my daughter?
- >burst into treats realising it's Shrek.
- >go back to girlfriend, who has sliced crispy onion rings
- >Tell her it was Shreck, asking wtf you were doing with his daughter
- >Shreck is already on the couch, has turned purple
- >gf tells me his time is ogre

- >we cry and start cuddling the poor man
- >wake up, thinking he's probably gone
- >find an onion in our bedroom with a ":3" smiley on it
- >he's alive
- >start crying because of pure happiness
- >then who was fone?' (Anonymous 2012c)

This discussion thread – one of the few ShrekChan pages archived by the Wayback Machine – is a powerful rebuttal for the presumed meaninglessness of *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life*. It contains over 75 greentext stories, many of which play around with the themes I have introduced and explored in this chapter. In context of this specific discussion thread, these greentexts serve multiple functions. They all seek to at once adapt and contribute to the self-perpetuating parodic fandom of their subculture; they all playfully masquerade as ‘IRL’ real life anecdotes set within the micro-universe of their performed fandom; they all compete for the attention of their online community through the absurd subversion of various genre tropes, and an engagement with over-the-top shock humour. The first text starts off impersonating a recollection of childhood trauma, only to reveal that the narrator’s sexual abuser was Shrek. Its motifs are very much familiar by now: Shrek-based puns (‘shrexual encounter’); the smell of onions; a green figure escaping through the window. By contrast, the second text embraces and parodies the style of erotic fiction in order to describe a passionate encounter with Shrek; it performs the confession of a fan crying and masturbating to the fourth Shrek in admiration; they and the ogre end up having ‘shreks’ and an ‘ogream’. Finally, the third text presents a spin on the creepypasta parody of ‘WHO WAS PHONE’ I have introduced earlier. It combines goofy horror with subcultural lore: onions, ogre puns, and ‘crying because of pure happiness’ that their encounter with Shrek wasn’t just a dream. *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life*’s obsession with bait-and-switch anecdotes,

pornography and erotica, horror, and media fandom are all present at this early stage, and it provides significant historical context for the phenomenon: we can see the post-by-post workshopping of what would later snowball into a much larger phenomenon.

These texts are a parody of fan fiction storytelling, while, at the same time, can be said to be fan fiction themselves. United by familiar in-jokes, sub-cultural slang terminology, recurring themes and the otherworldly presence of Shrek himself, each of them reinforces the collective yet fragmented parody of the brogre fandom. Shrekchan's works, the Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life meme and the subsequent online participation of various online communities amplify and perpetuate an imaginary fandom which, ironically, may become real fandom in this process. These practices are inherently transformative: they re-imagine their object of fandom in radical ways, while parodying themselves as fandom at the very same time.

Such performed, playful fandom is not without parallel in meme culture. Recent years have seen many other examples of online communities playing with the idea of media fandom in ways which transgress the dichotomy of love and hatred. In some cases, such as the meme fandom around Marvel's 2022 box office failure *Morbius*, participation around the film resembled that of the appreciation of failed filmmaking by cult audiences, but this "fandom" did not actually translate to any sold tickets. The meme fandom of *Morbius* did not require participants to actually see the film; they simply pretended that the film was a masterpiece without ever watching it. The social media hashtag #MorbiusSweep was part of this tongue-in-cheek collective performance as participants reported on the (imagined) box office success of the film ('Morbius Sweep' 2022). In response, Sony Pictures Entertainment chose to re-release the film in theatres only to see the film's second box office failure (Adele Ankers-Range 2022), challenging the assumption that the notable amount of participation around the film would translate to box office success. In this sense, the ironic fandom of *Morbius* is quite unique: it appears divorced from the fan practices of both sincere enjoyment and contentious 'hate-watching'.

Even more removed from the claimed subject of fandom was the example of Goncharov: a performed circle of fandom originating in 2022 on Tumblr towards the Martin Scorsese-created 1970s Mafia epic Goncharov which actually never existed ('Goncharov' 2022). The meme was inspired by a bootleg brand tag – most likely a commercial hijacking of the poster for the film *Gomorra* – found on a pair of knock-off boots and resulted in a growing community of users embracing the (imagined) existence of the fake movie. Participants wrote fake film reviews, composed original soundtrack for the film, drew up posters, workshopped a full cast featuring, among others, Robert de Niro, Al Pacino and Harvey Keitel, drafted the entire plot for the fake film, created extensive fan art. The Goncharov meme gives new meaning to the term 'post-object fandom': it is fandom without a cause, participation and play for the sake of participation and play. Both examples – the fan activities surrounding *Morbius* and Goncharov – follow in Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life's footsteps in transgressing and subverting more traditional "audience" behaviour through a parodic evocation of fandom.

As a final note, we can consider Shrek the ogre himself: a character whose meaning has shifted and morphed throughout the years of folkloric re-imagining and re-appropriation of the original media property. As the self-created lore of the subculture has become richer, the original films and its protagonist have, step by step, taken on new meanings and lives in the online sphere. Years after the release of the original films, Shrek is still subject to various forms of remixing and re-appropriation in the present day, at times radically changing his interpretation. This is only further complicated by the complex attitude of the online Shrek fan: perhaps sincere, perhaps ironic in their tongue-in-cheek re-appropriation of Shrek the fan object. Through the parodic fandom, the character of the green ogre is detached from its original fictional setting and becomes the meta-character of self-aware fan fiction. In turn, the performed fascination may influence, contribute to and converge with more "genuine" fandom too. The line between "real" and "fake" fandom becomes blurred, and the "new" character of Shrek the ogre – shocking, mysterious, transgressive; himself emblematic of internet culture – gains a

new appreciation as a subject of odd videos, silly jokes, grotesque fan art, surreal literature. Shrek the animated protagonist, Shrek the demonic entity, and Shrek the meme mascot all co-exist within online culture, perceived and engaged with by different individuals at different levels. It is the fascinating example of a media property at once belonging to a multi-billion-dollar media company and to the grassroots transformative practices of meme culture.

6. CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have built a case for parody as a lens of analysis for illuminating meme culture's transformative capabilities. I have called memes and parody a 'match made in heaven', through which I have gestured towards the strong compatibility between parody as a mode of expression and the genre of memes. This compatibility is greatest in the (largely) agreed upon claims that (1) parody has something to do with comedy and that (2) parody entails some form of transformation that distances the new work from the original. I have argued that the humorous, playfully transformative nature of memes warrants exploration into their compatibility with parody. As I have explored, this enquiry also revisits pre-existing questions about parody's scope and nature. Previous connections between memes and parody have been weakened by an emphasis on 'critique' as a suggested constituent of parody. These frameworks cannot do justice to online reuse: the ambiguity and ambivalence of multi-voiced participation make the application of 'critical parody' counter-intuitive. As a solution, I have adapted a theoretical framework which does justice to the complexity of memes like *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life*. I have argued that this framework of 'ambivalent parody' can deepen our understanding and appreciation of hypertextuality in memes.

These ideas are new in their application to meme studies, but they aren't new entirely. As I have shown through snapshots of prior scholarship, the restrictions of 'critique' and the capabilities of 'ambivalence' predate the internet. My preferred approach foregrounds what Rose describes as the

creative expansion of the parodied text into something new (1993: 51). In other words, the de-emphasis of 'critique' and 'mockery' help us understand some other reasons behind parody, such as the social and cultural pleasures of media play, performance and pretence, comedy and creativity. It shifts the balance from what I see as a more restrictive, more pedestrian hierarchy of the "original" intellectual property, and the "lesser" spoof/mockery which degrades and exaggerates the former work's features. I do not mean to say that online parody cannot be critical; but much of the transformation I talk about is more complex in nature. 'Ambivalent parody' accounts for these complexities.

The case study of this chapter has followed on from these ideas. The meme of Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life exemplifies ambivalence: it is rich in variations, (seemingly) unclear in its intentions, and it feels like re-appropriation for its own sake. In other words, it is deserving of a closer look. I have utilised the ideas of ambivalent parody to engage in a transtextual analysis of the meme. Unpeeling its layers has contextualised the meme as a series of works in conversation with broader cultural traditions. Namely, I have identified the genres and practices of online horror 'creepypasta' storytelling; erotic and pornographic fan fiction; personal social media anecdotes; and passionate media. All these practices have to do with popular online cultural expression in the early 2010s: the vernacular genres of media discussion, digital storytelling and online identity play that the genre of memes has emerged alongside. Its parody is rooted in content convergence: these stories could occupy the same online spaces (forums, wikis, imageboards, social media platforms) as the objects of their parodic play. In some cases, we could infer an element of mockery, or broader satirical function in the meme which seeks to correct bad ghost stories, shameless erotica, or an uncritical devotion for popular media – but drawing the line here would sell Shrek is Love, Shrek is Love short. I have proposed that, through its parodic hypertextuality, the meme also refunctions its referenced works and genres and creates new cultural meaning at the same time.

Finally, the field of copyright law – though not always reflecting the same priorities that parody theory holds – can provide a valuable additional perspective on the growing interest in parody’s transformative power. In this discussion, I have evidenced that some of the same questions that have engrossed parody theory (whether a parody should be limited to critique, whether a parody is imitative or transformative) have also engrossed everyday and legal understandings. We have seen how developments in national and international copyright laws have adapted to accommodate a more ambivalent, wider range of creative transformation. For instance, parody under EU’s ‘Deckmyn’ will likely apply to *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life*: the meme satisfies the condition of evoking an existing work (such as *Shrek*) while also being noticeably different from it, and it also satisfies the condition of expressing humour or mockery. Similarly, the meme can also be discussed in context of parody under US’s ‘Campbell’, although this framework is more limiting. To start, the meme is clearly more transformative than it is derivative in the treatment of its referenced work(s), which makes it a strong case for fair use. On the other hand, it is less certain whether it satisfies the condition of being a ‘target parody’ of *Shrek* since its incorporation of the DreamWorks property isn’t a direct commentary on the film, and as its parodic play on *Shrek* is more vibrant in consideration of the meme’s multi-textedness than just through its most infamous, single text.

Further, while it isn’t guaranteed that parody can act as a legal blanket for memes in all cases, memes and internet culture offer excellent opportunities for revisiting familiar ideas and coming to terms with new ones. As Schwabach describes it, the internet ‘has shifted the balance of power in the dialogue between author and audience, and online fan works are an important part of that shift’ (2012: 24). A decade later, this continues to be the case. Although, whether *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* and subsequent meme participation can be called ‘fan works’ isn’t entirely clear – which is, of course, the point of ‘ambivalence’.

CHAPTER THREE: FROGPOSTING AND EVERYDAY REUSE

1. INTRODUCTION

In Chapter Two I tracked the notion of ‘parody’ across multiple disciplines and applied it to the case study of *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* to investigate the rich hypertextuality of meme culture. I built this enquiry on my previously made claim that the emergent genre of memes enables and invites creative play with other texts and media; and that these patterns of creative reuse are deserving of closer academic focus. I used parody as a tool of analysis to unravel some notable threads of my chosen case study’s colourful tapestry of cultural transformation. As a result, I visualised memes not as the non-sensical distortions as a single text by a single text, but as many texts within the same work which transform and re-appropriate various aspects of the cultural landscape around them. By extension, I advocated for the legitimacy and transformativeness of memes as creative works. In summary, Chapter Two focused on meme culture at its most vibrant: as transgressive comedy, as playful hypermediacy, as elaborate parody.

But the rabbit hole goes deeper – and the smaller, everyday acts of transformation are an essential part of meme participation as well. This thesis has so far foregrounded transformation as seen through the distorted formal properties of texts, and through the colourful end result of striking visual change. I have shown Danny DeVito’s face Photoshopped onto a Radiohead album cover; Scooby-Doo’s Shaggy joining forces with Ross from *Friends* to battle the COVID-19 virus; a *Simpsons* episode mashed up with operas, music videos and German Expressionism; the character model of Shrek engaging in unspeakable acts in the collective memory of his victims. However, I have yet to dedicate a closer attention to other types of transformation which are less immediate in their reading but are still deserving of academic focus. We saw a glimpse of such transformative acts – which I call ‘everyday reuse’ in this chapter – in the exploration of ShrekChan’s archived graveyard of forum discussions. In

this case, the meme of Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life revealed itself to be not the inexplicable transgression of a single creative voice, but a building block among many others within a growing subcultural trend. The conscious or unconscious experimentation with, and workshopping of ideas in ShrekChan's storytelling threads reveals the complex creative processes of participation.

This transtextuality, as it occurs *within* a meme, is the primary focus of this third chapter. I start with the claim that meaning already undergoes change through small instances of participation. Shifting focus, then, this chapter interrogates the everyday and the mundane: the unsung building blocks of vernacular participation which snowball into the patterns we label 'memes'. In a sense, then, this chapter both qualifies and complicates my previous discussion. I argue that meme culture can only be truly understood through an approach which considers *both* creative hypertextuality (like parody) and everyday reuse as parts of its fabric.

As a first step, I adopt the notions of 're-entextualisation' and 'resemiotisation' (Sirpa Leppänen et al. 2014; Piia Varis and Jan Blommaert 2014) which can emphasise this other side of transformation's coin: one which takes place moment by moment as online participants look at, upvote, share and repost, create and modify, use and misuse, understand and misunderstand meme texts. Subsequently, I join the discussion of scholars (such as Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon and Axel Pérez Trujillo Diniz 2018, and Anastasia Denisova 2019) who warn about the complexity of online meaning. As I explore, memes are often not the product of the organised efforts of collective online communities of like-minded users. Instead, meme participation is often messy and unorganised with no clear end goal in sight, and its participants are guided by various interests and social needs. This, however, need not mean that everyday meme participation is undecodable and chaotic to the point of meaninglessness. Instead, as Varis and Blommaert note, the consideration of everyday semiotic change as part of online transformation becomes at once 'more complicated and more intriguing' (2014: 36).

As the main contribution of this chapter, I then put these ideas into practice. Much like in the case of the previous chapter, I make use of a larger case study to develop and illustrate these ideas. But where Chapter Two took a left turn to assess the large scale hypertextual reach of a meme, Chapter Three turns right (pun intended: the case study of ‘Pepe the Frog’ ventures into territories commonly associated with the online alt-right). Pepe the Frog, often called a ‘reaction image’, has at once been a well-known, long-lasting meme with numerous variations, and an infamous cautionary tale of online meaning-making and politics. Publicly denounced by news media in 2016 as a mascot for the online alt-right, the meme was quickly reduced to a singular function of the ‘hate symbol’ in the public eye. While the meme’s problematic nature has been subject to ongoing discussion, the “Pepe the Frog problem” I focus on is different: as detailed soon enough, the label of ‘hate symbol’ is a reductive one which has served a primarily political goal as opposed to a semiotic one. As Pelletier-Gagnon and Pérez Trujillo Diniz note, the news coverage around the meme’s controversy “locked down” the meaning of the meme for both internet users and mainstream society (2018: 8). I propose that there is more to discuss about the ways Pepe is used in its everyday reuse. Without the aim to rehabilitate Pepe the Frog, my research revisits the meme in its use on post-2016 4chan – a key site associated with the meme. 4chan, looked at before but explored in detail in this chapter, is an anonymous imageboard of constantly appearing and disappearing digital discussion. This also means that images hold a heightened significance in supporting written communication. This applies to Pepe the Frog as well.

There is little research done on reaction images and their communicative and social functions in 4chan’s discourse – however, my discussion benefits from my evoked disciplines of linguistic and communication studies. With the help of comparative research done on other forms of digital communication (such as emoticons and emojis), I build the case for multiple different roles which Pepe fulfils in online use. These different roles, often co-existing in the same message, range from the communication of emotive stance and the signalling of irony to different forms of identity play and vernacular creativity. My analysis is further grounded by the data findings of my own content analysis

project which looks at digital datasets harvested in three consecutive years (between 2019 and 2021) from three selected sub-communities ('boards') on the platform. As a key part of my methodology, I make the case for qualitative content analysis which considers the use of Pepe the Frog in the units of image and the text it as used together to create meaning in each post. As I uncover throughout the case study, these elements of text and image prove to be in complex dynamics with one another – the understanding of which is essential for an understanding of the meme.

Overall, in this final chapter I seek to provide additional nuance to the recurring notions of transformation and reuse at the centre of this thesis. I argue that transformation doesn't end inside of the borders of meme texts, and that everyday participatory acts are an essential part of meme culture's fabric.

2. IMITATION VS TRANSFORMATION REVISITED

As a short thought exercise, let's revisit Richard Dawkins's idea of the 'meme'. To re-affirm, the 'meme' he is talking about is not the 'meme' I am talking about (see Chapter One), but it still has interesting implications for how we can think about cultural transformation. In Chapter One I briefly referenced an open Q&A session held at the Oxford Union in 2014 in which Dawkins summarised his research (and denied that his concept of the meme was ever intended to contribute to the study of human culture). Let's take a second look. Dawkins opens by pointing to the 'meme' as cultural inheritance: 'the act of copying an idea from one brain to another' (OxfordUnion 2014). He sets up the example of 'Chinese whispers' (or 'Telephone'): the game consisting of a line of people, and a whispered message that starts at the front of the line and goes through to the end. He notes that a message too complex would end up 'mutating', but that one which is simple enough would arrive at the other end of the room unchanged (ibid). Here, Dawkins emphasises that there is mutation that is important and mutation that isn't: 'it doesn't matter that some of us say it in an English accent and some in a Scottish

accent and some in an American accent, some in a female voice, some in a male voice. These are all trivial mutations' (ibid). He argues that these changes are not inherited with the copying of the message and are therefore irrelevant. He emphasises the one element of real significance: 'the message survives' (ibid).

Dawkins's analytical framework is binary: either the message is unchanged and therefore successful at copying itself, or it changes in a notable way through mutation. His lens is, essentially, the lens of the game of 'Chinese whispers' itself, which is only concerned with whether a specific string of words resurfaces on the other side. This example works well for Dawkins because it is simple, enclosed, and based on the rules of play: the participants only have the single purpose of accurately copying a message.

This dichotomy of success and failure – either a message survives, or it mutates – could likely be adapted by Dawkins to other contexts too. Let's consider, for example, the element of distance necessary for classifications of parody which I discussed in the previous chapter. He could call DreamWorks's *Shrek* the first utterance of a chain, and could identify the text of *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* as the (arbitrarily picked) last one. In this case, the game could conclude that the message was drastically modified, and it is therefore transformative. As a second exercise, we could put the same text of *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life* through the Chinese whispers game, but now in context of its use as a copy-paste: since it is copied and pasted, it arrives as the same string of words and therefore does not demonstrate transformation, only "imitation".

But what if we are no longer just concerned with the message itself, but the circumstances of play too? To stay within the scope of this smaller scale example of the Chinese whispers, consider the researcher who wishes to find out more about the game at hand. Who are the players, and how did they get here? Are they all happy to play? Do the players know one another, and does that affect the way they interact

within the game? Does everyone know the rules, and do they all have similar past experiences playing the game? Do they all understand the phrase they are to whisper to the same extent? These are questions irrelevant to the game master, but perhaps not to the cultural researcher.

So, what about the transformation that is disregarded by the hypothetical game master? Let's say that our message – Dawkins suggests 'too many cooks spoil the broth' (ibid) as it is quite short – does in fact reach the end and stays "intact", but some of the participants have a different understanding of what the phrase means. Maybe some of them aren't sure what the idiom is used for or have never heard it used; maybe some of them have worked in a kitchen before, an experience which affects their engagement with the phrase regardless of its deducible universal meaning; maybe some of them have seen and remember the Adult Swim sketch *Too Many Cooks* in which a fictional sitcom intro sequence ends in a bloodbath. Maybe participant number two is in love with participant number three, and their exchanged whisper has paralinguistic meaning which transcends the actual string of words uttered. Maybe participant five deliberately miscommunicates the message (which also happens in this game). And so on.

We can see an extension of this approach in digital media studies. For Limor Shifman, the meaningful distinction between transformation and imitation translates to the dynamic of memes (which are transformative) and "viral texts" (which are not). She identifies the volume of artefacts as the aspect which differentiates the two concepts: 'whereas the viral comprises a single cultural unit (...) that propagates in many copies, an Internet meme is always a collection of texts' (2013: 56; italics removed). She nuances this argument by suggesting that the 'viral' and the 'memetic' should be discussed not as mutually exclusive features, but as 'two ends of a dynamic spectrum', as purely viral content probably does not exist, and everything that is popular eventually turns into a meme (2013: 58).

The use of 'viral' here is interesting for two reasons. First, as Shifman aims to account for another popular online buzzword as used in 'viral video', 'going viral', 'viral marketing' and so on, which often denotes the success of a piece of online content in reaching many users. And second, because both Shifman's use of the word and the vernacular buzzword version are Dawkinsian in nature. While certainly not used to suggest a biological virus in the literal sense, this framing disregards human agency in cultural discourse: while memes are made and shared by people, viral texts "go viral" on their own. This matters because the ascribed "meaninglessness" of the less apparent instances of participation (such as the "mere" spread of information) limits the ways we can understand online transformation. To clarify, let's see an example:



Figure 47: cotter548 (2007). 'RickRoll'D'. YouTube.

At first glance, this image appears to be from the music video of English recording artist Rick Astley's 1987 hit song *Never Gonna Give You Up*. It isn't. It is in fact from a YouTube video titled *RickRoll'D*, uploaded by account cotter548 and accumulating over 94 million views in the last one and a half decades (2007). Disregarding the upload's 240p video quality – an element symptomatic of the early days of YouTube –, this video is identical to *Never Gonna Give You Up*. The music and the visuals are

unaltered; no manipulation, editing or hidden messages in sight. And yet, this video and its associated cultural practice of 'rickrolling' have been a widely popular, infamous staple of early meme culture. The 'rickroll' is an excellent example of technological affordances and social pleasures motivations in the dimension of time. The practice is essentially a hyperlink prank: a person in an online discussion offers a link with the promise that it's something interesting (a trailer for a new film, a celebrity's sex tape, a shocking piece of news and so on); the unsuspecting reader(s) click on the link, and they are greeted with the synthetic drums of the song alongside Astley's smile and energetic dance routine. If you fall for it enough times, the new meaning of these musical and visual elements emerges: you have been pranked, duped, 'rickrolled'.

Rickrolling raises interesting questions about the meaning we attach to some aspects of online transformation (and, perhaps, not to others). It's "meme-ness" lies in its contextual and paratextual understanding: the given online discussion in which the hyperlink is seamlessly embedded; the journey through "cyberspace" from this hyperlink to the YouTube video; the internet literacy needed to decode this bait-and-switch prank for what it is; the single clue of the title *RickRoll'D* as a paratextual reminder of what just happened. In the Dawkinsian sense, the difference between *Never Gonna Give You Up* and *Rickroll'D* is insignificant; and the copyright lawyers of my previous chapter would likely have a difficult time constructing a defence for a video formally identical to the original as well. Earlier in this thesis, I have compared the textual play of memes to Marcel Duchamp's *Mona Lisa* parody *L.H.O.O.Q.*. To continue this parallel, Rickrolling could also be seen as similar to Duchamp's 'readymades': a series of everyday found objects stripped of their original contexts through their exhibition. *Never Gonna Give You Up* undergoes change, but this change cannot be measured in image or video editing. Instead, it is re-contextualised in other significant ways. And while rickrolling may be rather idiosyncratic in its treatment (or "non-treatment") of the original music video, its implications are universal: change in context is also a change in meaning.

An alternative approach to discussing everyday transformation is offered by Henry Jenkins et al. in who suggest that 'as material spreads, it also gets remade: either literally, through various forms of sampling and remixing, or figuratively, via its insertion into ongoing conversations and across various platforms' (2013: 27). The important distinction here is that the acts of circulation are not taken as the opposite of transformation, but as part of it. Similarly, Ryan M. Milner notes that cultural participants transform texts as they share them (2016: 73). He raises the example of 'reaction shots', which broadly refer to phenomena much like Pepe the Frog: images, GIFs and so on that are reused in online written discourse as visual supplements. As Milner argues, these artefacts 'reappropriate popular media to provide social cues in mediated conversation, even as they leave the source text unaltered' through a process that is not 'the mere imitation (...) of a media text, but the reappropriation of that text for conversation' (2016: 66-67). But Milner's claim doesn't completely alleviate the tension between "meaningful" change and the suggested 'mere imitation'. For him, imitation without discernible meaning is still possible on social media, but the contextual understanding of images in conversation elevates some forms of reuse above this threshold.

Further nuance is presented by Piia Varis and Jan Blommaert. They take issue with Shifman's binary of the meme and the viral text and argue against her claim that the "mere" circulation of artefacts lacks significant change. The authors make a strong claim against Shifman's approach, arguing that 'this distinction is only valid when one focuses on a superficial inspection of the formal properties of signs. When one takes social semiotic activities as one's benchmark, however, things become more complicated and more intriguing' (2014: 36). As an alternative, they evoke two notions for further guidance. First, 're-entextualisation', which 'refers to the process by means of which a piece of "text" (...) is extracted from its original context-of-use and re-inserted into an entirely different one' (ibid). This entails different participation frameworks, different kinds of textuality and different meaning outcomes (ibid). While this notion of 're-entextualisation' stems from anthropology and discourse studies, the second one – 'resemiotisation' – originates from social semiotics (Sirpa Leppänen et al.

2014: 115). Varis and Blommaert describe resemiotisation as the process ‘by which every “repetition” of a sign involves an entirely new set of contextualisation conditions and this results in an entirely “new” semiotic process’ (2014: 36). The compatibility of the two concepts is also recognised by Leppänen et al. who discuss them as closely related:

‘While entextualization offers the analyst a tool for explaining how in social media activities discourse material originating elsewhere gets lifted out of its original context and is repositioned and remodified as a meaningful element in a new context, resemiotization focuses on the examination of the unfolding and re-articulation of meaning across modes and modalities, and from some groups of people to others’ (2014: 116).

This dual approach is then able to investigate how both material context and semiotic meaning change in the process of online social participation. This focus of analysis is valuable for the upcoming case study of Pepe the Frog, but it also applies well to some of the case studies already featured in this thesis. As a first example, consider the recently discussed YouTube upload *RickRoll'D* reusing an unedited Rick Astley music video. Here, *Never Gonna Give You Up* is re-entextualised in the context of the *RickRoll'D* video (a dedicated resource for online pranks). Its context-of-use is different and its meaning is altered as a result; its audiences and participants also engage with it in a way that is notably separate from that of the initial text. As a second example, consider the Shaggy’s Power meme from the beginning of this thesis. Here, the already existing (though relatively obscure) Ultra Instinct Shaggy remix video reached new audiences under a new title (‘The Shagster, bringer of destruction’) on a new platform (Reddit’s *r/BossFights*) a year after its creation. If we accept this moment as the anecdotal catalyst for the spread and popularity for the meme, it has to be on the terms of its new contextualisation: the same text, but packaged differently, titled differently, evaluated differently. In both of these examples, changes in contextualisation and changes in meaning both occur, and these changes can potentially tell us something about the ways that users engage with social groups and cultural information.

In other words, while memes can be said to be premised on novel transformation, just what constitutes novel transformation is less straightforward. As a first step, we can acknowledge that participation isn't simply limited to media creation, and that other types of participation such as curation, conversation and circulation are also at play (Jenkins et al. 2013: 170-171). But where does the "real", "important" participation end and the rest of it begin? In some cases, there is a clear answer put forward to this question. Ross Mayfield's model of the 'Power Law of Participation', for instance, views collaborative value creation in a hierarchy of 'Collective Intelligence' and 'Collaborative Intelligence' at the two ends of the spectrum between 'lower threshold' and 'higher engagement' participation ('Power Law of Participation' 2006). As he puts it, '[t]he vast majority of users [will] not have a high level of engagement with a given group, and most tend to be free riders upon community value' (ibid). Mayfield's focus is on online participatory activities emerging out of the early years of Web 2.0: collaborative encyclopaedias such as Wikipedia and image-sharing sites such as Flickr. He visualises this hierarchy by evaluating how "meaningful" or demanding their associated activities are:

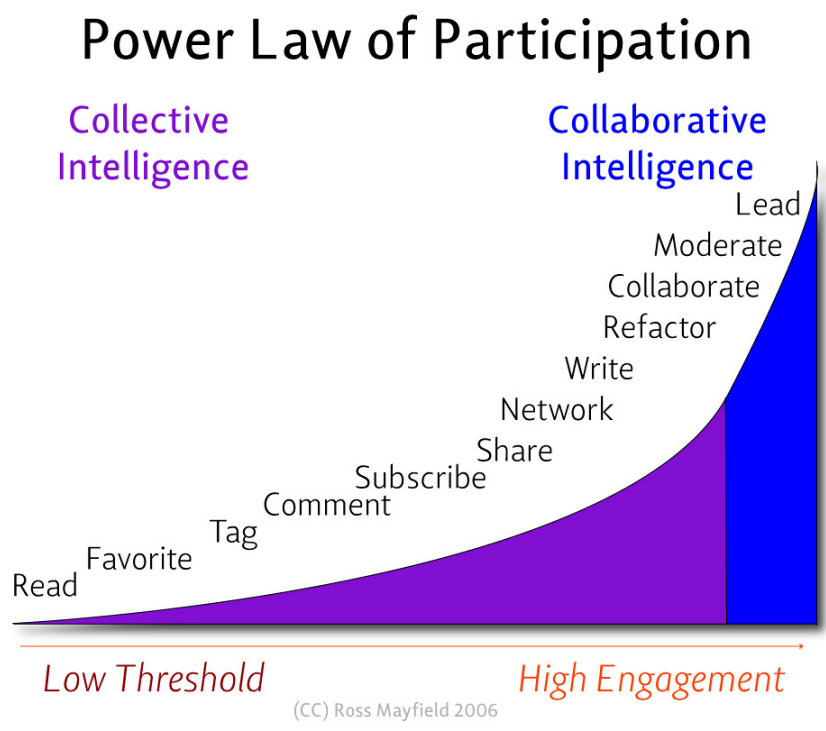


Figure 48: Ross Mayfield (2006). 'Power Law of Participation'.

Here, activities such as reading, favouriting, tagging content are discussed as ‘low threshold’ as they require less effort or dedication from participants. By comparison, ‘high engagement’ activities such as collaborating or moderating require a higher level of engagement, but also account for the ‘core of a community’ (ibid). He argues that only a small percentage of participants account for higher engagement in his discussed communities, and that most participation remains on the periphery (ibid). Mayfield’s visualisation can be useful for the consideration of different types of engagement, user interests, digital literacies and eases of access to digital technology. It is tempting to draw parallels to participation in meme culture: it makes sense that many online participants will engage in lower threshold activities such as viewing, sharing and upvoting meme texts, while other participants will engage in more elaborate activities such as re-editing, remixing, animating media content. In fact, Jean Burgess expresses a similar argument regarding vernacular creativity: ‘it is becoming apparent that participation in “user-led” content creation is very uneven: even among those who do participate there are many more lurkers than “active” participants’ (2007: 11; ‘lurker’ describing users who observe but do not engage directly in online discussion).

I am, however, hesitant to adopt the framework any further. For one, Mayfield’s line separating ‘Collective Intelligence’ and ‘Collaborative Intelligence’ categorises participation into core value and supplementary engagement, and I consider this distinction to hold little utility in the context of memes. Of course, I don’t mean to claim that higher engagement activities (such as remixing a video) aren’t often more notable for the meme analyst than lower threshold activities (such as upvoting that same video). Similarly, I also do not want to claim that different types of participation don’t have different types of impact on the way cultural meaning changes online. But, in the case of online media play, the binary of “more meaningful” and “less meaningful” would also involve having to quantify creativity – which I consider a fruitless approach. We have seen how the exchanging of offensive short stories on ShrekChan informed the text now called *Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life*; and how a well-placed

Reddit comment combining Dragon Ball lore with Shaggy's speech pattern then became a widespread catchphrase driving the Shaggy's Power meme forward. Meme culture can only ever be accurately understood as the dynamic interplay of these, and all other related activities. And similarly, while Mayfield's framework seeks to understand the collectively (or individually) generated value of wiki-esque encyclopaedias or image hosting sites, I would argue that meme culture participants don't fit the bill for this metric. Simply put, the participants of meme culture often do not follow an objectively discernible, consistent value system (such as the enriching or upkeeping of 'collective intelligence'); and, instead, their cultural practices are often contradictory, messy and unorganised with no clear end goal in sight.

This last point closely relates to another academic conflict around everyday participation: 'collectivism'. Milner, for example, discusses the notion in relation to 'linguistic pre patterning' in which users make sense of and re-create content by following a shared understanding of the language of memes. He calls this the 'memetic lingua franca' (2016: 109). He argues that participation is gatekept by collective precedent, and that 'proficiency in fixed conversations and contexts is required for entry into the discussion' (ibid). These claims are useful for the pinpointing of social structures and governing digital etiquette of online communities, alongside other biases and inequalities. However, it also suggests that meme culture has a mutually understood set of goals, motivations and semiotic structures. Anastasia Denisova challenges Milner's claim. She argues that, even amongst 'digitally savvy' users, memes may not be universally understood: 'memes are coded messages and therefore can be confusing for various people: members of the audience may have varying abilities and skills to read the 'code'' (2019: 32). "Perfectly" decoding memes could then depend on the knowledge of a variety of cultural, social, political and internet-specific contexts.

This same problem arises from Shifman's definition of memes as groups of cultural artefacts that are 'circulated, imitated, and/or transformed' by internet users, 'created with awareness of each other'

(2013: 41). The phrase 'awareness of each other' optimistically assigns a collective authority to meme culture, in which memes appear as organised movements. However, just because an extensive knowledge of transtextual relations may help online meaning-making processes, this does not mean that all users engage with memes in an organised or identical way. By comparison, Denisova puts forward the notion of the 'meme divide', which suggests that 'memes can impede the inclusivity of communication' (2019: 32). She argues that the issue of the 'meme divide' could question 'the legacy of memes as the mutually understood lingua franca' (ibid).

Questions of both temporality and spatiality further complicate this question as well. For one, while the conscious or unconscious gatekeeping of online expression (such as what's funny and what isn't – see my Ronaldo and Facebook Mom examples in Chapter One) is certainly ingrained into the social structuring of both online and offline spaces, this doesn't mean that all online spaces are governed by the same set of rules. Just in English language contexts already, different platforms (from 9GAG to Tumblr to 4chan) or even within the very same platform (exemplified by, for instance, the 'alt TikTok'/'straight TikTok' communities) may have different sets of social structures, cultural understandings, biases, and their own specific forms of gatekeeping memes. Opening up the international "borders" of other language communities and platforms, as well as the temporal dimension of continuously changing trends and standards, introduce further variables. These framings of collectivism are then at risk of oversimplifying the communicative and semiotic processes involved in meme participation.

This ties in with a powerful observation made by Sam Hinton and Larissa Hjorth in their discussion of social media: that '[r]ather than "one" internet, there are multiple, intersecting imaginings and understandings of the internet that are informed by the user's background and experiences' (2013: 7). This is very important. It enables us to consider any given user's experience as informed by endless variables of experience, skill and knowledge. Much like the internet is experienced in endless ways,

then, memes are understood and misunderstood, noticed and ignored in endless ways too. Meaning-making of meme culture can therefore only be imperfect – both from the standpoint of the scholar and the everyday user. From these circumstances, patterns of social structuring emerge. Similarly, while the notion of a ‘meme literacy’ (Shifman 2013: 100; Milner 2016) is potentially useful in identifying some of the digital and cultural skills that may be used to decode memes, I argue that a perfect meme literacy cannot exist. As users navigate online spaces, their perception of memes is constantly informed and challenged; different users experience not the same, but different memes and meme texts. Consequently, much like there is not one internet but many, there is not one meme culture either, but many.

The case study of Pepe the Frog reflects this idea of the messy internet. As I soon demonstrate, my platform of focus – 4chan – is often reduced to a single voice or ideology in public discourse; and the meme itself is often reduced to just a couple of possible meanings or functions. There is some truth to this but, of course, the rabbit hole goes deeper. As I uncover, the meme is used in a variety of interconnected ways. However, the co-presence of functions (analogous to the co-presence of attitudes which describe the ‘ambivalent internet’) does not mean that there are no answers to be found. If one extreme is the oversimplification of the meme’s everyday functions, the other extreme is to point toward ambivalence and shrug. I seek a path in-between. I am concerned with patterns of digital expression, and the findings which emerge from their analysis. To this end, I look at the meme and its use in everyday online discourse, and I use the analytical tools and underlying frameworks so far discussed to examine the meme through a fraction of its many contextualisations.

3. A BRIEF HISTORY OF A DISGRACED MEME

Pepe the Frog has been one of the most persistent memes of the last decade and a half, first appearing on the internet as early as 2008 and making its way into the news labelled as a symbol of hate in 2016,

almost a decade after its birth as a meme. Mainstream media coverage – which has significantly informed the public understanding of the meme – understandably paid little attention to the meme before this controversy, but news reports grew in number significantly during the 2016 presidential election. This also became a turning point in the meme’s semiotic treatment. The aim of my historical summary below is three-fold. Next to providing context ahead of my content analysis case study, I am also interested in the meaning-making efforts of mainstream coverage on the meme, as well as the scholarly dilemmas and concerns which have been raised in response.

Originally an anthropomorphic frog character in *Boy’s Club*, a 2005 comic by artist Matt Furie, the image of Pepe was lifted from the original work and recycled in the online discourse of 4chan’s /b/ (Random) board (‘Pepe the Frog’ 2015). The vectorised, coloured image of the frog would subsequently spread across the site, and, eventually across social media from Reddit and Tumblr to Instagram and Facebook (ibid). The image in question, showing the frog with a smile on his face alongside the speech bubble ‘feels good man’ (fig. 49), entered the subcultural use of 4chan participants ‘who started remixing both the phrase and the face in 2008’ (Sean T. Collins 2015). The image soon left behind the specific context of Furie’s comic narrative and was transformed into a ‘reaction image’ used in support of written text in online discussions. The image, like reaction images often are, was used in discussion as an additional, visual aid to support written messages – which is significant on imageboards like 4chan which utilise anonymous posting and quickly disappearing conversations.



Figure 49: Feels Good Man frog (n.d.)

Defying its existence as a single purpose reaction image, however, Pepe the Frog soon became more than the 'feels good man' frog, and instead turned into a recurring character, re-drawn into various emotional states. Sad, angry, smug versions of the frog would appear as Pepe took on more and more roles in online communication, now expressing a wide variety of facial expressions and other contexts (ibid). These versions of the meme offered new meanings to be used and re-used in conversation, all united by the recognisable visuals. Instead of relying on the original artwork, users would freely develop and re-create the image to take it in new directions. As its popularity grew across different communities and social media platforms, users would create hundreds, then thousands of variations of the frog – these ranging from well-drawn and creative to amateurish, quickly edited images. Pepe would be dressed up in costumes and Photoshopped to impersonate celebrities.

As the frog grew into an unofficial "meme mascot" to connect the users of online communities, the very act of posting/making/collecting variations of the meme became a running joke on its own. Next to its regular use as a reaction image, the meme also transcended this role to fulfil a variety of other roles in digital culture. By 2014, users would be routinely building their own collections of Pepe variations ('Pepe the Frog' 2015). 4chan's /r9k/ (Robot9001) board started referring to some of the variations as 'rare Pepes'. Users established a tongue-in-cheek online market to trade and sell rare

Pepe and invented the Pepe Cash cryptocurrency. One specific rare Pepe (fig. 50) sold for 1 million Pepe Cash (around \$3,500) in the online market exchange (Jay Hathaway 2017). By around 2016 4chan also saw the establishment of the parody religion 'the cult of kek' (Emma Grey Ellis 2018) which combined the ancient Egyptian frog god Kek with the popular 4chan slang 'kek' (an alternative to 'lol') and the Pepe the Frog meme.



Figure 50: 'MYLITTLEPEPE' (2016). Rare Pepe Directory.

As the popularity of the meme increased, Pepe got his own accounts and subreddits on Facebook, Tumblr and Reddit; at the same time, celebrities and companies started to acknowledge the meme and sharing Pepe posts, ranging from pop stars Katy Perry and Nicki Minaj to the UK Russian Embassy and the restaurant chain Wendy's. In response, some 4channers hoped to take back the meme from its mainstream popularity and growing 'normie' (the uninitiated everyday user) fanbase by inserting the frog into inappropriate, sexual or violent scenarios under the 'poo poo pee pee' trend ('Pepe the Frog' 2015). In these images, Pepe committed murder and sexual assault, complete with various

depictions of scatological imagery. Through these efforts, they may have hoped to make the frog unmarketable for mainstream, 'normie' communities. And while such a change in the public perception of the meme was indeed brought on eventually, it was due to a different reason: the widespread media coverage and public scrutiny of Pepe the Frog as an image associated with Donald Trump and the emerging alt-right, which led to the induction of the meme by the Anti-Defamation League into their database of hate symbols in 2016, and resulted in the since infamous narrative of a meme fallen out of favour.

In October 2015 US presidential candidate Donald Trump retweeted a Pepe version of himself on his official Twitter page. In the midst of the pre-election period, both the Hillary Clinton campaign (Adi Robertson 2016) and news organisations were quick to investigate the possible ties between Pepe the Frog and Trump and, subsequently, Pepe the Frog and the political right. Within a year, the meme which had persistently existed in various forms for practically a decade – with little to no mainstream media coverage – suddenly became a centre of attention. An article titled 'How Pepe the Frog Became a Nazi Trump Supporter and Alt-Right Symbol' by *The Daily Beast* discussed Pepe's turn into a 'socially unacceptable' meme as a calculated move by a smaller sub-community within 4chan. It referenced an inside source who described the appearance of controversial and radical political Pepes as 'an actual campaign to reclaim Pepe from normies' (Olivia Nuzzi 2016). As the article suggested, there may have been a mixture between those 4channers that genuinely embraced right-wing ideology, and those that engaged with far-right imagery out of jest. Either way, the plan to alienate Pepe the Frog continued to succeed, and there were plenty of controversial variations to report on. Below is a variation we revisit later in this chapter, seen depicting a Nazi Pepe complete with uniform, armband, gun and a Swastika background:



Figure 51: Nazi Pepe variation (n.d.)

In the same year, *BBC News* published an article reporting on the Anti-Defamation League's choice to add Pepe the Frog to its database of hate symbols (BBC Staff 2016). The entry on the ADL website acknowledged that the exact uses of the image and its variations would require a nuanced interpretation. It first described how users placed 'the frog in a variety of circumstances and saying many different things' ('Pepe the Frog' 2016), then pointed to the websites 4chan, 8chan and Reddit 'which have many users who delight in creating racist memes and imagery' (ibid). It explained that a 'subset of Pepe memes would come into existence that centered on racist, anti-Semitic or other bigoted themes' (ibid). The entry also mentioned that the 'majority of uses of Pepe the Frog have been, and continue to be, non-bigoted'; and that due to this, 'it is important to examine use of the meme only in context' (ibid). Classifying Pepe as a hate symbol in this database motivated further discussion of the meme by news outlets. An article from the same year by *The Guardian* compared Pepe the Frog to the swastika, arguing that the swastika itself was also a pre-existing symbol before being appropriated by the Nazi regime (Oren Segal 2016). The article suggested that the corruption of the meme was due to 'the rise of the so-called "alt-right", a loose network of white supremacists,

mostly online, who seek to infuse American conservatism with racism and antisemitism'; and, later, that 'Pepe the Frog became an unofficial mascot for many on the alt right' (ibid).

The use of Pepe as a mascot in the 2019 Hong Kong protests (fig. 52) was considered the beginning of a 'redemption arc' by some (India Bourke 2019; Robertson 2020), brought into contrast with the controversy around the meme in Western culture. Notably, however, the stance that Hong Kong protesters would use the meme "despite" its infamy naively disregarded the cultural evolution of Pepe in countries outside of the U.S.-centralised narrative constructed around the meme. As Gabriele de Seta explains in the book chapter 'Pepe Goes to China, or, the Post-Global Circulation of Memes', Pepe had already found his way to Chinese social media platforms years before its contested political interpretations (2019: 391).



Figure 52: Hong Kong protest Pepe variation (n.d.)

More recently, it has been suggested that Pepe's growing popularity as an 'emote' in Twitch chats could also mean a notable change in Pepe's meaning, as the meme's 'political significance appears to have been casually discarded by Twitch's (...) users (...) who have effectively re-stolen the work from the original thieves' (Martin Anderson 2022). According to this *Unite.AI's* article, this noticed shift in

meaning might not be enough to be recognised by future research: since existing NLP ('Natural Language Processing') research projects in open source repositories would have already categorised Pepe emotes and images under 'hateful' or 'right wing' for their sentiment analysis, it is likely that '[l]ater NLP projects may not choose to audit the older data's currency; may not have any practical mechanism to do so; and may not even be aware of the need' (ibid). This means that, even if evidence of other meanings could be found, the routine interpretation of these signs would still be effectively "locked in" to describe hate speech.

The original creator of the character, Matt Furie took a clear stance regarding the Trump/alt-right controversy and engaged in a variety of ways to "reclaim" Pepe as a peaceful image. These ranged from multiple, privately settled copyright infringement lawsuits (Michael Kunzelman 2018; Kayla Epstein 2019) to the 'Save Pepe' crowdfunding campaign and related Twitter hashtag #savepepe which urged the public to make peaceful Pepe variations (Christopher Mele 2016). Furie also "killed off" his original creation by depicting the death of Pepe in a new comic (Samuel Osborne 2017), even though the functions and meanings of the character's likeness had been out of his hands for more than a decade. The proclaimed "death" of the meme was an ideal conclusion to the larger public narrative – less so in truly believing that Furie's action would put a stop to the hateful misuse of his character, and more so in suggesting that Pepe the Frog had been irreversibly lost to the alt-right altogether. The documentary *Feels Good Man* (2020) offered a further look at Furie's ongoing conflict with the legacy of his creation. A film review for the documentary by *The Verge* titled 'Pepe the Frog died, and part of the internet died with him' considers Pepe part of the 'collateral damage' brought along with 4chan's white nationalist ideology (Robertson 2020). A paragraph recalled with nostalgia how Pepe the Frog was 'becoming part of the language of the internet' (ibid) before it ended up in dark places.

By contrast, scholarly discussion is quick to point out the lack of authority Furie holds. Giacomo Bianchino, for example, suggests that Furie's role as the creator in a struggle against his own creation

is clearly overstated. According to Bianchino, Furie ‘makes the mistake of believing that changing the original meaning of the [meme], or silencing it, will put an end to the chain of substitution that he himself inaugurated’ (2019: 385). Denisova also points to the futility of “killing off” the original character and suggests: ‘there is no evidence that less memes with Pepe the Frog are produced after Furie’s statement’ (2019: 30). It is good to assume that Furie’s actions were not dictated by an imagined control over internet culture at large, of course, and that they simply reflected his personal struggle with the wider political landscape and his own role in this cultural event. Admittedly, my own discussion in this chapter cares much less about Furie than news reporting and mainstream coverage did. For the extensive news coverage, Furie likely served multiple purposes: he was the everyman grounding an otherwise absurd phenomenon; he was the closest person to the meme who could be interviewed; and the re-appropriation of his original work could translate to the dual framing of internet’s two evils – hate speech and copyright infringement – at the same time.

In contrast to the *Verge* article, *The Washington Post* had already chronicled the downfall of Pepe in 2016. Their article, which looked back on the early years of the meme and suggested that ‘[t]here were *then* many other Pepes’ (my italics), continued to say that ‘the “rare” Pepe joke had given way to “Nazi” Pepe, at least for now’ (Ohlheiser 2016). According to this public narrative, the once complex meme had lost its versatility in favour of a singular meaning (and a rather destructive one at that). By 2017, Pepe became a disgraced meme, and a taboo in mainstream discourse: from Zara clothing items recalled from production due to public backlash (Elena Cresci 2017) to people with a Pepe sign removed from a public audience (Nathan Grayson 2018), the meme was now fully associated with the alt-right.

In their journal article ‘Colonizing Pepe: Internet Memes as Cyberplaces’ Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon and Axel Pérez Trujillo Diniz suggest that it was likely the news coverage and subsequent ‘toxification’ of the meme themselves that truly cemented the association of Pepe the Frog as a controversial figure

(2018: 7). They make the additional claim that the meme's public controversy may have influenced a growth in the production of controversial variants of the meme. As they argue, the coverage 'turned it into a host for alternative right-wing ideology, traveling much more widely and affecting a much larger Internet and mainstream media demographic than it could ever had through traditional methods' (2018: 13). This accelerationist dynamic between mainstream media and internet subcultures is not unique to Pepe the Frog. As Whitney Phillips aptly suggests in context of 4chan's 'trolling' practices, 'trolls and sensationalist corporate media outlets are in fact locked in a cybernetic feedback loop predicated on spectacle; each camp amplifies and builds upon the other's reactions' (2015: 52). Attempting to solve the chicken-and-egg question of Pepe the Frog's ties to dedicated right wing groups is likely arbitrary, however. For the purposes of my own research, what is important to highlight is the semiotic framing of the meme: a public perception which seeks to make sense of complex online participation through the electoral binary of contemporary US politics.

At the centre of the Pepe the Frog controversy lies a semiotic misunderstanding: the assumption that Pepe the Frog, as a 'symbol', can be assigned a singular meaning. The meme and its hasty labelling is discussed by Denisova who notes that, unlike singular icons or symbols, memes are constantly evolving, fluid, and ambiguous (2019: 29). She makes the argument that when journalists rushed to write about Pepe the Frog as a hate symbol, 'they made a crucial mistake of the offline world: they attempted to fix the meaning that was not fixed' (ibid). Similarly, Pelletier-Gagnon and Pérez Trujillo Diniz argue that the Pepe the Frog itself is a 'fluctuation of meaning', and that the meme 'always refers to the multiple interpretations that populate its memetic space' (2018: 10). This isn't unusual for meme studies, of course – I have noted earlier in this thesis that researchers need to be alert to the existence of meme texts in a multiplicity of contextualisations and variations. Pelletier-Gagnon and Pérez Trujillo Diniz argue for the socio-political significance of such an approach as well: they understand Pepe the Frog as a contested site that is hijacked and repurposed according to the various

ideologies of participants (2018: 4). Most importantly, they also argue that the label of a single symbol is problematic:

'The problem with a symbolic approach to Internet memes is that their multiplicity in terms of differing representations and meanings is hard to capture under a single symbol. It is extremely difficult to establish a single symbol that represents Pepe the Frog, for (...) [it] is constantly being altered and repurposed. (...) It is constantly shifting in its representations or images, as well as its meanings.' (ibid).

My contribution takes the semiotic problem of Pepe the Frog as a starting point for an exploration of transtextuality and discursive play. I follow on from the grievances raised by Denisova, and Pelletier-Gagnon and Pérez Trujillo Diniz to ask: if the meaning-making approach emerging from the public narrative around Pepe the Frog doesn't accurately reflect its online use, is there one that does?

It is a trick question. There is not a single answer for it, but many; and these answers depend on many variables. As I suggested early on, my introduction to Pepe the Frog meme on these pages has been guided by the public rhetoric of 2010s Western media and could therefore never claim itself a holistic overview of the meme. For one, Pepe the Frog has seen use in international communities outside of majority English speaking countries and has been subject to academic enquiry for its role in Hong Kong (de Seta 2019; Katrien Jacobs et al. 2023) and Finland (Jonne Arjoranta and Johannes Koski 2018). But even within English language use, the meme and its functions have ranged vastly under the affordances and restrictions of different social media platforms. As it stands, the frog has been spotted on Twitter (Valentine Crosset et al. 2018), Facebook (Gabriel Weimann 2021), YouTube and Twitch (Pavel Dolin et al. 2021; Daniel Jurg et al. 2022) and so on. These accounts not only document meme participation across the political spectrum, but also illuminate the different ways in which the meme can function (as profile pictures, chat emotes, emojis, reaction images and so on).

Further, while the meme is often associated with its infamous “birthplace” of 4chan, 4chan itself is not a singular community either, and its different thematic boards such as /pol/ (Gabriel Emile Hine et al. 2017; Marc Tuters and Sal Hagen 2019; Dillon Ludemann 2021; Thomas Colley and Martin Moore 2022) or /b/ (Michael Bernstein et al. 2011; Tanner Higgin 2013; Asaf Nissenbaum and Limor Shifman 2015) have warranted dedicated research projects. Finally, let’s add time into our consideration: the ever-changing flow of cultural discourse, further and further nuanced and altered by new re-textualisations and resemiotisations. Two pieces of research conducted years apart may not yield the same results – and this likely applies to two pieces of research conducted a day apart as well.

At the same time, as I have suggested earlier, the awareness of these complexities by itself isn’t enough. While fractions of digital discourse under a researcher’s microscope cannot provide conclusive evidence about the meme at large, they can serve as valuable samples for the interpretation of its crystallising patterns. Facing these variables, a similarly broad, but perhaps more pragmatic question is this: what can a sample of the everyday use of Pepe the Frog tell us about online communication and digital culture?

4. METHODOLOGY (AND WHY ONE MATTERS)

My research takes me to Pepe’s “original” stomping grounds on the 4chan imageboard. My enquiry is grounded less in political theory and the study of hate speech – compared to, for example, work done by Hine et al. (2017), Tuters and Hagen (2020), Jeffrey Demsky (2021), Diana Rieger et al. (2021), or Colley and Moore (2022) –, and more in an intersection of cultural and communication studies. 4chan has been considered a hotbed of meme participation (Phillips 2015: 21). This has been at least partially due to the unique affordances and limitations of the imageboard website format: user anonymity, the ephemerality of posts, and the co-dependence of image and written text which emerges from the first

two conditions. Depending on the rules of each of the website's (current count of) 75 thematic boards, users can engage in conversation through written posts, uploaded images or a combination of the two. This "syntactical" dynamic between image and text has implications for everyday meaning-making on the website. Through variation and repetition, memes become 'pillar[s] of familiarity' to overcome 'the gulf created by anonymity and temporality' (Lee Knuttila 2011: 10). The site also offers an alternative to other social media in that there is no evaluative interaction system (such as upvoting and liking posts) besides replying (Hine et al. 2017: 6). These conditions heighten the importance of image attachments in the flow of communication.

The emerging notion of the 'reaction image', which suggests a link of utility between online conversation and meaning conveyed through images, becomes important here. Variations of Pepe the Frog have fallen under the 'reaction image' label ('Pepe the Frog' 2015) for their use in portraying specific emotions in response to something that has been said ('Reaction Images' 2011). Similarly to 'hate symbol', though, 'reaction image' is also limiting: it suggests a straightforward hierarchy between digital communication and its use of graphical structures. As suggested by Colley and Moore in their assessment of academic challenges for studying 4chan, the connections between images and text are not fully understood (2022). And yet, Pepe the Frog has been in use on the website for a decade and a half, and (at the time of this thesis submission) it is still in use today. I am interested in finding out why.

I am guided by the following research questions: *In what ways can the meme be said to function on the platform at the time of this research, and how do those functions seem to be negotiated by its participants? What is the semiotic relationship between written text and image, and what are best practice methods for finding out? And finally: In what ways is the meme transformed, re-entextualised, and resemiotised through the everyday reuse of digital participation?*

4.1 Methodology and related work

To seek answers to these questions, my enquiry takes the form of qualitative content analysis – ‘a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use’ (Klaus Krippendorff 2004: 18). Core to my case study is the harvesting, coding and interpreting of digital data from 4chan. In this effort I join a handful of research projects which have engaged with data analysis on the website, though with different aims, methodologies and scopes.

Depending on the focus of these studies, they work with differently sized datasets. On the shorter end, Nissenbaum and Shifman discuss memes as ‘cultural capital’ (2015) through the lenses of grounded theory and netnography, analysing 840 thread discussions from the /b/ (Random) board (although Pepe the Frog isn’t part of their highlighted examples). Colley and Moore use qualitative discourse analysis on a single thread discussion amounting to 333 posts from /pol/ to highlight emerging challenges ahead of future research (2022). Much larger datasets are presented by Bernstein et al. (2011), Hine et al. (2017), Rieger et al. (2021), and Ludemann (2021), but their approach is primarily quantitative in nature. Bernstein et al. use content analysis on over 482,500 threads to quantify ephemerality and anonymity on /b/ but do so without capturing images (2011: 53). Hine et al. harvest over 256,000 threads (again, without images), and analyse their content related in particular to hate speech and ‘raids’ (in which 4channers swarm and disrupt other platforms) in a quantitative manner (2017). Ludemann’s study scrapes over 200,000 threads from /pol/ (2021) to conduct a general enquiry on the board’s ‘flag’ feature (which is used and abused to communicate nationality or political affiliation). Finally, Rieger et al. conduct quantitative content analysis with a focus on hate speech across multiple platforms and communities, which also includes a dataset (again, without images) of over 15,000 /pol/ posts (2021).

My own research lands somewhere in-between: I use content analysis on five smaller datasets captured between 2019 and 2021, with the overall data scope of 11,199 scraped thread discussions. On one end, this scope is enabled by generous resources (such as the time scale of my full-time Postgraduate studies); on the other end, it is limited by the nature of qualitative enquiry itself. As Marilyn Domas White and Emily E. Marsh put it, qualitative research focuses ‘on the uniqueness of the text and [is] consciously aware of the multiple interpretations that can arise from a close perusal of it. The need for close, reiterative analysis itself usually limits the size of the sample’ (2006: 36). In other words, my interest in everyday text and context warrants a methodology which is aided by technology but is ultimately conducted by the researcher as ‘the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis’ (Sharan B. Merriam and Robin S. Grenier 2018: 5). This approach is particularly important for my intentions of understanding meaning in digital communication, especially as my units of analysis aren’t just images *or* written texts, but image-text pairings which convey meanings together. This method is explored by Marsh and White who note that pictures on the internet are often used in combination with (written) text, and as such can be subject to analysis which either looks at the pictures by themselves or at the relationships between the two (2006: 27; 2003). The latter approach is significant for my case study; and, as seen in my analysis, the difference that this transmodal approach offers to the meme’s meanings is very significant.

The qualitative process is inherently reliant on the experiences and biases of the researcher, but at the same time allows for an interpretive approach towards data analysis which quantitative measuring wouldn’t fully include. As I have suggested throughout this thesis, an understanding of meme culture will benefit from nuanced meaning-making methods. One quick example is provided by Pelletier-Gagnon and Pérez Trujillo Diniz regarding the ‘smug’ variation of Pepe the Frog, which ‘can be interpreted as Pepe grinning to show intellectual approval, but it can also be seen as an antagonist smirk’ (2018: 9). Phillips makes a similar observation regarding 4chan’s language use – specifically, the term ‘fag’ which has seen consistent use on the platform but is so deeply embedded in its slang that

its use often transcends hate speech. As she argues, '[d]epending on the context, "fag" – whether used as a suffix or as a noun – can function as a homophobic slur, a term of endearment, or a mode of self-identification' (2015: 55). These are meaningful variables on coded meaning within data points that otherwise look similar; they deserve a closer look. Similar cases are peppered throughout my later discussion of findings: frogs in happy embrace which either signify kinship or used ironically to mock; frogs with a female appearance which can either suggest sincere self-identification or disingenuous identity play; frogs which are first exchanged as creative resources and are later used to convey new meanings in conversation. It is through the method of manual analysis that some new patterns and concepts emerge (White and Marsh 2006: 34). This way, the analytical concepts of re-entextualisation and resemiotisation see pragmatic application; I am able to examine both textual and contextual transformation.

4.2 Harvesting and coding data

A pilot study of my data analysis project was conducted in 2019, as part of the CHASE Arts and Humanities in the Digital Age programme. This pilot looked at "a day in the life of Pepe the Frog", limited to 24 hours' worth of digital data from the /r9k/ (Robot9001) 4chan board (a smaller, and relatively under-researched board which is often associated with the meme). This pilot project was then further developed to include four more datasets and combined data from three different years and three different 4chan boards (which I introduce in more detail in the next section).

The five datasets are as follows: 921 thread discussions as captured from /r9k/ on 16th March 2019; 5157 thread discussions as captured from /pol/ on 16th March 2019; 3189 thread discussions as captured from /b/ on 16th March 2019; 897 thread discussions as captured from /r9k/ on 16th March 2020; and 1037 thread discussions as captured from /r9k/ on 16th March 2021. Overall, the data collection followed two thematic connections. In its first three datasets, it looked at the same 24 hours

(shifting time zones to Eastern Daylight Time to match the day-night cycle of the platform's largely North American userbase) across the three mentioned sub-communities. The fourth and fifth datasets added two additional days of data in two consecutive years (each landing on 16th March), revisiting the /r9k/ board's digital discourse. These four additional datasets served to enrich the interpretive process of my content analysis.

For my data collection, I used and compared two methods which considered the ephemerality of the 4chan platform. The site hosts a large number of discussion threads that are constantly created and contributed to as the popular conversations stay on the top of the site while unpopular ones drift to the bottom, and eventually disappear to give way to newly created threads. Depending on the rules of the site's different thematic boards, threads without engagement either end up in a 3-day temporary archive before being deleted or are deleted immediately. To counter this, unofficial third-party archival sites such as Desuarchive or TheBArchive utilise the Fuuka/FoolFuuka software to archive 4chan threads and images in real time.

My first method, which I applied to the first two datasets, involved the first-hand scraping of 4chan's self-hosted temporary 3-day archives. The /pol/ and /r9k/ boards each have these temporary public archives, which enabled the use of a Python script to gain all archived thread links from the 3-day period ending on the 18th of March 2019. This two-day delay was deliberate: it allowed for the archival of some threads which may have been started on the 16th but stayed popular enough to remain active in the following couple of days. To note, it is possible that some discussion threads lived even longer and therefore weren't captured before their archival, but this would be a rare occurrence: as Hine et al. note, boards like /pol/ have a 'bump limit' of 300 (2017: 95), which means that threads with over 300 posts will no longer bump to the top of the page and will inevitably sink down to inactivity. I then used the Python library BASC Archiver which engaged with the 4chan API directly in order to parse all thread metadata into manageable .json files while also saving all images and thread HTMLs. This meant

that the original page layouts and image-text combinations could be frozen in time for the purposes of my analysis.

My second method engaged not with 4chan directly, but with the third-party archival sites which already scrape 4chan's digital data. I did this out of necessity in the case of my third dataset, as the /b/ board, at the time of research, did not have an official temporary archive. In late 2019 I used the ParseHub software and CSS coding to set the parameters of my data harvesting project. This method again focused on 16th March 2019, but this time not bound by the 3-day time limit. While the first method captured all metadata of the posts by the design of the archival script, I selected these same criteria myself during the second method. These included thread and post numbers, date and time of posting, thread titles, post content, the original filenames of attached images, image URLs. Metadata was once again parsed into .json documentation. This time, the visual representations of the thread discussions remained only on TheBArchive website itself, while the images were downloaded separately. I modified and reused my ParseHub script in 2020 and 2021 for my last two sets of data, this time scraping Desuarchive, which (at the time of writing this) archives /r9k/'s digital communication.

Both methods proved suitable for the purposes of qualitative research, but some of their implications may be relevant for future research. The first difference relates to replicability: while 4chan's temporary archive restricts the researcher to a small window in time, third-party archival sites make available the same data even years after their archival (unless these archival sites themselves cease to exist, of course). The second difference concerns the available data itself. Posts or threads which are deleted by 'janitors' (a sort of moderator on 4chan) for violating community guidelines don't make it to the temporary archives. They are, however, caught by the live scraping of third-party archives. These websites enable the filtering out of such posts in search results, which meant that I could keep consistency across the two methods and exclude these deleted posts from my data. On the other hand,

archival sites also operate under a set of guidelines, and as such they welcome user reports on any thread, post, or image. Desuarchive, for example, lists all of the following as valid reasons for removal: illegal images (probably alluding to child pornography), gore or shocking material, personal information and copyrighted images ('Frequently asked questions' n.d.). This means that their hosted data can be similarly compromised. In this, the two methods both differ from a third one: the live scraping of 4chan done by the researcher themselves. But this difference is dependent on the nature of the research project, and whether the researcher *wants* to engage with content that is deemed transgressive or illegal even by 4chan's standards (which raises ethical implications).

The data collection process was followed by the preparing and cleaning of the datasets through OpenRefine, which created manageable spreadsheets out of the .json documentation. The spreadsheets made it clear which posts were submitted with accompanying images (an option which is only mandatory for 'OP' original posts used to kickstart a conversation, but optional for all other posts), and which posts chose to directly reply to another post (also an optional feature). I used OpenRefine's 'faceting' to generate smaller, workable spreadsheets, filtering the overall data for posts which contained image accompaniments.

Here, the 'close perusal' and interpretation of the posts began. For this, I used both the generated spreadsheets and the archived visualisations of each thread (either through my own HTML backups or the third-party archives, depending on the dataset). Developed during my pilot study and refined throughout my research, my approach to coding consisted of two steps. I would (1) determine which units of analysis included a variation of the Pepe the Frog meme, and (2) annotate those which did. My coding system was influenced and impacted by previous research from the intersections of communication studies, semiotics and digital media (which I discuss later in detail), as well as the patterns emerging from the data itself. As such, my enquiry followed a combination of inductive and

deductive strategies, at once foregrounding the main themes of my findings and situating them in broader communication studies.

The resulting tags range from larger organising categories (such as the ‘creative’ or the ‘thematic’ – which I discuss in my analysis as ‘iconic’ and ‘metaphoric’ – uses I identified in the posts); the sub-classification of some prominent frog variants (such as ‘apu’ and ‘honkler’); and, whenever relevant, different emotive stances (such as ‘happiness’ and ‘anger’). Many of these generated codes are explored in my findings, while others were discarded or excluded as I developed my analysis. As one discarded example to highlight, my initial project plan considered to quantify instances of hateful and/or alt-right imagery in Pepe the Frog memes as opposed to those instances in which the imagery is not hateful by itself, but it is used alongside a written message that is. My findings suggested that roughly 9.76% of all Pepe the Frog images from the combined data included some form of hateful imagery (ranging from violence against women to Hitler cosplay), which I could then compare to the roughly 20.07% cases which I flagged for contextual (but not textual) hate speech. However, there are problems with this method. First, the scope of my data is too small to meaningfully contribute to already existing studies which took a quantitative approach. Second, it is possible that much of the data corresponds with the statistical anomaly of 16th March 2019 which saw particularly high engagement on /pol/, as seen below:

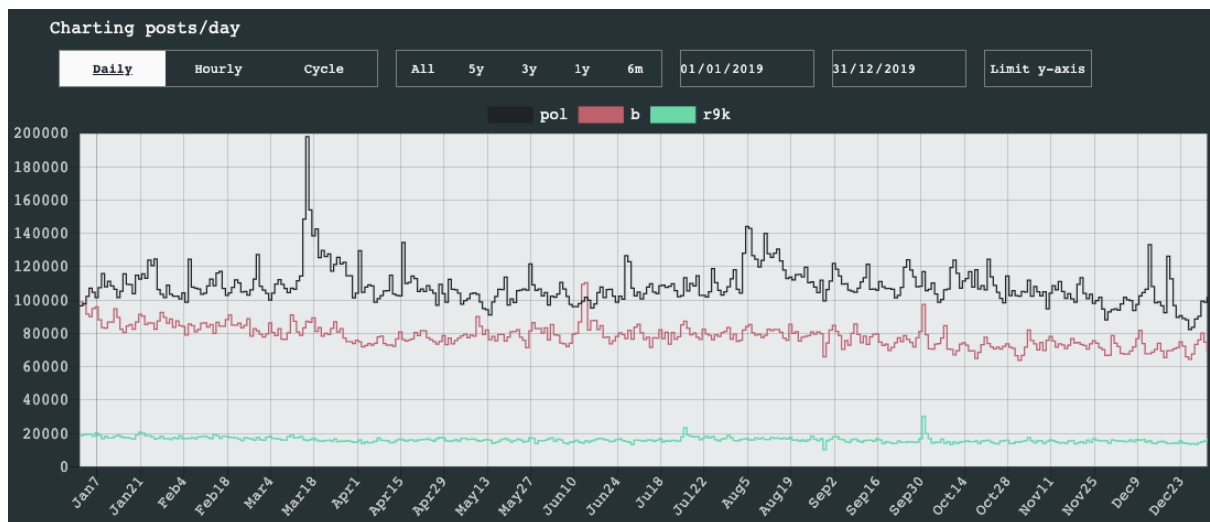


Figure 53: Incoming traffic for the three boards. 4stats.io.

As it happens, this first sample date coincided with a significant increase in traffic as a result of the Christchurch, New Zealand terrorist attack on the previous day. The attack, which was racially motivated and livestreamed by the gunman, received a lot of attention on /pol/ and inflated its data as a result. This meant that coding for textual and contextual hate would both be affected by the board’s engagement with the event – while, on the other hand, it provided valuable data for more rigorous studies on hate speech (see Rieger et al. (2021) who also make use of /pol/’s data from this same day). And finally, my flagging of contextual hate speech relied on several variables: the flagged posts would range from personal insults to negative stereotyping to conspiracy theories. In lack of a more robust coding system which would differentiate between the severity and theme of these flagged posts, I am not confident about the impact of these findings (especially as this wasn’t the main focus of my enquiry). For this same purpose, the topic modeling approach combined with manual coding that Rieger et al. (2021) take will yield more reliable results (although, to note, their study excluded images from their methodology and could have thus missed examples of hate speech that are only present in the image, but not the text).

However, while I consider my codes of textual and contextual hate to be prone to error, they give other useful indications regarding the differences between 4chan's different sub-communities (explored later in more detail). In addition, the percentage difference in these test findings also highlights the utility of analysing imageboard posts in their image-text pairings. It can further inform interpretations such as Hine et al.'s brief comment on Pepe the Frog images found in their dataset: the authors note that, despite the Anti-Defamation League declaration, the ten most used Pepe images in their sample did not 'seem to have an obvious link to hate' (2017: 97). It is possible that contextual consideration would add further nuance to this claim.

While some personal biases and subjectivities should also be considered in relation to my other generated codes (as is the case with all interpretive data), the role of categories is de-emphasised by the qualitative nature of my enquiry. While I make use of data findings to introduce and further ground my discussion, their primary role is not to provide evidence which holds statistical significance or makes claims to statistical representativeness, but to guide and support my interpretations.

4.3 Ethics

Ethical considerations around this case were considered by the Research Ethics Department of the University of Kent. Due to the nature of my research – that my chosen social media platform is by design premised on anonymity and prohibits the posting of revealing or identifiable private information –, it was reasonable to suggest that the research subjects of this research were not at risk of harm (see Leanne Townsend and Claire Wallace 2016). As such, even though my analysed data contains thematically sensitive material such as the discussion of mental health issues and suicide as well as controversial political opinions (ibid), these are not connected to the online identities of users. This is further helped by the nature of my enquiry as well, which does not work with social media

participants directly, and which focuses on drawn frogs and their roles as image attachments (as opposed to analysing all shared images).

However, additional ethical considerations beyond these initial ones are worth considering. For instance, even though other images from the datasets containing explicitly violent or sexual imagery were only circumstantial to the aims of my study, in some cases these themes affected my analysed data as well. Among its many variations, frogs are also depicted engaging in sexual acts, and committing acts of violence and self-harm. In addition, forum posts which otherwise contain more mundane Pepe the Frog images could still exhibit written discussion on these same themes, as well as others engaging in racism, sexism and transphobia, political extremism and conspiracy theories. My analysis features instances of these themes when they are relevant to my discussion and findings. This warrants a **content warning** for the readers of this thesis.

In addition, the datasets harvested from 16th March 2019 contain instances in which screenshots of the Christchurch terror attack (taken from the shooter's livestream, including his victims) are combined with Pepe the Frog images. These uses fall under some of my discussed functions of the meme (such as the thematic signalling of current events, and the identity signalling of far-right and accelerationist political ideologies), but their explicit use is not essential to my arguments. As such, I have decided to exclude all these instances from my analysis. Regarding this case, I keep in mind the arguments made by Phillips (2018) and Colley and Moore (2022) who note that scholarly discussion should be aware of the potential risk of amplifying the reach of harmful content. Colley and Moore counter this by only reproducing 'the minimum content [they] deem necessary to answer the study's questions' (2022). Since my focus of research is different – it looks at communicative meaning as opposed to the disruptive practices of 'trolling' or the understanding of the political alt-right, respectively –, I encounter a slightly different set of risks. Next to the amplification of potentially harmful discourse, its

trivialisation by omission is also a concern. My balancing of content shown, and content excluded keeps this in mind.

Finally, ethical questions around the nature of content analysis itself should be considered as well. This is also raised by Colley and Moore who discuss ‘the mental health implications of prolonged exposure to extreme content’ as a prominent ethical issue (2022). I have thus far advocated for the utility of the ‘human instrument’ and the combination of inductive and deductive interpretation which guided my qualitative process. However, the nature of my chosen data – which included, among many other types of content, political extremism, physical and sexual violence, conspiracy theories, racism, misogyny, extreme pornography, and depictions of real death and gore – raises a valid objection to it. The mental health implications of researching radical spaces are addressed by Tina Askanius, who writes that ‘issues around the emotional work and personal exhaustion of studying organized racism are rarely brought centre stage’ (2019: 884). While I cannot provide a meaningful solution which addresses this issue, I join these authors in drawing attention to it.

5. VARIATIONS ON A MEME

As the result of my data analysis of the five datasets (an overall of 276,159 4chan posts, 83,991 of which included image attachments) I identified my core data: 4,189 posts which included some form of the Pepe the Frog meme. For a visual overview, here are all 4,189 frogs, run through Lev Manovich’s visualisation tool ImagePlot, organised by standard deviation (X axis) and median brightness (Y axis):

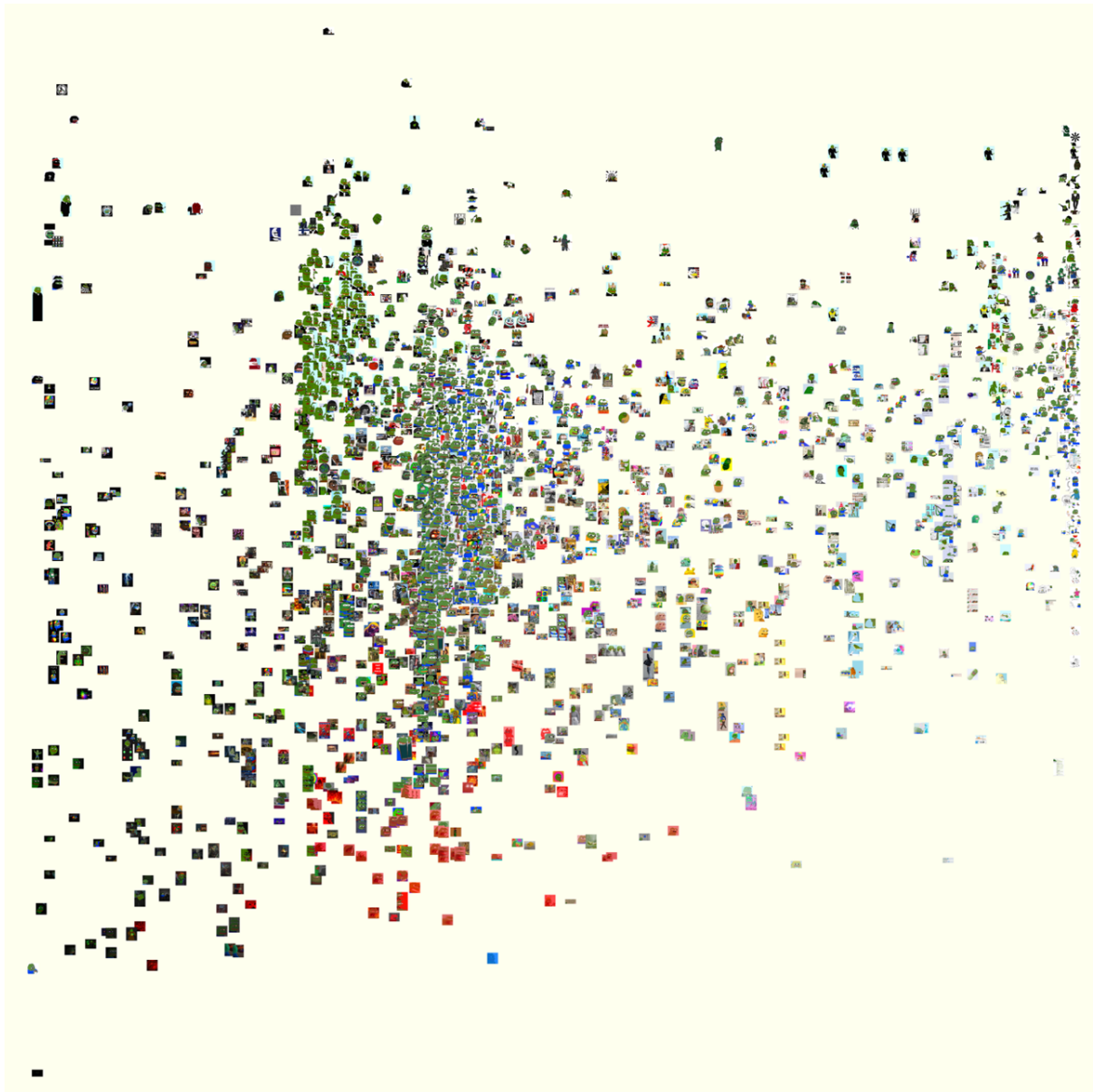


Figure 54: 4,189 Pepees plotted with ImagePlot. X-axis = standard deviation. Y-axis = median brightness.

This visualisation helps us spot early clues about the range and variation of the images. It reveals a cluster (see towards the middle-left) which is largely consistent in framing and colour, with a focus on the face and facial expressions. But plenty of outliers deviate from this formula too. Some of them abandon the known colour scheme of the meme and portray Pepe in other colours and face-to-body ratios; they combine him with other characters or objects; or morph him into the face of a celebrity or historical figure. In other words, while some variations are generic and simple enough to fit numerous conversations, others are likely tailored for specific topics, themes and contexts. Due to this, the

frequency of all variations isn't consistent. While some only see novelty use once or twice within the datasets, some others show up in the "regular" rotation of users. Below are the five image variations which were posted most frequently, in order (from left to right, top to bottom) from most popular:



Figure 55: The five most frequently posted Pepe variants.

The first image depicts an unimpressed, disapproving Pepe which appears 77 times within the sample. The second one shows a clown frog which earned its own name as 'Honkler' or 'Honk Honk', appearing 54 times. The third one depicts Pepe in a nervous state in front of a rocky background, appearing 47 times. The fourth one depicts Pepe in tearful laughter, with a wide grin which closely resembles the 'Big Grin' Rage Comics character from years prior, appearing 40 times. Finally, the fifth one depicts Pepe with a neutral or indifferent facial expression (while it could read as sadness at first, other variations communicate sadness in much more explicit ways), appearing 38 times. These findings are an interesting starting point. It appears, for example, that the most popular 'disapproving Pepe' variation is consistent with Hine et al.'s 4chan study which also identified this same variation as the

most frequently posted one (2017: 6). It also shows the prominence of the Honkler “sub-character” which emerged in early 2019 (‘Clown Pepe / Honk Honk / Clown World’ 2019). But conclusions should not be drawn this early, and the frequency of these images by itself does not simply equate to the most prominent meanings held by the meme. One false interpretation, for example, could assume that the depicted emotions of disapproval and fear dominate the overall data sample, but this assumption doesn’t consider that an emotion could also be depicted in many different graphical variations; I return to this question later.

Also notable are the variations of the meme which have “evolved” into their own sub-characters, and gained their own names, character traits, and meanings in conversation. One such character is a poorly drawn, childlike version of Pepe dubbed ‘Apu’, or ‘Apu Apustaja’ in full (“Help Helper” in Finnish). Apu originates from the Finnish imageboard Ylilauta (‘Apu Apustaja’ 2017) and was adopted by 4chan around 2016. This little frog, while its specific variations don’t enter the top five list of most used images, makes up 20.24% of my data sample (amounting to 848 posts). This ratio is even higher for the /r9k/ board specifically, where it reached 34.24% throughout the three datasets. Compared to the antagonism and confidence which is often associated with Pepe the Frog in general, Apu often appears vulnerable, playful and friendly:



Figure 56: Apu petting a cat.



Figure 57: Anonymous (2019). 'im whining [...]'. 4chan.

In contrast with Apu, the clown costumed Honkler character seems a lot less versatile at first. It takes up 9.14% (383 posts) of the identified frog images, but, as seen earlier, its most popular iteration lands in the two most used overall. This can be for two, interrelated reasons: that (1) as a “sub-meme” rising to prominence around the time I gathered my first three datasets, it had not yet experienced a growth in versatility in form; and that (2) its associated meaning(s) are largely attributed to the /pol/ (Politically Incorrect) board. The Honkler character has been often associated with alt-right and white supremacist ideologies in the post-2016 internet landscape. As Know Your Meme suggests, the character has been

used as shorthand for the idea of the political accelerationism of the 'Clown World', which interprets liberalism and progressive politics as a 'cosmic joke' ('Clown Pepe / Honk Honk / Clown World' 2019):

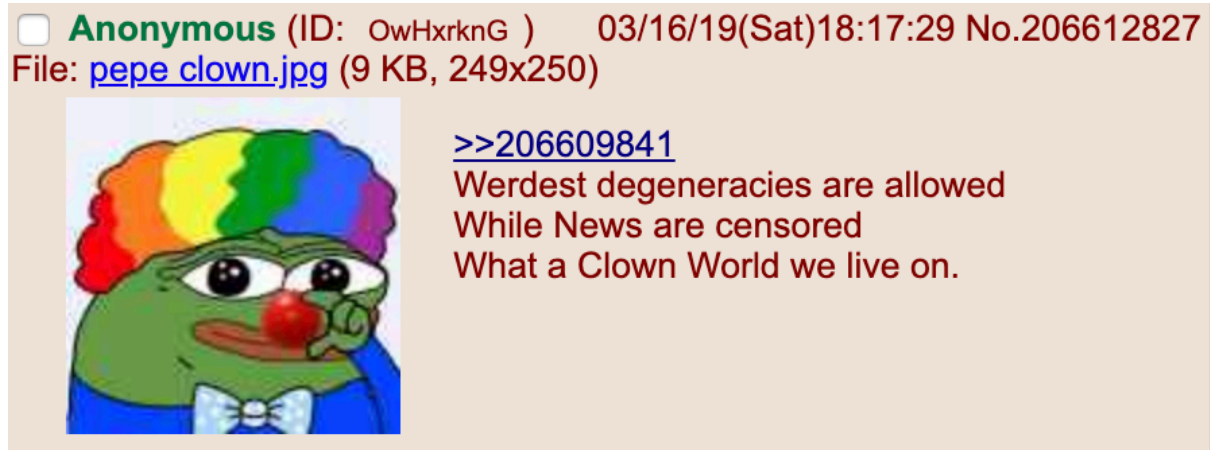


Figure 58: Anonymous (2019). 'Werdest degeneracies are allowed [...]'. 4chan.

But Know Your Meme also takes brief note of another use for the "sub-meme": accompanying bad jokes with corny punchlines (ibid). Both tendencies are visible in my sampled data. The same image of the clown frog can communicate direct political ideology or be posted alongside silly jokes and non-sensical 'shitposting'. As Ludemann describes, shitposting 'shares aspects of trolling, in that it frequently derails discussions', and it can be discussed as playful disruption, though not necessarily of consistently good quality (2021: 7). These uses of the 'Clown World' message and shitposting are competing ones, sometimes found within the same thread discussion. On one such occasion, a conspiracy theory thread about the New Zealand events receives a reply with the Honkler character holding a gun (fig. 59). To note, the terror attack received a large amount of discussion and debate on the board, with users both denouncing and celebrating the shooter. This message, however, is not a political statement, but a shitpost: 'i dont give a single shit about the whole story give me the memes and fuck off or fuck off entirely and don't approach me get the fuck out of my living room idiot'. Another user replies with surprise: 'Whoa...../Here I was thinkin you were gonna honk,/but then you honk honk./Very nice'.

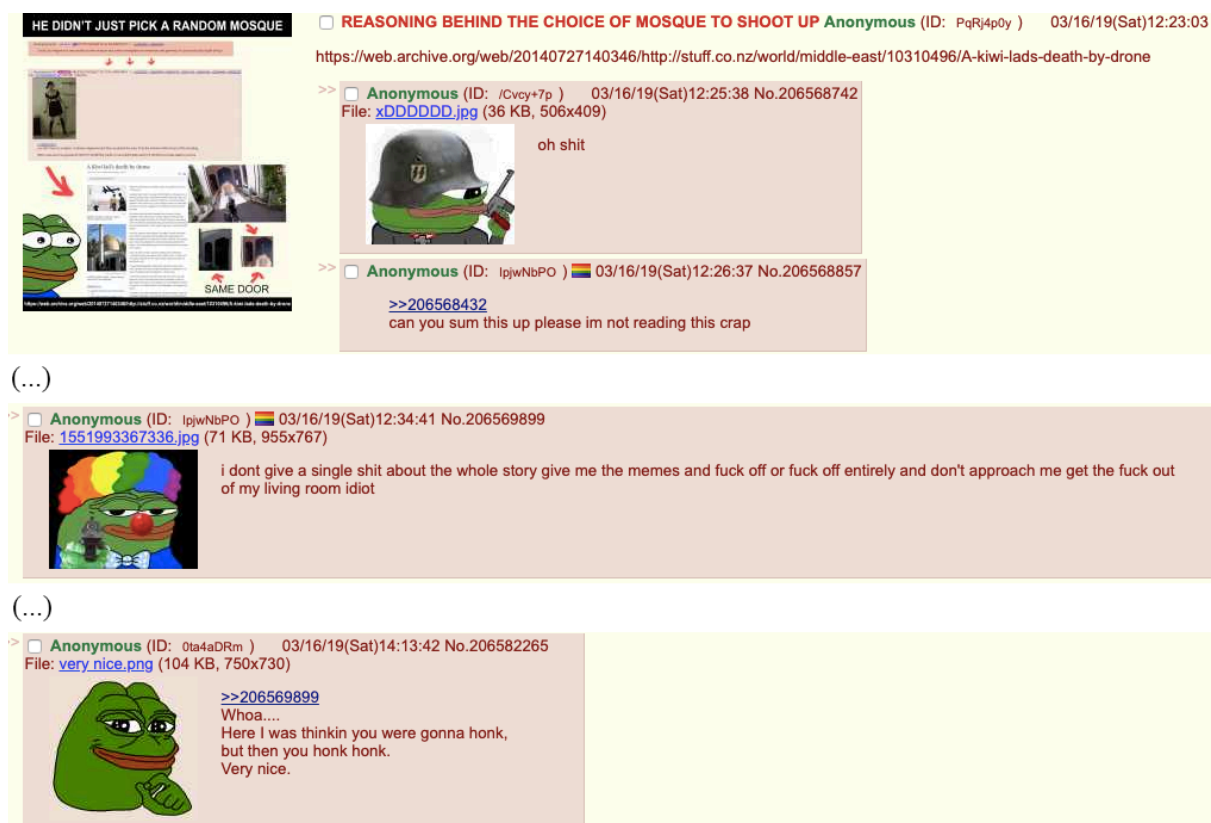


Figure 59: 'Honk honking' instead of 'honking' (2019). 4chan.

This suggests awareness of the multiple uses of the very same image whose meaning emerges from the image-text pairing. Here, it's either 'honking' (using the Honkler as a politically charged figure), or 'honk honking' (using the clown frog as a jester/shitposter). The second user's post demonstrates everyday meaning-making in action: the visual of the clown frog image could have suggested that its poster was going to make a specific political statement at first, but this did not end up being the case. Aptly, this same thread discussion also features the generally more "harmless" variation of Apu, here dressed up as an SS officer.

The initial binary of the Honkler variation is further challenged and nuanced by later reuse. In 2021's /r9k/ dataset, for example, a more complex Honkler image is attached to the admission of a poster's gambling addiction. The image features Pepe seeing his reflection as the Honkler in a broken mirror

(fig. 60). Used in another context, we could read the image as the loss of control and self under societal pressure – think 2019’s *The Joker* which received wide popularity on the internet –, but here it is packaged in regret and personal struggle: as a result of their own addictive behaviour, they have become a “clown”.

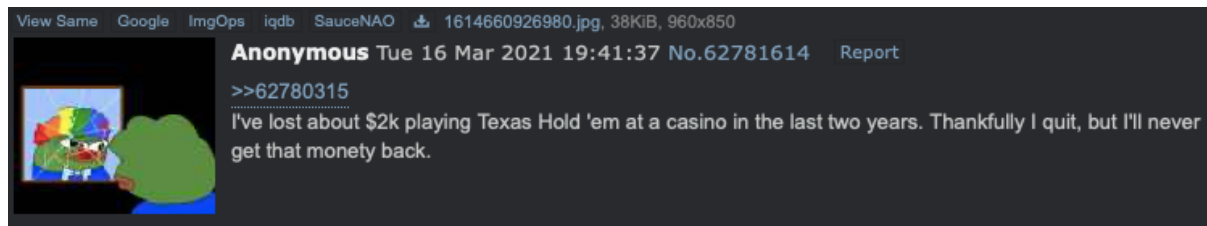


Figure 60: Anonymous (2021). 'I've lost about \$2k playing Texas Hold 'em [...]'. 4chan.

Next to these prominent variants, the data also features remnants and leftovers of past trends, or the early seeds of new ones. The fragments of these digital footprints further ground the meme as the vibrant tool of digital communication spanning many years. ‘Peepo’, ‘Nu Pepe’, ‘Groyper’, ‘Marv’, the “original” ‘Feels Good Man’ image are all statistical footnotes in my datasets but are not without meaning. I have chosen to highlight one more variant which is sometimes labelled ‘Fresco’, though its entry on Know Your Meme currently claims to have been rejected due to a ‘lack of notability’ (‘Fresco’ 2018). Fresco only appears in one of my five datasets, used three times overall on 16th March 2020 on the /r9k/ board. This variant re-imagines Pepe as a disillusioned worker in an office environment, with red skin and yellow teeth, and a frustration with modern capitalism:

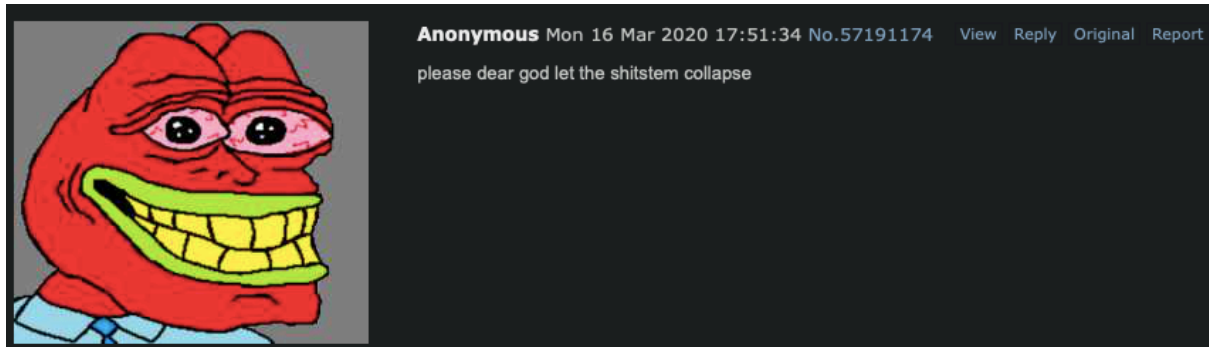


Figure 61: Anonymous (2020). 'please dear god let the shitstem collapse'. 4chan.

Images such as Fresco are a useful reminder that my enquiry could only ever present a cultural snapshot as opposed to a complete overview of the Pepe the Frog meme. While some patterns of everyday creation gain academic or public significance through widespread popularity or controversy, others are left in subcultural consciousness, and the 'rare Pepe' image folders of social media participants.

6. NAVIGATING 4CHAN

We have now seen that some variations of the meme were used to different degrees and with different aims across my three examined 4chan boards. One last introduction to the website is useful to clarify these dynamics further. As I have mentioned, discussions on 4chan are organised by theme into the communities of 'boards'. Users may visit multiple different boards; different boards may share certain trends and memes that make their way across the hyperlink borders of their communities; and these communities are also subject to constant change as users arrive and leave, start and react to conversations, or simply 'lurk' without actively engaging. While there are uniting themes and patterns connecting these in-groups, no one board should be discussed as a wholly structured community. As Pelletier-Gagnon and Pérez Trujillo Diniz argue:

‘While the democratization of cyberspace and the exploration of its potential sometimes lead scholars to look at online communities as consensual discussion platforms attracting like-minded users around a certain topic or issue, this discourse obscures possible conflicts in the meaning-making processes and the ways in which online communities negotiate dissent and community borders’ (2018: 3).

This reasoning is a welcome extension to Hinton and Hjorth’s idea of the unorganised internet. At the same time, it is reasonable to presume that participants on 4chan’s boards engage in discussion because they are in some shape or form motivated to do so (though this motivation need not be always limited to like-mindedness or shared beliefs).

Some 4chan boards are more visited than others, and some use memes more than others. This is often influenced by the nature and theme of the given board (for example, boards dedicated to sharing pornography may be less incentivised or even enabled to engage in off-topic discussion). While Pepe the Frog is found on most boards, it is more prominent on some than others. In preparing for my data analysis enquiry, I identified the three boards of /b/ (Random), /pol/ (Politically Incorrect), and /r9k/ (Robot9001) for their ties to Pepe the Frog throughout its history – however, this does not mean that other boards could not demonstrate novel use of the meme, and future research could very well direct its focus to other 4chan communities.

Breaking down the overall data, the **/pol/ (Politically Incorrect)** sub-set consists of 5,157 threads containing 146,224 submitted posts, out of which 38,192 posts were submitted alongside image (including .gif and .webm) attachments, and include an overall of 2,697 Pepe the Frog posts; the **/b/ (Random)** sub-set consists of 3,187 threads containing 85,608 submitted posts, out of which 35,442 posts were submitted alongside image (including .gif and .webm) attachments, and include an overall of 467 Pepe the Frog posts; and finally, the combined **/r9k/ (ROBOT9001)** sub-set, which includes 72 hours of harvested data between 2019 and 2021, consists of 2,855 threads containing 44,327 posts,

out of which 10,357 posts were submitted alongside image (including .gif and .webm) attachments, and include an overall of 1,025 Pepe the Frog posts.

Out of the three discussion boards, **/pol/ (Politically Incorrect)** received the most traffic during its 24 hours. As of the time of this case study, /pol/ is the most popular discussion board on the website, and the one that is mostly associated with 4chan as a website in general. That said, other boards often seem to distance themselves from the infamous forum that had been specifically created as a ‘containment board’ with the purpose of re-directing unrelated and extremist political discussion from other 4chan boards (Dennis Erasmus 2019). Hine et al. discuss /pol/ as ‘the most controversial [board] owing to its links to the alt-right movement and its unconventional support to Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign’ (2017: 11); and, by extension, /pol/ is also considered to be a key site for Pepe the Frog memes (Ohlheiser 2016; Adrià Salvador Palau and Jon Roozenbeek 2017). The board hosts a variety of forum topics ranging from historical events to socio-political discourse to current events, much of which lives up to the name of ‘Politically Incorrect’. In addition, /pol/ offers a feature for its anonymous users which lets them display the flag of their nationality, or some ‘meme flags’ (Ludemann 2021) which are taken less seriously by the community. We have seen one such flag used by the /pol/ user posting a Honkler shitpost in Figure 59 – here, the rainbow flag used by the poster is likely not attributable to neither LGBTQ+ support nor an antagonism towards it, but a representation of the clown wig’s rainbow pattern instead.

The **/b/ (Random)** board was discussed a decade ago as the site’s most popular board, then accounting for nearly half of 4chan’s overall content (Knuttila 2011; Bernstein et al. 2011: 50). By comparison, its dataset for 16th March 2019 is considerably smaller than that of /pol/’s (which launched in 2011). However, the amount of image attachments found in /b/’s threads does not fall behind in the same manner as the overall number of posts does. Posts with images in fact take up over 51% of /b/’s dataset (compared to 26% of the /pol/ and 23% of the /r9k/ datasets). This notable difference stems from the

differing natures of the boards: compared to the other two, /b/ is not restricted by too many rules regarding the content posted. This enables the existence of ‘dump threads’ which contain little to no discussion. As Know Your Meme explains, the combination of random topics and minimal board rules of /b/ causes the board to become ‘a common source of spam, trolling, and shitposting’, while ‘pornography and gore threads [can] also be frequently found of the board’ (‘/b/’ 2015). Threads that serve as image dumps and threads that entail general discussion between users co-exist on the same platform. This has a unique impact on Pepe the Frog too: as I discuss later, Pepe exchange threads are popular on the board.

The third and smallest dataset belongs to the **/r9k/ (ROBOT9001)** board, whose three combined samples only take up about half of /b/’s 24-hour data. This is at least partially due to the nature of the forum: originally introduced as an experimental board in 2008 (then deleted in 2011 and resurrected in 2014), /r9k/ is powered by the concept of filtering all reposts (‘/r9k’ 2015). This means that users are not allowed to post text that is unoriginal – that is, strings of characters which have already been posted on the board at any prior point. By this method, the board filters and discourages quickly posted content such as copypastas, and instead encourages well thought out discussion. This is enforced by automatically muting users who submit unoriginal posts. At the same time, the guidelines also disable the posting of images without any text, subsequently disabling “lazy” dump threads. Compared to /b/ then, while the threads on /r9k/ aren’t united by a specific theme or topic, the content found on the board and the user experience is significantly different: without any image dumps, repeated posts and quick insults, the board is reduced to “meaningful” discourse. As a result, /r9k/ hosts a notable number of personal anecdotes and greentext stories discussing ‘experiences of social awkwardness, confusion and relationships at school or with family’ (Knuttila 2011). Despite its restrictions, the community of the board has been associated with a variety of memes throughout its existence, including various applications of Pepe the Frog as well.

The nature, themes, affordances and restrictions of these communities all inform an understanding of the meme as used in the different corners of the website. This does not mean that each of the three boards should be discussed in complete isolation, as many of the communicative functions I cover in this chapter appear in all three boards (though not necessarily in identical ways). Instead, I treat these differences as clues for uncovering and interpreting the everyday use and reuse of the meme.

7. CASE STUDY: THE MANY FUNCTIONS OF PEPE THE FROG

In this section I propose six communicative functions for Pepe the Frog in 4chan's digital discourse. I investigate what the Pepe the Frog meme means, and how it is made to mean. Through this case study of the meme, I hope to shed light on the semiotics of everyday reuse – an aspect of digital culture which deserves more academic attention. At the same time, I also hope to provide some methodological insights into how researchers can effectively address the vast transience and “multi-textedness” of memes, while also arriving at conclusions beyond ‘they can mean anything’.

Pepe, alongside other memes within imageboard discussion, is often labelled a ‘reaction image’. This label emphasises the active role of images in 4chan's digital discourse (as opposed to being more “complete”, multimodal units which contain written text within the frames of the image). I have indicated earlier that the term ‘reaction image’ can be misleading: it oversimplifies the possible functions of these images, and falsely suggests a straightforward syntactical hierarchy between them and some other post they respond to. While the case isn't so simple, this notion can serve as a first step: it indicates that the interpretation of these images will depend greatly on the written text which surrounds them. Going forward, we can consider reaction images (or, as I'll also call them in this context, imageboard memes) a light “sub-genre” of memes, though I only use this notion to emphasise its specific technological and social conditions. These include the platform-specific temporality of messages; the benefits and limitations of site-wide anonymity; the lack of common evaluative

participatory tools such as upvoting and reposting; and the play and experimentation which results from these specific technological affordances and limitations.

While the communicative functions of reaction images are currently still under-researched, some other digital visual symbol systems – such as ‘emoticons’ and ‘emojis’ – can be of some help. Emoticons have been called ‘paralinguistic-like’ (Allan James 2017: 147). This means that, while they do not fit the definitional criteria of ‘paralanguage’ (such as variations in pitch, volume, voice quality, intonation and so on), the ‘means of their semiotic signalling (...) and their linguistic co-occurrence are at a certain level of abstraction reminiscent of (...) paralinguistic features’ (2017: 146; italics removed). Emoticons have also been called ‘paralinguistic restitutions’ (Crispin Thurlow and Alex Brown 2003: 15; Caroline Tagg 2012: 118) for their utility in substituting for information which would otherwise be expressed in face-to-face interactions (Stefania Spina 2019: 346). The use of pictographic symbols therefore emerges from the affordances and restrictions of ‘CMC’ (‘computer-mediated communication’) as online speakers find the need to supplement their written discussion with visual cues. As explained by Matt Applegate and Jamie Cohen, ‘[w]here contemporary Internet language functions as information to be comprehended, it evidences common graphical structures that are bound up in its linguistic traits’ (2017: 83).

This discussion is valuable for my own investigation of imageboard memes. There are notable differences between the emoticon and the imageboard meme, of course. Applegate and Cohen suggest that ‘memes combine text and images to create a mode of communication more articulate than the emoji but less robust than the grammar and syntax of a natural language’ (2017: 85). Here, they talk about memes in general, but their point applies to my chosen “sub-genre” of the imageboard meme. The rich visual properties of these drawn, Photoshopped, animated image attachments offer a great deal of variety in their contained information. There is a difference in digital syntax as well. Emoticons function as typed digits in CMC and can therefore interact with written text in dynamic

ways, while imageboard memes are bound by the spatial restriction of the 'image attachment' next to a post (and the solutions which mitigate this restriction, such as transparent .png backgrounds, are only cosmetic). But even though Pepe the Frog is not an emoticon, its communicative functions are also informed by the limitations of CMC (here: anonymous forum discussions), and the social need to navigate those. The patterns which emerge from these conditions of technological affordances/limitations and social exigencies can be a valuable extension of existing research on the role of images in digital conversation. Further, the case study can also exemplify the genre model I proposed in Chapter One.

Discussing emoticon use on Twitter, Stefania Spina identifies five functions they can exhibit in digital communication. This is based on the claim that '[a]s context-sensitive resources, emoticons play several functions which emerge from dynamically changing contexts' (2019: 358). This is particularly valuable for a symbol system that is reduced to the singular role of the 'emotion icon' in its very name (and the same goes for the 'reaction image'). As she argues, 'emotions cannot be considered just as a ludic and extralinguistic supplement to language, with the exclusive role of expressing emotions but rather as linguistic resources that play other important pragmatic and social functions' (2019: 347). And later: 'emoticons are multifunctional resources, whose different functions often overlap within the use of a single emoticon' (ibid). While this discussion doesn't differentiate between 'linguistic' and 'linguistic-like', I argue that it is applicable to Pepe the Frog as well.

Spina offers five categories which can describe these overlapping functions: emoticons as 'emotion icons' (which I adapt as 'emotive markers'); as 'pragmatic markers'; as 'social markers of familiarity'; as 'structural markers'; and as 'creative resources'. For the purposes of my case study, I adopt Spina's categories, although with some changes. For one, I exclude 'structural markers' from my discussion since, as I have mentioned, Pepe the Frog is bound by the digital structure of the image attachment, which doesn't permit for the syntactical punctuation of the written text. Further, I add two other

categories to account for types of use which are not discussed by Spina (although, as seen, they have been discussed in other studies) but which have crystallised through the process of my data analysis. These categories discuss imageboard memes as 'iconic and metaphoric markers' and as 'identity markers'. I formulate my discussion of these six functions against the backdrop of broader linguistic theory as well, such as the 'six functions of language' as introduced by Roman Jakobson (1987). I do this with the awareness that while linguistics can provide valuable guidance for the pinpointing of communicative functions, the uncritical application of these theories could create a false equivalence between language and Pepe the Frog (which is not a language, but its purposes are closely aligned with the purposes of language). As such, my contribution is not a localised "mirroring" of linguistic theory, but a more dynamic adaptation of some of its notions which are complementary to my arguments.

As an additional note, while my research below prioritises the interacting meanings of text and image, and the ways in which content analysis can make sense of these meanings, my datasets also contain instances in which the message does not contain any written text. These instances are specific to the /b/ and /pol/ boards, as /r9k/ (as mentioned) does not allow for image uploads without original text. I identified an overall of 370 messages (around 8.8% of the overall harvested data) which fell under this category. Despite some increased ambiguity in some of these cases (since the lack of additional context clues makes it more challenging to decipher, for example, if a laughing frog laughs *with* you or *at* you), the function(s) of these uses also fall under one or multiple of the categories I describe below. A thankful frog with a thumb up can similarly indicate a social emotion; a Nazi frog without text can similarly indicate identity play and so on. These uses nonetheless act as a reminder for methodology: not only does research need to consider the imageboard meme texts in relation to their accompanying text, but their surrounding conversation in which their communicative functions are activated as well.

7.1 Frogs as emotive markers

As a first step in the ‘demystification’ of Pepe the Frog’s online use, we can look at the imageboard meme as it expresses attitude and intention. To start off, the broader notion of the ‘stance marker’ works well here: it refers to linguistic (and in our case, linguistic-like) devices which convey a speaker’s attitudes, feelings, judgements and assessments (Douglas Biber and Finegan Edward 1989). As a comparison, Caroline Tagg argues that emoticons fit the description of stance markers: they are items which operate outside (and serve to frame) a clause, to explicitly indicate attitudes, feelings and evaluations about the communicated message (2012: 118). This notion of the ‘stance marker’ is broad enough to account for both the emotive and pragmatic functions of my units of analysis (and, similarly to Spina, I consider it under two, complementary categories). Let’s look at the emotive function first.

As discussed in the previous section, Pepe the Frog is often referred to as a ‘reaction image’, which highlights a specific use in conversation: conveying feelings. We can trace this back to the ‘feels good man’ panel of *Boy’s Life*. Through its speech bubble’s own admission, an attitude – feeling good – is communicated in conversation. Reaction images share this utility with other image-based icons which similarly visualise facial expressions. Spina notes that emoticons ‘replace existing spoken language resources, preserving part of what happens in actual speech. As paralinguistic components of a message, they provide visual cues of the author’s emotional involvement’ (2019: 346). She categorises this function as that of the ‘emotion icon’. This term works well in the context of emoticon studies, but I opt to use the comparable notion of the ‘emotive marker’ (Jessica Rett 2021) as it is more suitable for broader application. As Rett suggests, emotive markers ‘mark a speaker’s emotive attitude towards some descriptive content’ (2021: 306). While this term is coined recently, we can trace it back to Jakobson’s ‘emotive function’ of language which ‘aims a direct expression of the speaker’s attitude toward what he is speaking about’ (1987: 66.) Jakobson emphasises that the impression of emotions can be ‘true or feigned’ (ibid), which is why the term ‘emotive’ is preferable to ‘emotional’. This distinction gains further importance in CMC image attachments: here, the performance of emotions

is often a conscious effort as users choose to evoke impressions of emotions through manually uploading images.

As I have suggested, emotive markers are especially significant in the imageboard environment. This is because the unique combination of ephemerality (constantly appearing and disappearing conversations) and anonymity (a de-emphasis on who is speaking) motivates users to clarify intent through image use. These visual cues – in our case, smiling frogs and crying frogs – are an essential part of 4chan’s communication. Users sometimes draw explicit attention to this quality in the written text itself. For instance, the acronym ‘tfw’, which stands for ‘that feeling when’, directly refers to the emotive importance of the image. Facial expressions are often evoked to evaluate other posts as well. We can see this in action with the example of the disapproving/annoyed Pepe which I have earlier identified as the most frequently used variation. Here are three instances in which this image acts as a visual cue of emotive stance:



Figure 62: Anonymous (2019). 'boo hoo cry somewhere else'. 4chan.

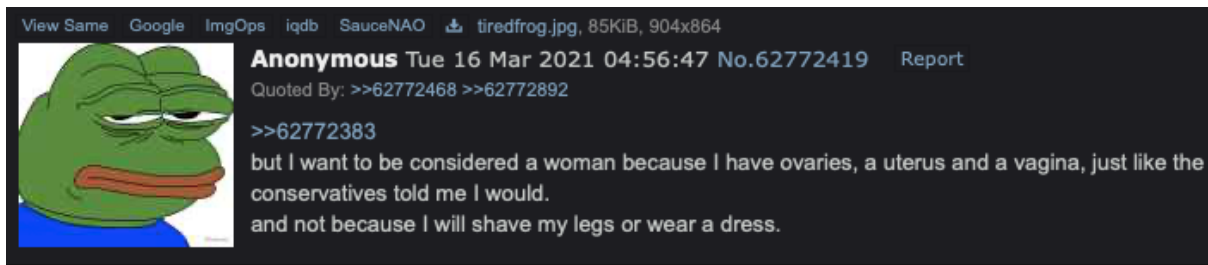


Figure 63: Anonymous (2021). 'but I want to be considered a woman [...]'. 4chan.



Figure 64: Anonymous (2019). 'oh look'. 4chan.

In the first two instances, we see the continuation of conversations in a way which is perhaps closest to the concept of the 'reaction image'. The two users each tag the post they are replying to (indicated by the double arrows in the first lines of the posts), and the disapproving facial expression of the image expresses their communicated attitudes and feelings toward that previous post. The first post (fig. 62) mocks an 'OP' (the 'original poster' of a thread) expressing concerns over the political implications of the New Zealand terror attack. The second post (fig. 63) debates the enforcement of gender norms for women after another user suggests they should appear more feminine to be socially acceptable.

By comparison, the third post (fig. 64) is the OP of its respective thread, and the image isn't used directly as a reaction in conversation. It nonetheless serves a similar function: it illustrates the emotional state the poster wants to evoke. This OP expresses frustration over the current state of /pol/ and its 'Yang shill threads'. (These threads expressed support for politician Andrew Yang and his universal basic income policy, which was an often-entertained alternative to a second Donald Trump

presidential term in 2019's /pol/ dataset.) Depending on the context, the visual aid of the meme expresses the emotional stance of disapproval, fatigue, boredom and annoyance. In the midst of a digital conversation, it can also express disagreement with other, previous posts. Note that in the second post, the filename for the uploaded image is 'tiredfrog.jpg', which can give the indication that some users organise and draw from a pool of reaction images based on the sentiment they express. At the same time, the 'tired frog' label could be misleading for its use in these instances – unless interpreted as 'tired of your bullshit'.

I have earlier indicated that the status of the disapproving variant as the "most used Pepe" has to be taken with a grain of salt. This is for two reasons. First, unlike emoticons, user-drawn images are highly variable and modifiable, and this results in sentiments expressed through a wider range of visualisations. My analysis has found that while some emotional stances (such as that of the "most used Pepe" above) are depicted in a single, expressive image, other emotive stances have a wider pool of variants. It is possible that the restrained, tired nonchalance of the disapproving Pepe withholds it from the need for more vibrant textual modification. By comparison, anger – a stronger and more expressive emotion – can be found in my datasets in numerous variations. Here are a few:





Figure 65: Angry Pepe variations.

As seen, the emotion of anger can be illustrated by a combination of visual ideas, some of which transgress the iconicity of an angry facial expression and enrich the visual with other elements (such as the colour red, distortion, or the metaphoric evocation of magma and explosions). This creative fragmentation of the reaction image means a larger pool of resources to draw from – many of which can communicate a similar emotional stance.

But, as the second reason, the opposite is also true: the same image can signal different emotional stances in different contexts. For example, the crying-grinning variant of the meme (the fourth most frequent image in the dataset) can be used to signal amusement and admiration for a funny GIF (fig. 66), or to mock someone's behaviour in cruelty (fig. 67).



Figure 66: Anonymous (2019). 'that gif rolfmlwjd'. 4chan.

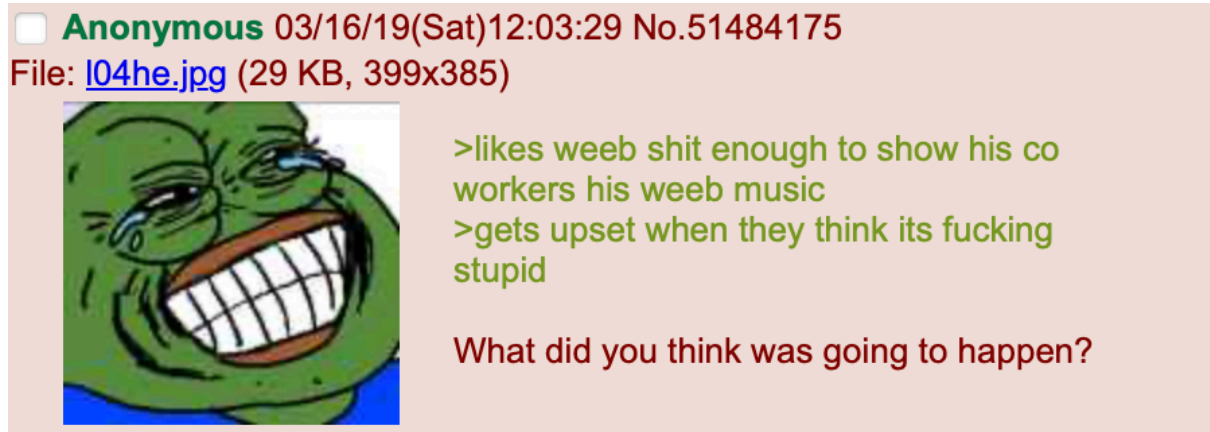


Figure 67: Anonymous (2019). '>likes weeb shit enough to show his co workers [...]'. 4chan.

The first post is a brief expression of laughter which is shared *with* a previous user; while the second post laughs *at* and mocks the OP of the thread (who has reported on their co-workers disliking their music taste). This latter sentiment is communicated through the use of greentext, which here serves to “transcribe” a previous post’s meaning while also signalling an evaluation of it. Back in Chapter One I discussed laughter as both a constructive and destructive force of social relationships; the ‘Big Grin Pepe’, which can equally celebrate and attack through its laughter, is a strong case study for these social dynamics. The image works well for both purposes; depending on its surroundings, it can be read as an expression of kinship or antagonism – and sometimes, both at the same time. The meaning of the image can change depending on the context of its application.

To account for these (and similar) variables, I used the codes generated from my content analysis to create emotion tag clouds for each of the three discussed 4chan boards. These tag clouds take count of the emotive stances which arise from the use of Pepe the Frog in conversation:



Figure 68: /b/'s emotion cloud.



Figure 69: /pol/'s emotion cloud.

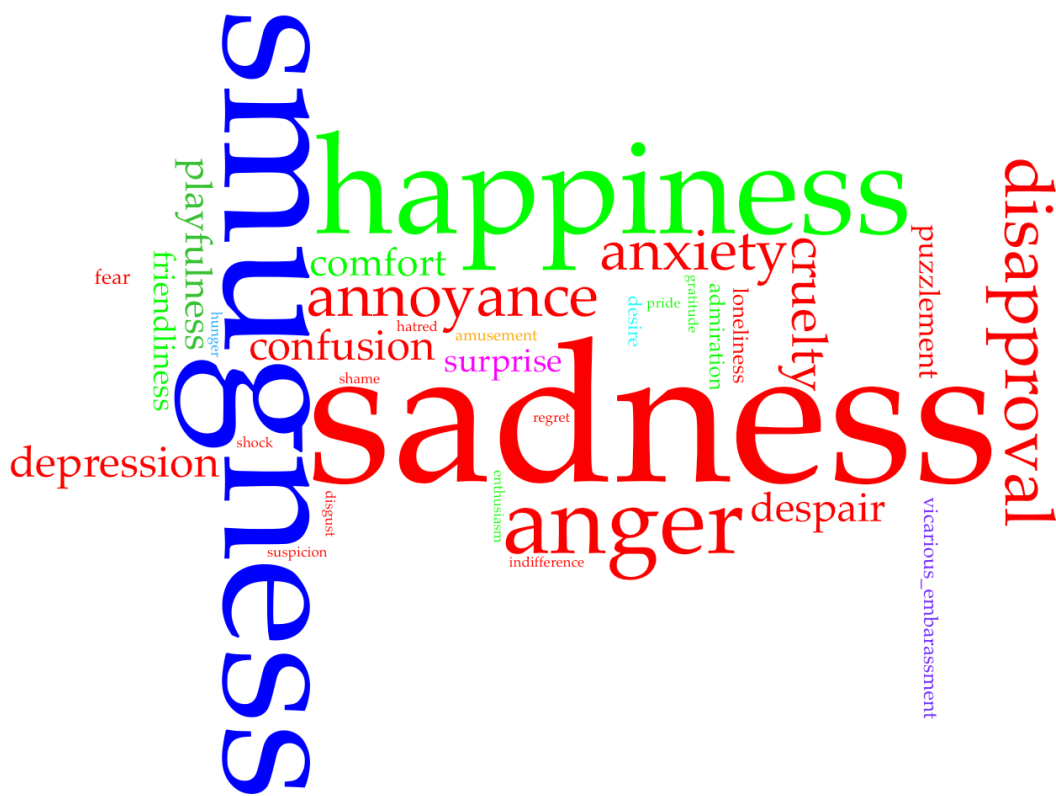


Figure 70: /r9k/'s emotion cloud.

While the primary purpose of my emotion classification efforts has been to aid my qualitative analysis further, the methodological implications of this research element are nonetheless worth a closer look. Notably, my approach was once again informed by the image-text pairs as units of research. This is discussed by Anurag Illendula and Amit Sheth who argue that '[w]hile a high percentage of social media posts are composed of both images and caption, (...) researchers have not looked at the multimodal aspect for emotion classification' (2019: 440). Their research, which discusses emoji use and related hashtags on Instagram, argues that the consideration of multiple elements of a message results in better accuracy for automated emotion classification than unimodal approaches would (2019: 449). The same applies to qualitative methods. Through my own analysis of Pepe the Frog posts, many of the nuances of multimodal analysis emerged. As revealed from the image-text dynamic, the same image can be assigned different emotion annotations. This often depends on their attached written text. A single image can have more than one emotion annotation if all of those annotations can

meaningfully describe the emotional context of the image-text pair. Some images simply do not suggest a clear emotional context (as, much like emojis which depict objects, they often serve some function other than an emotive one). Finally, some images, while they depict a facial expression of some sort, are used for some other communicative function which can de-emphasise or even negate the element of the facial expression. I unpack these other functions soon.

The second decision of my approach concerned the chosen emotion tags themselves. My initial approach prioritised the use of only a handful of 'primary emotions'. What these are, and how many of them there are have been subject to academic discussion. Paul Ekman, for instance, identifies the six basic emotions of anger, fear, disgust, sadness, enjoyment and surprise as having universal facial expressions (1992: 35). Robert Plutchik suggests the existence of eight primary emotions (sadness, surprise, fear, trust, joy, anticipation, anger and disgust) whose mixtures result in further emotions (2001: 349). Illendula and Sheth settle on seven (anger, fear, joy, love, sadness, surprise, and thankfulness) for their analysis of emojis (2019). Notably, they add 'thankfulness' which is not usually recognised as a primary emotion. This addition is likely due to thumb-up emojis and equivalents, which are prominently used to communicate social emotions. These approaches served as a good baseline for my own research. I began with a smaller set of primary emotions to begin with; however, after my initial findings, I adjusted my method to accommodate additional prominent emotive stances which have revealed themselves through the content analysis process. This could allow for the nuanced treatment of some emotional extremities such as depression and despair, and the recognition of social emotions such as cruelty, disapproval, vicarious embarrassment (colloquially, 'cringe'), friendliness and smugness.

While this method still has its biases (for example, it doesn't account for the instances of irony which I discuss in the next section), it can give some further insight into the patterns of marking emotive stance. Smugness, for example, dominates much of 4chan's digital communication across the three

boards. The 'Smug Frog' facial expression (seen earlier in figs. 51 and 59) lends itself well to both mockery and a sense of performed confidence, which can be beneficial in the often-hostile thread discussions on the platform. This is particularly the case for /pol/ and its heated political discussions. By comparison, more "vulnerable" emotional stances (such as sadness, depression and confusion) are more prominent on the other two boards which are not bound by a central theme, and which allow for personal anecdotes and for seeking advice. In fact, 'sadness' is the most frequently noted emotion within /r9k/'s combined datasets (see fig. 70). This is likely due to the ethos of the board, whose community often discusses loneliness, social anxiety, romantic relationships and mental health. Finally, we can see that the 'tired of your bullshit' Pepe – which in most cases received the 'disapproval' and 'annoyance' emotional labels during the analysis – loses its previously held throne of "most important emotion". Instead, we can see that the most evoked emotional stances (such as happiness, sadness, smugness and anger) are ones versatile enough to escape the previously introduced "top five" with their many variations. It seems that the users of these communities engage with a large pool of image attachments despite many of those evoking similar emotional stances – which is a good indication that Pepe the Frog has other functions as well.

7.2 Frogs as pragmatic markers

While the facial expressions depicted in these images clearly reveal an emotive function, not all frog faces should be taken at face value. Next to the indication of emotional context, an attached image (much like non-verbal communication and paralanguage in face-to-face discussions) can also inform us about how the speaker wants us to interpret their words beyond an emotive stance. Imagine the message of 'I hate you' from one user to another, accompanied by a frog with the facial expression of a sulking child; and the same message, in context of a frog in violent, explosive rage. The emotional context in these cases very may well be similar, but their expression is informed by the visuals – in this case, one softening the blow and the other declaring hostility. Now, imagine the same message again,

but the frog is smiling – the meaning of the two elements now seems contradictory, which then further informs our reading of the message. We can describe this as the pragmatic function.

This function transgresses and nuances the propositional meaning of the image-text pairings. Spina takes note of this regarding the emoticon: '[i]n digital written communication emoticons also serve as resources that are not conventionally mapped onto facial expressions (...) In this function, emoticons provide information on how to interpret a verbal message' (2019: 346-347). This statement echoes the role of the 'pragmatic marker', or 'discourse marker', in verbal linguistics: words acting as interlocutors attempting to 'guide the processes of interpretation and social involvement' while also acting as 'important hints to the addressee as regards what has been or is about to be said' (Vivian de Klerk 2005: 1184). As such, they can be said to have procedural meaning rather than conceptual meaning (Karin Aijmer 2014: 200). Put simply, graphical images may not only function as indications of emotion, but also as indications of what 'the user intends by what he or she types' (Eli Dresner and Susan C. Herring 2010: 256). Once again, this is applicable to imageboard memes as well.

Spina identifies multiple ways in which emoticons serve this role. As she summarises, emoticons can soften requests, mitigate expressed negative effects, signal jokes, or even contradict the propositional content of a message through irony (2019: 347). In these cases, facial expressions can also create meaning, but the meaning is not necessarily emotive. Dresner and Herring provide a simple example to illustrate this claim: '[c]onsider the use of the winking smiley, which is often used as an indicator that the writer is joking, teasing, or otherwise not serious about the message's propositional content. (...) Clearly, joking is not an emotion' (2010: 256). Methodologically speaking, this is very much relevant for qualitative content analysis: in many cases, a smiling frog will not mean that the post evokes happiness, but that it performs some adjustment or mitigation to the post's meaning. Pepe the Frog can do this in multiple ways, often in collaboration with linguistic pragmatic markers in the written text to communicate the poster's intentions. Let's look at some examples:



Figure 71: Anonymous (2019). 'I am OP of this content [...]'. 4chan

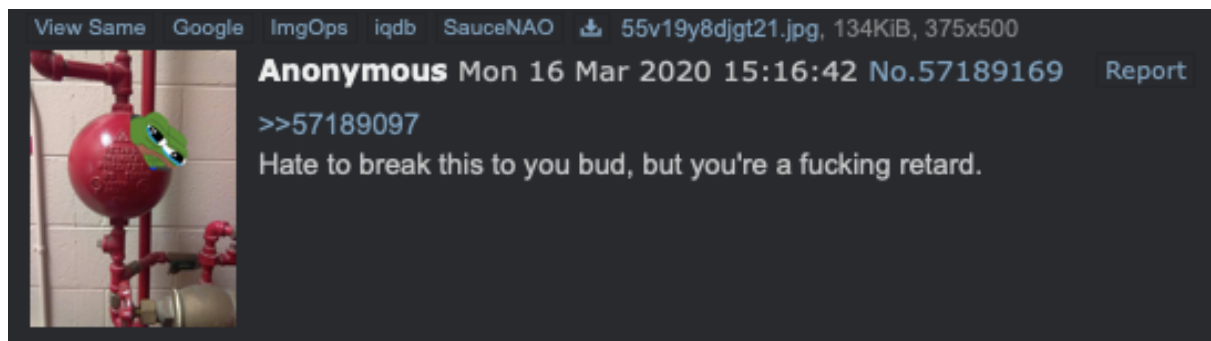


Figure 72: Anonymous (2020). 'Hate to break this to you bud [...]'. 4chan.

In these instances, the image attachments act as 'politeness markers' (Spina 2019: 347; Tanimu Ahmed Jibril and Mardziah Hayati Abdullah 2013): force indicators which soften and mitigate the negative effect of the written message. In the first post (fig. 71) the OP hopes to recover some homemade pornography and asks if any other users have it. The reply 'nobody does' is mitigated by the friendly visual of two Apu frogs hugging. The second post (fig. 72) calls a previous user 'a fucking retard' but accompanies it with the playful Photoshop of Apu's face on top of a 'Retard Chamber' holding tank. The use of the pun, as well as the use of Apu itself (a notably less antagonistic frog than others), soften the blow of the insult. In both cases, the propositional content of the posts is nuanced by the friendly visuals, which results in a decreased sense of hostility. But the meme can do the opposite as well and strengthen or emphasise the tone of the message (Spina 2019: 347). In the following examples, the image attachments escalate the tone of the posts:



Figure 73: SombriAnon (2019). 'enjoy your ban'. 4chan.



Figure 74: Anonymous (2021). 'i just need to have sex [...]'. 4chan.

The first writer (fig. 73) responds to a deleted post which has violated community guidelines. The sarcastic 'enjoy your ban' is further emphasised by the stylised visual of Pepe about to deliver a punch to the addressee. The second writer (fig. 74) is frustrated by their lacking sex life. The phrase 'i just need to have sex' is repeated four times, which serves a dual purpose in the message: it allows the writer to bypass /r9k/'s originality rule, but it also uses the pragmatic force of the repetition to strengthen the emotions of frustration, anger and despair. This is complemented by the additional pragmatic marker of a distorted, dynamic GIF of an enraged Pepe. The linguistic and extralinguistic elements therefore work together in clarifying the writer's attitude and intentions. This latter example holds emotive and pragmatic meaning at the same time: the meme text evokes emotion and communicates emphasis too.

As a third and final pragmatic function to highlight, Pepe also subverts or challenges the propositional content through *irony*. While irony in meme culture deserves its own dedicated thesis, for my present purposes I evoke ‘communicative irony’ as used by Gregory Currie (2011) to describe acts of rhetorical pretence:

[W]hen Irene says “The meeting went well”, or “Have you won the Nobel Prize yet?” she is not claiming that the meeting went well, or asking whether I have won the Nobel Prize. She is also not saying it did not go well, or asking whether, or claiming that, I did not win the prize (...). Ironist that she is, she is *pretending* to say it went well, pretending to ask whether I have won the prize’ (2011: 151).

Currie’s framework builds on the argument that ironic meaning is not simply the inversion or opposite of the uttered statement (David S. Kaufer 1981; Linda Hutcheon 1994: 12; Currie 2011: 160; Deirde Wilson and Dan Sperber 2012; Dieter Declercq 2020: 546). Instead, we can view ironic communication as a ‘kind of stancetaking, whereby language users express a dissociative stance in relation to a proposition’ (Declercq 2020: 550). Ironic communication is significant in everyday speech, and its use is notable in 4chan’s communication as well. Here, its application is further complicated by the image-text pairs and how they create meaning together. Text and image can both signal irony at the same time; the image can crystallise ironic intent that is otherwise only implicitly present in the text; and image and text can contradict one another in unique ways.



Figure 75: Anonymous (2019). 'Tfw board of Peace'. 4chan.

In the above example, the OP launches a thread discussion titled 'Tfw board of Peace' (again, 'tfw' standing for 'that feeling when') and asks: 'Who else is being extra peaceful and loving today?'. From the context (this was posted on /pol/ on 16th March 2019, at the time heavily populated with New Zealand coverage and related hate speech) we can infer that the post is ironic. The text and image work together to establish the rhetorical pretence. The written text offers an exaggerated rhetorical question, and by doing so pretends to be unaware of the then-current state of the board's discourse. The dreamy, happy image of Apu enriches the play of this statement under the pretence of being a sincere emotive marker. Even the title's 'that feeling when' contributes to this ironic roleplay.



Figure 76: Anonymous (2019). '>be me/>don't actually get laid [...]'. 4chan.

This second example, itself a greentext parody (a concept I introduced in Chapter Two), takes the form of a brief anecdote: '>be me/>don't actually get laid in any way shape or form/see ya later, virgins'. This is a play on a trope on the /b/ and /r9k/ boards – communities which are often generalised by their participants as being the home to lonely, socially incompetent and/or sexually inexperienced males. A sincere variation of this post would claim that the OP had lost their virginity or found a romantic partner, thus “graduating” the community and saying goodbye. This parody post evokes the same boastful tone, but its pride is ironic: it reveals that the OP has not experienced any satisfaction

in their sex life. The cool Pepe with shades and jacket on contributes to this pretence. Without further context clues regarding the poster's intent (this thread did not gain any interest), two options are possible. Either the post is a shitpost, and its only intended function is to engage in play with the form of this specific trope on the platform; or the OP evokes irony in a self-deprecating manner and confesses their loneliness through the ironic performance of boastful happiness.

Finally, in the third example below we can see a more subtle form of irony which can be said to emerge from the image attachment specifically:



Figure 77: Anonymous (2021). 'I have perfected the art of microwaving a steak [...]'. 4chan.

This post consists of a recipe and advice for cooking frozen steak in a microwave. The text of the post appears to be delivered in sincerity, with the poster giving trivial but detailed instructions on the cooking process from defrosting to auto-cooking. As absurd as this message is, there is a possibility that the post is not ironic at all (or, at least, that its irony is coded to be subtle enough to remain ambiguous). But should we argue for the presence of irony, we would find that it emerges from the image attachment, and its pragmatic effect on the text. Next to the recipe is yet another Apu image, this time with a quiet sadness and a chef's costume. In this image-text combination, the post can perform the ironic stance of considering oneself to be a good cook (despite the actual recipe only detailing microwave instructions). In this framing, Apu's childlike behaviour signals a juxtaposition between professional cooking and quick homemade food.

The ambiguity of the frozen steak recipe brings up a further, broader point about the challenges of researching irony in online communication. Milner discusses this in relation to the 'Poe's Law' internet adage and suggests that ironic and genuine forms of communication cannot be distinguished in an obvious manner: '[w]hen content and form are so grounded in ironic critique, communicative function becomes ambiguous' (2016: 144). 'Poe's Law' suggests that, without blatant displays of humour or irony, distinguishing between sincere, and ironic or satirical extremism on the internet is 'utterly impossible' ('Poe's Law' 2012). As Milner argues, 'Poe's Law exists because of the blur between ironic creative play and earnest hateful ideology in participatory media collectives' (2016: 144).

In a similar (though lower stakes) fashion, whether my most recent example's writer was earnest, or playfully ironic in their 'perfecting the art of microwaving a steak' may remain up in the air. However, while the methodological concern behind Poe's Law is valuable, it should not be used as a blanket excuse which renders all online meaning undeterminable. I am reminded of Linda Hutcheon's argument regarding the decoding of parody: 'to some extent, (...) parody is indeed in the eye of the beholder. But beholders need something to behold; we need signals from the text to guide our interpretation, and the degree of visibility of these signals determines their potential for assisting us' (2000: xvi). The same goes for irony. The pre-supposition of online ambiguity should not negate the decoding process as it is guided by the presence of pragmatic markers in the looked at messages. Presuming that the reader is fit to decode the context clues of ironic expression, and that the instances of ironic expression showcase some of those context clues, the only ambiguity which remains is between sincerity and "bad" irony – that is, irony which is not detectable by its addressee(s) and therefore isn't activated as such. This isn't to say that edge cases cannot exist: between these extremes of the defeatist and perfectionist researcher perspectives, we can find messages like the friendly recipe of the microwaved steak.

7.3 Frogs as iconic and metaphoric markers

While the chef-costumed Apu's exact relationship to irony is debatable, this image also has another function: it orientates its addressee(s) through its iconic representation of cooking. Even before reading the text, the image sets up expectations: it suggests that the chef hat we see on the character may have some reference to the content of the writing. In this case, this is indeed true: the image acts as a navigation tool which can summarise, foreshadow, or simply refer to some aspect of the writing's content. This function is less explored in the study of emoticons (which is likely due to the limited variation and relative simplicity of character combinations). It is, however, discussed by Lauren Gawne and Gretchen McCulloch who analyse 'emojis' as sets of visual icons: descendants of emoticons in that they can be integrated in-line directly with text, but also introducing colour and a fair amount of detail (2019). Gawne and McCulloch discuss emojis as digital gestures with multiple communicative functions. Among other observations (such as the pragmatic capabilities of the emoji to act as force marker, or to indicate disingenuous and ironic stances), the authors identify their 'illustrative' and 'metaphoric' capabilities as well (ibid).

In their framing, emojis can be 'illustrative' gestures insofar they refer to concrete objects and are modelled on those objects 'by outlining a property of [their] shape, use, or movement' (ibid). But they also take note of less literal image-meaning relationships: '[m]etaphoric gestures generally have the same form as illustrative gestures, but refer to abstract concepts. Metaphoric gestures tend to draw on larger cultural metaphors for understanding abstract concepts' (ibid). I adapt these two notions to my discussion of Pepe the frog image attachments as 'iconic markers' and 'metaphoric markers'. (Note that the authors acknowledge 'iconic' and 'illustrative' as synonymous but opt to use the latter, less used term strictly to avoid any semantic confusion with 'computer icons'). Let's look at iconic markers first:



Figure 78: Anonymous (2019). '>be me/>stressed [...]'. 4chan.



Figure 79: Anonymous (2019). 'i am writing a call roleplay and need a monster [...]'. 4chan.

The first example (fig. 78) is once again a greentext story, though a rather brief one: the writer notes that they smoked a cigarette to ease their stress. The attached image shows Apu lighting a cigarette, thus translating the object of the described event into an iconic representation of it. By comparison, the second example (fig. 79) isolates the post's object in the image instead of re-telling (or foreshadowing) an event. The writer asks fellow users for help come up with a fictional monster character. An image with the filename 'monster pepe.jpg' supports this text by signalling the topic of the post through the iconic representation of a monster (though, notably, not the monster the OP actually wishes for).

By comparison, the use of image attachments as metaphoric markers can also serve to visualise messages and thus orientate the addressee(s), but they do so by creating an abstract rather than literal connection. Whether an image is iconic or metaphoric (or, perhaps, both) depends on its context. Gawne and McCulloch raise the example of the ‘bee emoji’ and its range of uses, being used ‘not just by Beyonce fans ("Queen Bey") and beekeepers, but also by people who like honey, fans of sports teams named Hornets and Wasps, and several businesses named after bees or hives’ (ibid). To complete their list, I offer one more possibility:

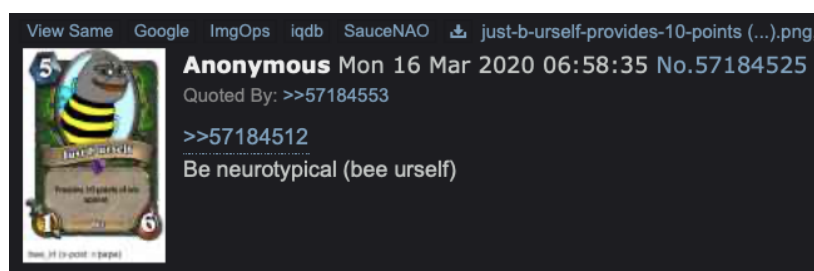


Figure 80: ‘Bee’ yourself (2020). 4chan.

In this conversation, an OP has expressed frustration over a personal grievance: someone they know, who is conventionally unattractive, still has a romantic partner. They ask how this is possible; another post (fig. 80) provides an answer: being yourself (if that self is neurotypical) helps. The image of a bee Pepe, placed within the frame of a fictional tabletop playing card, confirms this same message. The post orientates its argument through the character and through the abstracted play on the words ‘be’ and ‘bee’, which are phonetically connected. This isn’t a single instance: the “sub-meme” of the bee Pepe variation has seen use on the internet (both with and without the ‘bee yourself’ slogan), and its likeness has been often associated with the motivating statement.

Like the example above, some metaphoric markers make use of word play or internet slang to create abstract links between image and text. The datasets provide some additional examples. A smirking Pepe with chicken tenders can refer to the fictional town of Tenderville from the film *Rampage*; Apu torching a field of dry leaves can be used as hate speech toward Canadian 4channers (whose national flag contains a maple leaf); sexually frustrated users can accompany their confessions with frogs in wizard costumes to evoke the “internet legend” that a person is endowed with magical powers if they reach the age of 30 without engaging in sexual intercourse (‘30-Year-Old Virgin Wizard’ 2016). Often, these metaphoric markers require a deeper understanding of sub-cultural language, in-jokes and broader internet culture. In other cases, however, they are very straightforward:

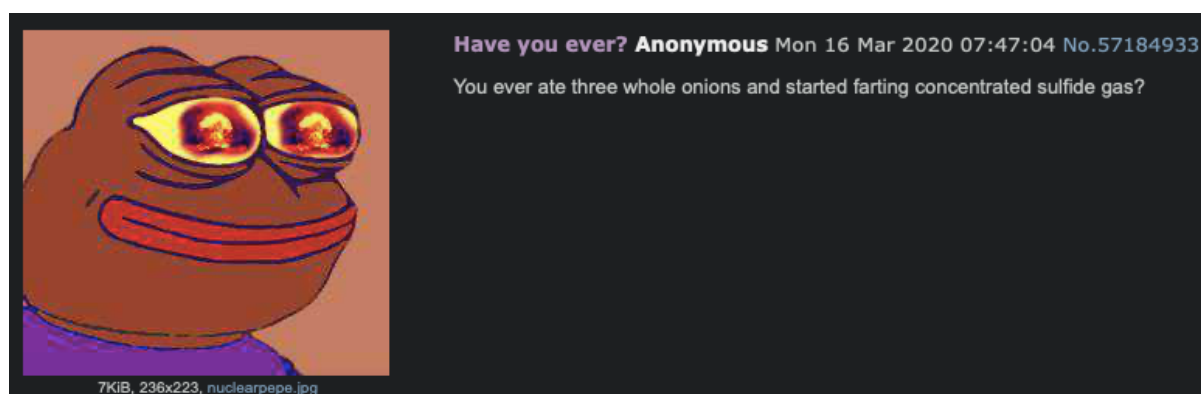


Figure 81: Anonymous (2020). 'Have you ever?'. 4chan.

The example above is, at its core, a fart joke. The writer suggests that ingesting three onions leads to flatulence made of hydrogen sulfide – and this message is visualised through a smiling Pepe whose eyes reflect a nuclear explosion in the distance. While the metaphoric connection is simple, the visual of the image does not automatically foreshadow the content of the writing. It is a play on expectation: the addressee(s) might have expected a discussion about nuclear war, destruction, interpersonal conflict or inner turmoil, but receive a different kind of image-text connection. Jokes and shitposting such as this one can make active use of both iconic and metaphoric play to draw in their audiences:

images can set up false expectations about their links to the written texts and rely on surprising metaphors or overly literal meaning to earn their punchlines.

The interplay between the iconic/metaphoric functions and the emotive function can also lead to contradictory meanings. While at times an image will successfully communicate *both* the attitude of the writer and the thematic content of the post, at other times a poster will favour one function over the other. The post below is a good example:

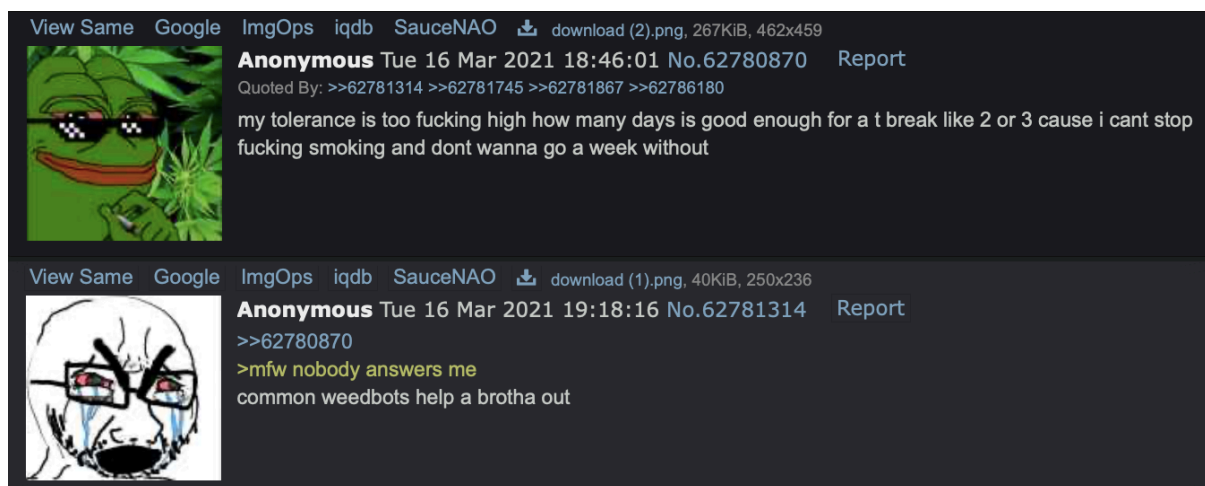


Figure 82: Seeking advice on drug addiction (2021). 4chan.

Here, the poster admits to being addicted to marijuana, and expresses an inability to stop smoking for even a week. The tone of the writing is serious and possibly frustrated (this is further evidenced by their next post which depicts enragement). However, the image of a smug Pepe smoking a joint seems to contradict this attitude. If we accept this discrepancy, we can make the argument that the thematic significance of the image took priority over its implied emotive stance in the poster's judgement. What makes this example stand out even more is its context in discussion: oddly, it is posted in an /r9k/ thread discussion with the prompt of 'Post a picture that describes how you feel right now'. I suggest that the poster likely disregarded the thread prompt and treated the thread as a space for general discussion. However, the complication remains: since Pepe the Frog images can depict both facial

expressions and other elements (such as objects, costumes, thematic backgrounds and so on) in their framing, the way these elements interact with each other and with the written text are context-sensitive, and sometimes contradictory.

7.4 Frogs as social markers of familiarity

I have now introduced multiple functions which, in one form or another, serve to aid in digital communication. However, as I explore throughout this thesis, meme texts also have underlying social significance. What about cases where the sole purpose of Pepe images is to act as a social lubricator – empty expressions which establish or re-establish social relations without doing much else? This possibility has been addressed by prior communication scholarship as well. Regarding the emoticon, Spina makes the case that signs do not always convey meaning, and instead sometimes only fulfil a ‘phatic’ social function (2019: 346). This function is for the sake of social interaction itself. Prior, Jakobson also makes the case for a ‘phatic function’ of language which ‘may be displayed by a profuse exchange of ritualized formulas, by entire dialogues with the mere purport of prolonging communication’ (1987: 68). Greeting someone, saying goodbye, small talk fall under this category. Spina goes on to note that the use of social markers can increase the familiarity of the message and create a closer sense of intimacy between speakers (2019: 346).

4chan’s communication also features many ritualised formulas, and Pepe the Frog often serves as part of these. We can draw easy parallels between a waving hand in everyday face-to-face conversation to signal hello, a waving hand emoji which opens a string of text messages and the image of a waving frog. It is, however, worth to dig deeper. For one, we can find that seemingly phatic expressions are also sometimes imbued with some other meaning and can be said to serve additional functions. On other hand, 4chan’s digital discourse also demonstrates unique cases of phatic expression which are

specific to the technological affordances and limitations of the website. Let's start with the former claim:

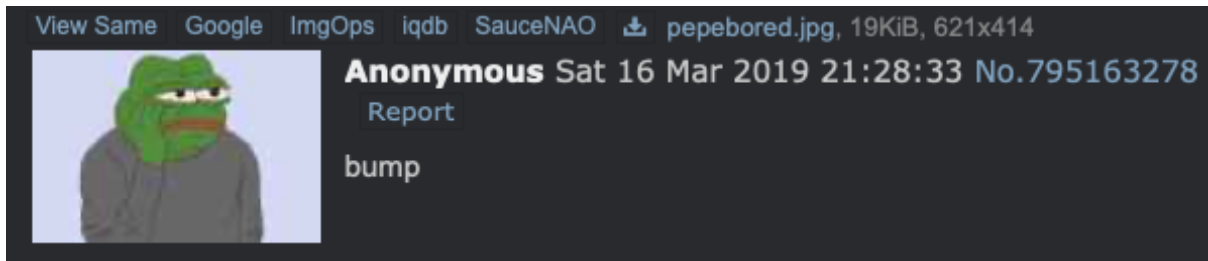


Figure 83: Anonymous (2019). 'bump'. 4chan.

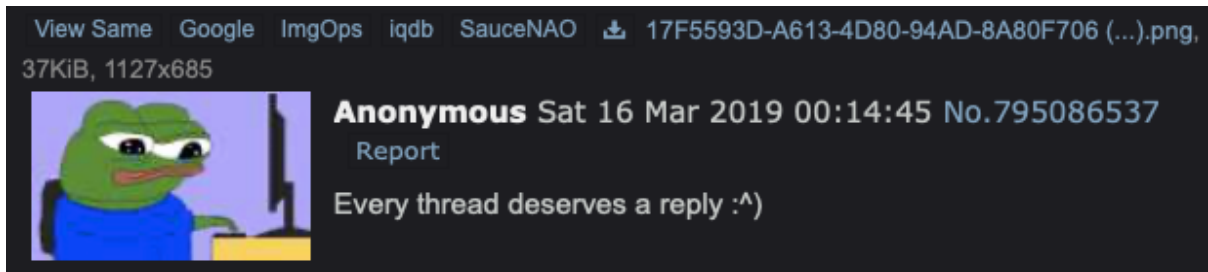


Figure 84: Anonymous (2019). 'Every thread deserves a reply :^)'. 4chan.

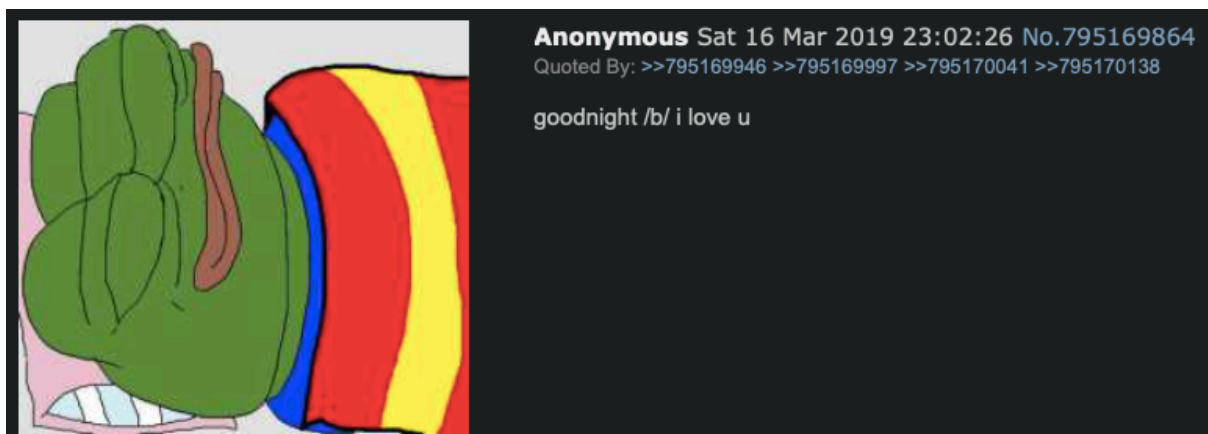


Figure 85: Anonymous (2019). 'goodnight /b/ i love u'. 4chan.

The first example (fig. 83) shows social procedure embedded in the platform's technology: by replying to a thread with the empty 'bump' phrase, this user bumps the thread to the top of the page, and thus prolongs the availability of an otherwise unpopular discussion. But this post also communicates an emotive stance: the user suggests that they are bored, and that they are hoping for more interaction

within the thread. The second example (fig. 84) is a combination of text, image and emoticon. This writer once again interacts with an unpopular thread. It features an image of Apu by a computer and the text 'Every thread deserves a reply :^)'. The post can be said to serve a social function in that it engages with another post to express familiarity and empathy (Spina 2019: 346) – but the image-text-emoticon combination could also suggest irony and a playful critique of the thread it replies to. After all, if the user sincerely found that the thread deserved a reply, that reply could have actively engaged with the topic of conversation (this one was about how modern women are the 'spawn of satan'). Instead, the post embodies a disingenuous stance: it is one out of many 'every thread deserves a reply' posts which often make fun of OPs with bad ideas. Finally, the third example (fig. 85) evokes the ritualised formula of saying goodbye and ending a conversation (though it is worth noting that the writer uploaded this post not in an already existing discussion, but as an OP). By 'goodnight /b/ i love you' it serves to maintain social relationships (though ultimately anonymous, unorganised ones). But its image attachment of a smiling, sleeping Apu also evokes an iconic illustration which foreshadows the event of going to bed, and its facial expression nuances the user's message by signalling happiness and friendliness. These functions are difficult to separate, and their seemingly phatic discussion is often, either consciously or unconsciously, packed with additional meaning.

But, on the other hand, the grassroots experimentation of imageboard discourse also introduces unique forms of phatic expression. In some cases, Pepe images can serve a social function independently from (or, rather, despite) the content of the written text:

File: [hwewqerft.jpg](#) (67 KB, 1024x962)

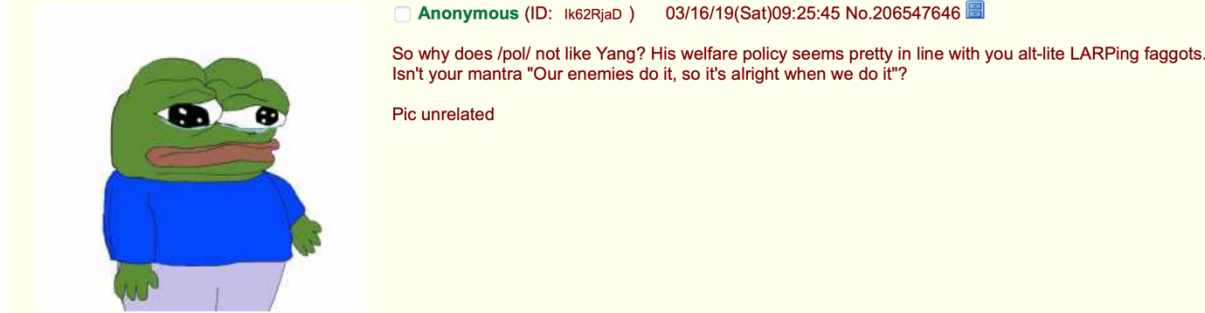


Figure 86: Anonymous (2019). 'So why does /pol/ not like Yang? [...]'. 4chan.

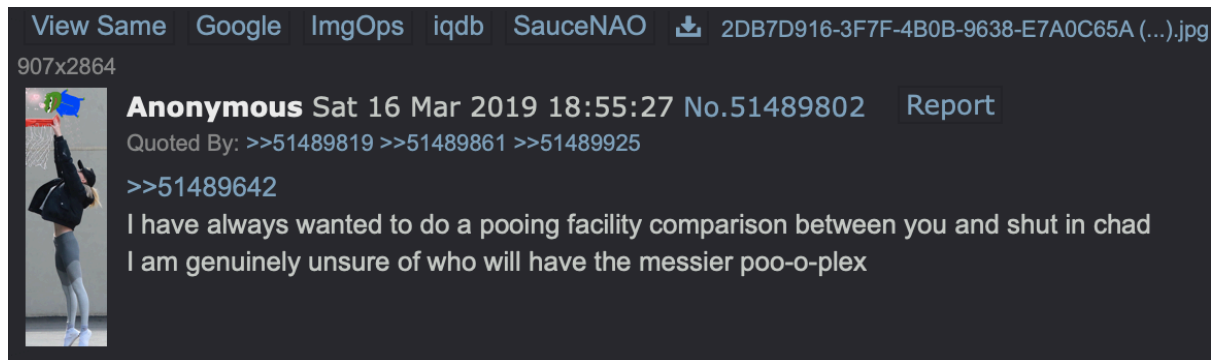


Figure 87: Anonymous (2019). 'I have always wanted to do a pooing facility comparison [...]'. 4chan.

The first post (fig. 86) wonders why some of /pol/'s userbase doesn't support Andrew Yang's politics; the second post (fig. 87) hopes that two other users in the thread post pictures of their respective bathrooms for a comparison of cleanliness. Neither of the attached images are thematically, tonally, emotionally or pragmatically related to the texts. In the case of the first post, the image of crying Apu acts as the required image attachment for a thread-starting post. It is possible that the OP did not have a fitting image at hand but was still required to upload one to launch their thread – hence the often-used phrase 'Pic unrelated' in the body of the text. The second post uses an image of an attractive woman using an infatuated Apu as a basketball, but this image doesn't add to the conversation at hand. Instead, it acts as social lubrication – or, perhaps, as a separate conversation entirely. Out of three direct replies to this post later on, one responds to the text, and two comment on the image of the woman instead. In both cases, the images establish or maintain social familiarity as a separate, but simultaneously performed act alongside the propositional content of the written texts.

These acts emerge from the vernacular activities of users as they (consciously or otherwise) regard and disregard the “rules” and conventions of the image-text units. These acts of “miscommunication” illuminate an interesting aspect of digital culture. Even though the close semiotic relationship between text and image is an established staple of imageboard discussion, this “rule” is largely socially constructed: depending on board regulations, users are relatively free to upload any image they wish to. The meaning which is co-constructed between the image element and the text element – and whether or not the ‘pic is related’ – is the result of the years-long (and still ongoing) negotiation of participants as they work their way through the challenges of CMC.

7.5 Frogs as identity markers

Next to a phatic quality in social interaction, the meme also serves more complex roles for users navigating the social structures of the website. In particular, it can mark group and individual identity. In their study of /b/, Bernstein et al. make the case that 4chan’s communities counter anonymity and the loss of ‘traditional social cues’ by developing alternative credibility mechanisms via slang and images (2011: 51). In computer-mediated communication people have different sets of resources than those in face-to-face interaction, which means that they have to rely on the digital message itself to present themselves and co-construct identity (Tagg 2012: 189). In this sense, all interactions can be seen as performances of identity (ibid). Discussing /pol/’s flag feature and thread IDs, Ludemann also suggests that ‘the consistent, repeated engagement with [these features] (...) create instances in which negotiation of identity may occur between anonymous individuals’ (2021: 4). He uses Blommaert’s notion of ‘light identity’ to assess this process:

‘Light identities emerge within smaller and more specific contexts, understood and engaged with by much smaller groups of users, which appear, disappear, or shift quickly (...) Identity

markers online (...) are located within communities of practice and everyday interactions on websites that users visit. These features are important for those within these spaces and play crucial roles for identity' (ibid; Blommaert 2018).

I build on these arguments by recognising Pepe the Frog as an example of online 'identity markers'. Pepe the Frog is highly versatile and adaptable through the technological affordances of image editing and digital creation. This also means that its variants and associated meanings for group and individual identity are dynamic, rather than fixed. Some aspects of identity are more valued than others, and some identity expressions (such as those of gender and sexuality) are more marginalised while others (such as those of national identity, political affiliation and social status) are more openly negotiated. These factors are once again subject to the different communities of the three boards as well: for instance, while both /pol/ and /r9k/ have dedicated threads for some nationalities, the /b/ dataset had no instances of any discussion of national identity. 4chan's culture is permeated by a white male centrality (Milner 2016: 130) which is therefore often presumed to be the "default" state of identity by its participants. The identity performance of individual users both conform to and challenge this wider group identity. The notion of 'identity performance' is useful because it de-emphasises the concerns raised by Poe's Law – *truly* knowing the intentions of these writers is likely impossible – and looks at the ways in which participants construct social relations (truthful or otherwise) on the platform. These are 'established primarily through a digital medium, separated from institutional channels of identity, and navigated by users with varying degrees of success' (Ludemann 2021: 5). Let's see some examples:



Figure 88: Anonymous (2021). 'i hate being british [...]'. 4chan.



Figure 89: Anonymous (2021). 'I don't have high standards in men'. 4chan.



Figure 90: Anonymous (2019). '/pol/ is not a board of Peace [...]'. 4chan.

The three posts negotiate identity in different ways. The first poster (fig. 88) actively identifies themselves as British in the written text and expresses unhappiness with their national identity. This is illustrated by a sad Pepe in British national attire, at once symbolising the evoked identity and emotive stance of the writer. The second poster (fig. 89) discusses their ideal romantic partner (white,

takes care of himself, has a job, isn't abusive) and evokes a female or feminine identity with its attached 'femanon' (short for 'female anonymous') frog variant. Female perspectives are a rarer occurrence on the platform, and when they do occur, their authenticity is often questioned by other users. The third post (fig. 90) uses a Nazi Pepe we have seen earlier in this chapter, now attached to the '/pol/ is a board of peace' slogan we have also seen earlier (though this time transformed through word play to state that /pol/ is 'bored of peace').

In context of this third post, we can interpret the image in two, possibly overlapping, ways. First, the image can be seen as interacting with another identity marker: the German flag set by either the user's real geolocation, or one manipulated through VPN use. In this sense, these two elements could contribute to a construction of national identity. It is more likely, however, that the user uses the image to construct a political identity instead. It suggests that the user embraces the identity characteristics of far-right ideology, and it also alludes to a shared, co-constructed group identity. After all, the writer attempts to speak for the entire board in the written content of the message as well.

While I have focused closely on 4chan's discourse only through the lens of the Pepe the Frog meme, it is useful to note that not all users on 4chan actively use Pepe images, nor are they required to do so. As a recurring meme character on the platform, Pepe in general is subject to ongoing social negotiation, and the act of 'frogposting' itself becomes a form of identity performance. This identity of the 'frogposter' is not fixed. Its meaning is often constructed by depicting interactions with other popular visual "characters" such as the humanoid 'Wojak' (who deserves his own research enquiry). Often, the Wojak and Pepe characters are portrayed in conflict, each representing a different kind of constructed identity on the platform. At other times, they are associated with specific character traits, as Pepe behaves in more eccentric, playful or violent ways than the Wojak character does. Here, we can see a glimpse of this duality:

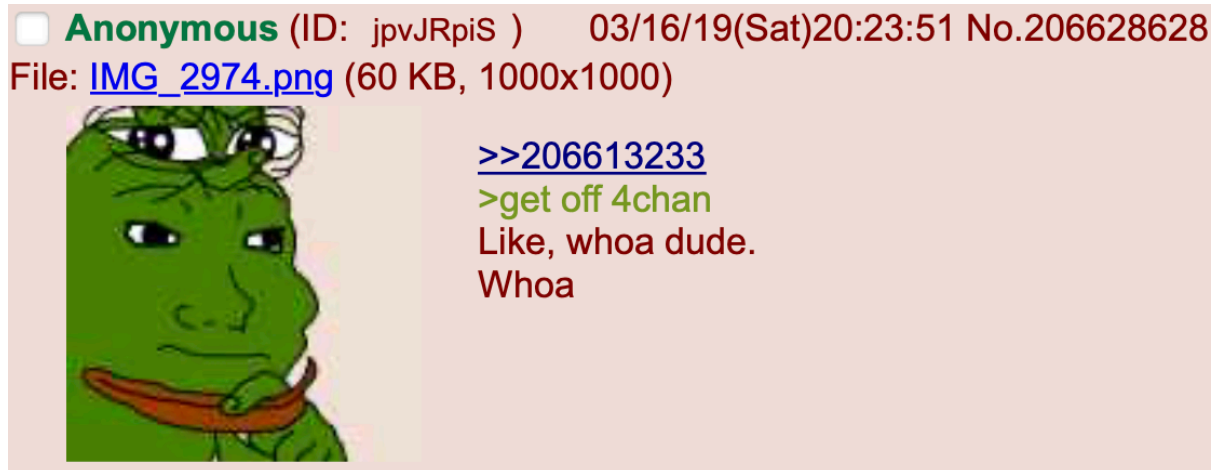


Figure 91: Anonymous (2019). '>get off 4chan [...]'. 4chan.

This poster is playfully surprised at the OP's prior statement that leaving 4chan shows a new perspective of outside society. The image visualises a change in attitude: a Pepe is revealed to be a Wojak as he removes the facial features of the frog from himself. It is a 'let's be serious' moment: it acknowledges the performative quality of Pepe (or, at least, its Smug Pepe variant) as used like a mask in communication, and thus "breaks character". We can also witness this concept of conscious performance from another angle, in the form of a popular copy-pasta:

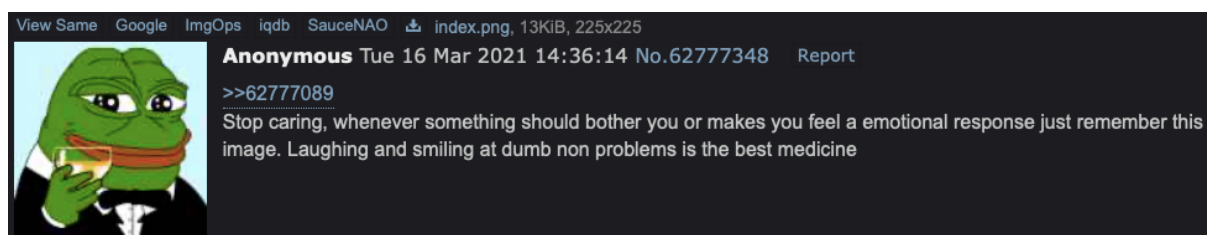


Figure 92: Anonymous (2021). 'Stop caring [...]'. 4chan.

The copy-pasta urges the addressee(s) to 'stop caring', and to adopt the performative stance of the pictured tuxedo Pepe variant whenever they feel frustrated. This "unfeeling" smugness serves as an instruction for 4chan's online conduct, and potentially for offsite and offline behaviour as well. We could therefore distil the character to the identity performance of the 'jester' whose best defence is to attack.

However, throughout this case study I have also shown other forms of identity performance associated with the meme which do not fit this bracket. As the most obvious counterexample, we have seen the Apu variant, as it embraces the vulnerability and insecurities that the 'Tuxedo Pepe' denies. It has other associations as well: for instance, the datasets show Apu as regularly used by the participants of /r9k/'s recurring 'britfeel' thread. Britfeel invites British users to engage in conversation of various topics. The heavily recurring use of Apu within the thread co-appropriates it as an abstract marker for national identity:

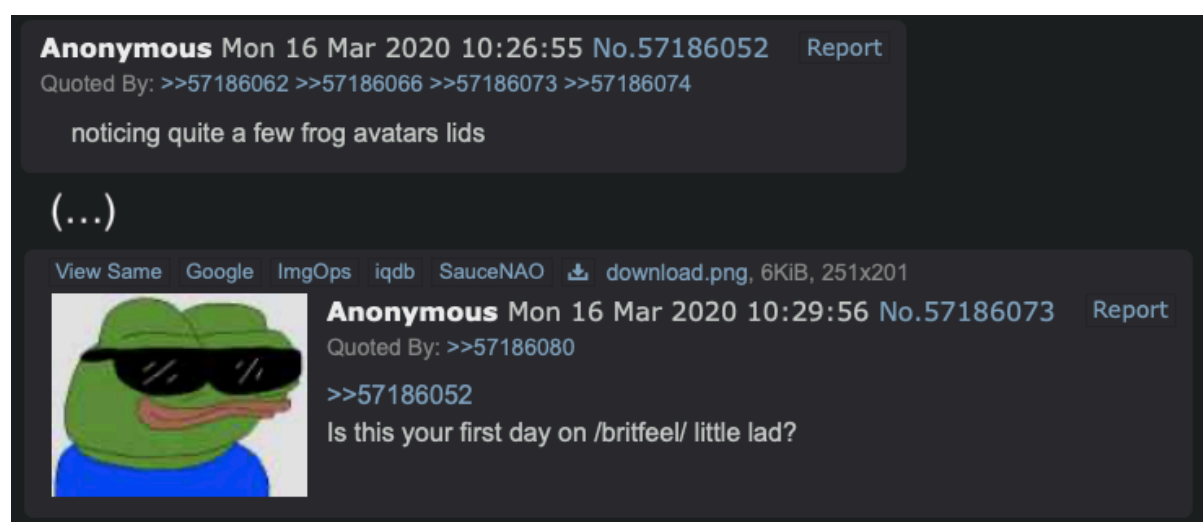


Figure 93: Frogs on /britfeel/ (2020). 4chan.

In another notable context, Apu is also evoked in relation to a self-identification with autism. Such identity performance often places emphasis on childlike behaviour, the embracing of emotions and the pursuit of hobbies and interests. This isn't to say that all Apu-posters are bound by this description; and it is also possible that bits of the Apu persona have been co-constructed to serve as an alternative to the confidence and smugness of the popular Smug Pepe variant. Nevertheless, the data shows evidence of disability identity in association with the character:

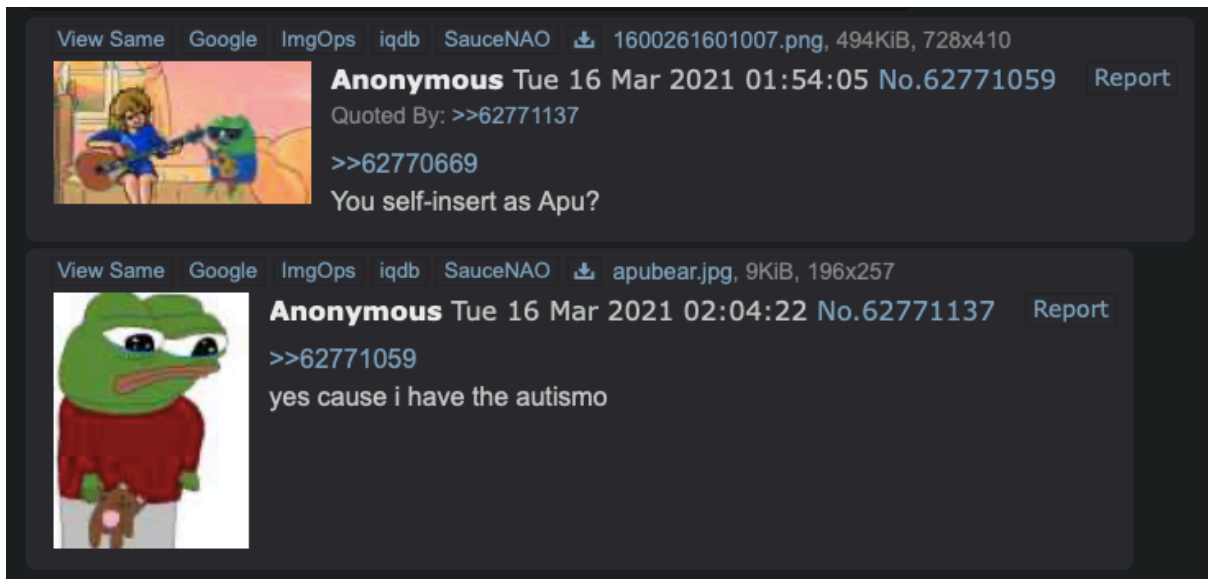


Figure 94: Self-inserting as Apu (2021). 4chan.

Finally, while there is plenty of evidence for the meme’s popularity and frequent use within the datasets, users often reject and disapprove of its use too. ‘Frogposter’ is a derogatory term to label participants who make use of the meme by those who do not. This further complicates the notions of a shared ‘lingua franca’, and of a consistent group identity, on the platform. We can see an instance of the conflict here:

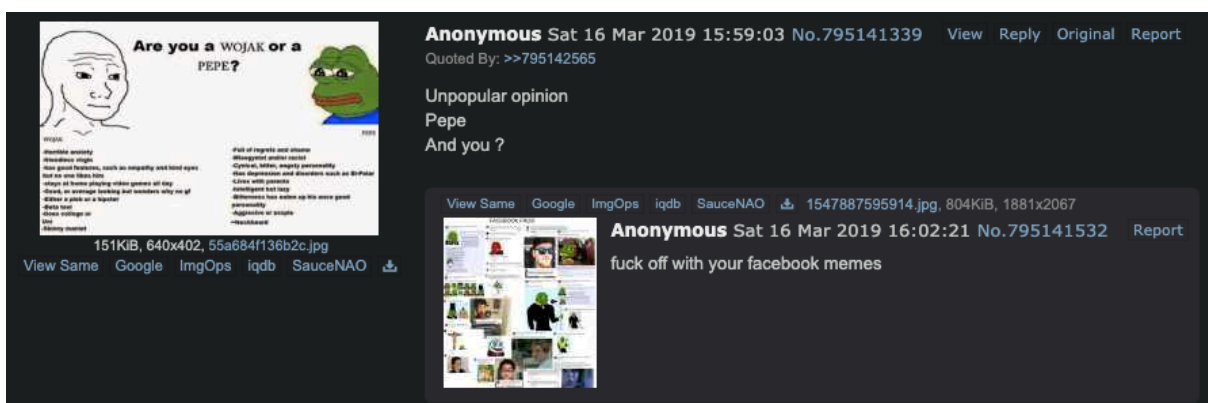


Figure 95: Are you a Wojak or a Pepe? (2019). 4chan.

The OP launches an unsuccessful thread discussion, led by the attached image which asks the question ‘Are you a Wojak or a Pepe?’ before listing fictionalised character traits for both. The sole reply writes

‘fuck off with your facebook memes’, and posts a collage of Pepe the Frog images as used on other social media. This could suggest a tension in the meme’s use on post-2016 4chan (as Pepe has already seen widespread transmedia popularity at one point). But it’s also telling of the meme’s ethos on the platform: it is co-constructed but unorganised, popular but contested, repetitive but variable. Performance and play are central to its everyday use, and its social function as identity marker (both towards pre-existing social identities and the identity of the ‘frogposter’) is the subject of ongoing negotiation through trial and error.

7.6 Frogs as creative resources

As a final category for my case study, Pepe the Frog is also used as a creative resource. In other words, frogs offer users source material for creative play. The datasets reveal a complex dynamic for these practices. For one, artists – both ‘good’ and ‘bad’ artists in the traditional sense, though bearing in mind that this distinction is not as meaningful here – draw, redraw, edit, remix, animate image variations either independently or in conversation with other users. At the same time, users also exchange variations with each other. This can happen implicitly during the natural flow of conversation (a user sees an image they like and save it for later use), or explicitly through users requesting and offering variations to enrich their collections or show those off to other users.

Spina details how this function in emoji use enhances social media discourse. As she argues, participants may aim at ‘generating a visual salience of the text, so that the message raises an interest in other participants’ (2019: 347). Therefore, this function is also social in nature. She adds that this need for salience ‘is particularly strong in environments like social networks, where interactions take place as flows of conversations, with hundreds of messages that follow and overlap one another in the timelines of participants’ (ibid). This is similar to what Jakobson identifies as the ‘poetic function’ of language (though no longer rooted in literal speech). Jakobson discusses the poetic function as

'message for its own sake' (1987: 69), and emphasises word ordering, alliteration, rhyming as they reinforce the 'impressiveness and efficacy' of the message (1987: 70). Translated to the world of frogposting, these arguments draw attention to the use of the meme as a colourful resource for boosting salience in anonymous discussion. This function hinges on users' ever-increasing ability to alter digital images. While getting the message across is still important, it is often balanced with playful experimentation to give visual prominence to posts:

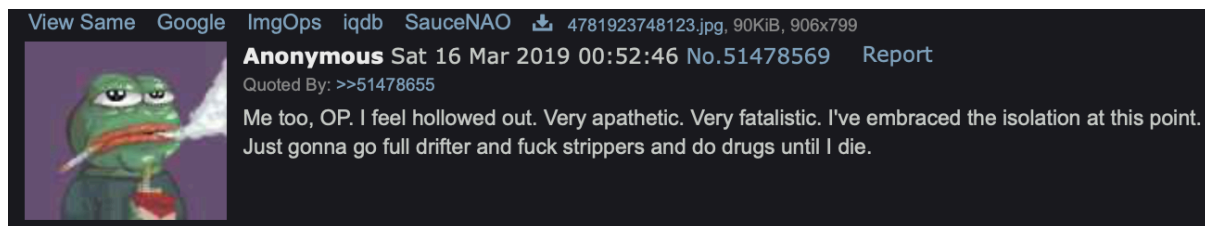


Figure 96: Anonymous (2019). 'Me too, OP. I feel hollowed out [...]'. 4chan.

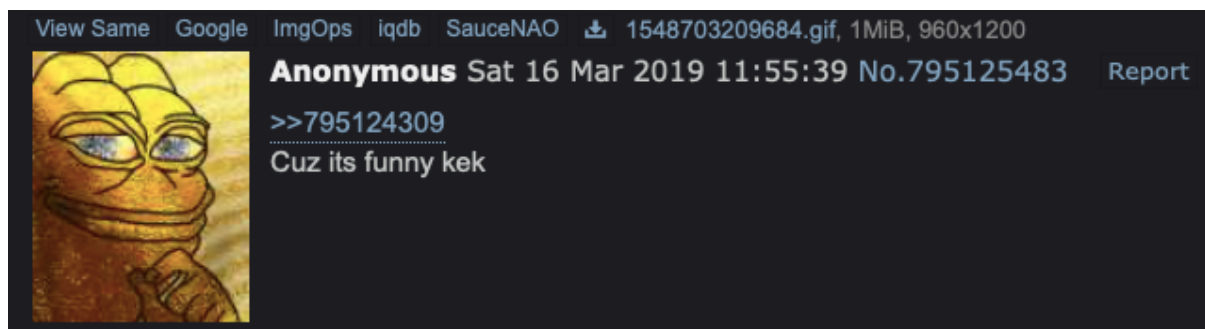


Figure 97: Anonymous (2019). 'Cuz its funny kek'. 4chan.

These instances, for example, both function as stance and identity markers in conversation – but they also enrich this formula by using less prominent, visually interesting image variations. Compared to the institutionally structured symbol sets of emojis, the possibilities of visual manipulation here are practically endless. Different image variations can be picked up, recycled and forgotten as participants play with different variations, and balance familiarity with novelty. Sometimes, another function (such as quickly conveying an emotive stance) takes priority; at other times, users engage in visual play to challenge or nuance the patterns of repetition.

The instances above show the implicit practice of constructing meaning: these posts incorporate salient image variants into everyday conversation. There is, however, plenty of evidence for the explicit negotiation and discussion of image variants too: what variations should be made next, what preferences users have about different variations, and whose personal folders can reveal a “rare” Pepe. Next to its “regular” uses, Pepe the Frog is also subject to meta-discussion. Users request and share lesser known or newer image variants; new events and emerging social needs motivate the creation and evaluation of novel images; and thematic threads encourage the exchange of rarer, niche variants. The social needs for accurate and salient communication converge with the pleasures of vernacular creativity. This ties in with Jakobson’s notion of language’s ‘metalingual’ function which comes into play ‘[w]henver the addresser and/or the addressee need to check up whether they use the same code’ (1987: 69). As he suggests, metalanguage is not only a necessary scientific tool for linguists, but it also plays an important role in everyday language (ibid). Even though Pepe the Frog is not a language, its meta-communicative functions further confirm its dynamic use in online conversation. As one last dive into my datasets, consider the two examples below which can tell us more about these processes.



Figure 98: Pepe dump thread on /b/ (2019). 4chan.

This thread, posted on /b/, is a thematic ‘dump thread’. A category or theme is suggested, and either a single user or multiple users upload (dump) content which fits the category. As I have noted before, this type of interaction is characteristic of the /b/ board specifically (as its rules allow for ‘random’, thematically loose interactions, and posts often consist of uploaded images without written text).

In the above example, the OP of the dump thread opens with a request and a call to action: ‘Requesting the tuxedo pepe with the cigar. Also dump all your pepes’. Another user provides the requested image right away, and the rest of the thread becomes an exchange of creative resources. As we can see (fig. 98), the next upload post arrives without text; it happens to depict another instance of identity play (Wojak hiding in Pepe’s mouth like it’s a costume). 67 more images follow, likely provided by multiple participants. They include Pepe-Wojak pairings, Pepes of various nationalities, psychedelic and colourful variants, depictions of radical and extreme imagery (such as Hitler pepe, Pepe transformed into the Happy Merchant caricature, Pepe as the New Zealand shooter), and more straightforward “reaction image” variants as well (sad Pepe, happy Pepe and so on). Some of these may be “relics” from older trends (such as the concept of the ‘rare Pepe’ playfully associated with scarcity and special value). By requesting, sharing, uploading and downloading, these users engage in the “lower threshold” practices of reuse – but these practices are essential for the “ecosystem” of the meme’s use in online discourse.

By comparison, we can see the “higher engagement” processes of freshly created visual content in the second example below. This /r9k/ thread from 2021 allows a peek behind the curtain as vernacular artists draw and upload their work for feedback. The occasion is the emergence of a new character in 4chan’s lore: a female character called ‘Aspie’ to act as the romantic interest for Apu in scenarios (sometimes sexual, but often sentimental and romantic). Aspie likely got her name from Asperger’s Syndrome to complement Apu’s constructed identity and thematic meaning. As seen in the example,

the artist of the OC ('original content') puts the couple in the environment of the Southern United States and asks for feedback on their work:

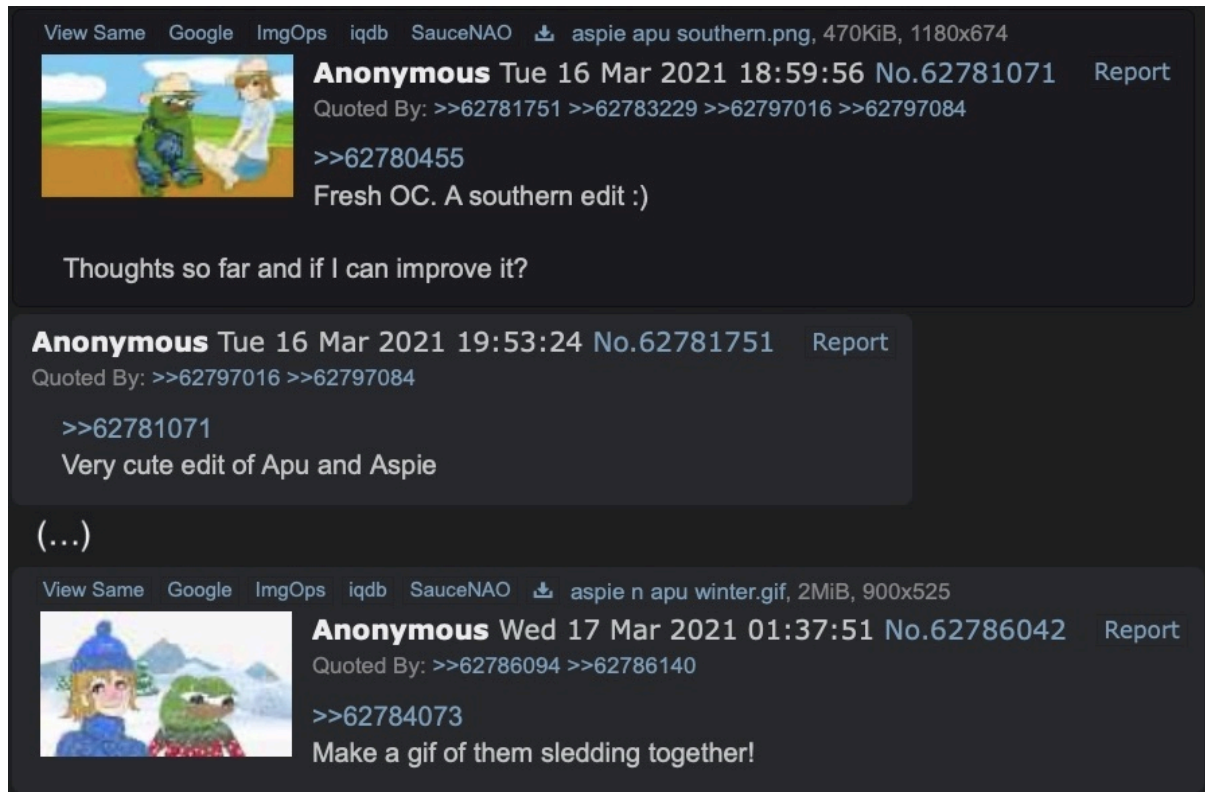


Figure 99: Workshopping new variations (2021). 4chan.

Other users critique or compliment the work, and request new scenarios to be depicted ('Make a gif of them sledding together!'). This marks the early stages in the everyday use and reuse of new image variants. Their later use on the platform (or, perhaps, elsewhere on the internet) depends on the perceived quality and value of the art, their adaptability in communication, and any additional meanings they may gain through trial and error in communication. Unravelling the threads of textual transformation, re-entextualisation and resemiotisation in their entirety is likely impossible. In this case, however, we can see another, small step of this process. Five hours later on the board, Apu and Aspie as farmers re-appear:

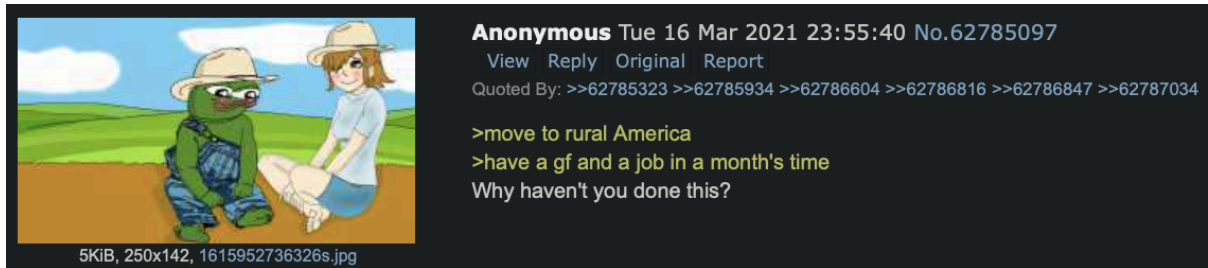


Figure 100: Anonymous (2021). '>move to rural America [...]'. 4chan.

The same image, which was earlier offered as a creative resource, now occupies a new role in a different thread discussion. Alongside it, the OP asks: '>move to rural America/>have a gf and a job in a month's time/Why haven't you done this?'. Here, the image gains the role of the iconic marker in depicting the event described by the OP. It also has metaphoric meaning: the happy frog and his barefoot partner signify an ideal relationship, and the bliss of simple life. It is unclear whether the writer constructs the post's narrative around the newly found image variant, or if the image fulfils an already existing need for expression. Neither can we be sure how much attention it will get in subsequent future communication. Either way, the image is on its way.

8. CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have further elaborated on the notion of transformation. In comparison to some of my earlier discussion, transformation here has been looked at as part of everyday social and semiotic processes. I have argued for the importance of everyday reuse: the elements of participation which are easily dismissed as 'lower threshold', or as part of processes such as 'virality' outside of meaningful change. I have argued that digital media studies can benefit from analytic approaches which also consider these practices – which I have called the building blocks of meme participation. As a demonstration of these claims, I have conducted a qualitative content analysis project on the Pepe the Frog meme: one which, as I have noted, had often been discussed based on its formal characteristics alone, and without much focus towards its actual everyday use on social media. This project has

proposed to analyse Pepe the Frog posts as image-pair units in digital communication (an approach which has been underused in social media research) to see how the meme is used. Existing scholarly enquiry around this phenomenon (discussing *only* images or *only* text on 4chan; discussing image and text, but not on 4chan) has helped in connecting the dots between the additional disciplines of linguistic and communicative theories and my own data findings.

The resulting patterns are complex, but not meaningless. I have demonstrated that the meme fulfils multiple functions which often co-exist within the same messages. These functions have included those of emotive markers; pragmatic markers; iconic and metaphoric markers; social markers of familiarity; identity markers; creative resources. I have also explored the acts social negotiation at the heart of the communication and miscommunication taking place on the platform. I have argued that the combination of technological affordances/limitations and the social needs and interests of online participants result in a unique, complex site of vernacular creativity and social play. I demonstrated these claims through my analysis of the Pepe the Frog meme. Even though Pepe the Frog is not universally used on the platform, and his everyday application can have vastly different results, the emerging patterns of the meme's communicative potentialities can help us gain a deeper understanding of computer-mediated communication and meme participation as well. As discussed, meaning changes in both big and small ways through online participation. I consider these everyday changes in meaning, in parallel with hypertextuality and hypermediacy, as two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, it is the vibrant results of online creativity which qualifies and defines the genre of memes; on the other hand, these results are made up of the complex, messy, often unorganised social activities of everyday reuse.

In addition to my findings above, my work has also generated some methodological learnings on how to study memes. I have argued that the patterns of Pepe the Frog's use on the 4chan platform warrant a lens of research which considers image-text pairs as units of analysis. This can, in turn, improve the

accuracy of both qualitative and quantitative analyses. I have also argued in favour of manual analysis and the significance of the 'human instrument' of qualitative research in order to accommodate the subtle changes of re-entextualisation and resemiotisation in digital data. At the same time, I have also made note of the ethical implications of such research (such as the mental toll of researching extreme content), which need further consideration.

Much of this chapter has been dedicated to the 'Pepe the Frog problem': whether the brief revisiting of the meme years after its "locked" perception in 2016 can provide a more satisfying answer than the one in the public consensus. But the Pepe the Frog problem is also symptomatic of the challenges raised by digital media in general. 'What memes do' cannot have a straightforward answer if 'what memes are' doesn't have a straightforward one either. This need not be an unsolvable issue for digital media studies; it should be an opportunity. Memes are made up of many meme texts, and those meme texts are used and reused in many ways. Meaning changes in complex ways, and only fractions of these changes are seen and decoded by the individual (both the everyday user and the researcher). Perhaps the best that media research can do is to pick up the pieces left behind by these endless waves of cultural participation and compare them to some other pieces. And this is okay.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I investigated the topic of memes: works of cultural expression which have enjoyed wide popularity within the internet culture of the last thirty years, and which have received increasing academic attention for the past decade. In my Introduction I identified three key research questions to guide my investigation: ‘How can memes be situated in the cultural landscape and what characteristics underpin their presence in digital culture?’, ‘How exactly do memes transform other texts and media on the internet?’ and ‘How do the day-to-day vernacular participatory practices at the heart of meme culture nuance our understanding of memes?’ The three chapters of this thesis built on each other to answer these questions. First, I proposed to re-assess memes as a vernacular genre premised on social laughter, social play and the creative reuse of other texts, genres, media. Then, I adapted the lens of parody theory to illuminate these acts of transformation. Finally, I qualified and complicated these previous understandings of transformation by highlighting the complexities of everyday reuse. Together, my arguments and findings sought to demystify memes as transformative works co-created and negotiated in complex ways on the internet. The three arguments are interconnected. Both genre and parody theories allow meme culture to demonstrate recognisable and decodable patterns of social needs and pleasures (such as humour, social play and vernacular creativity). Genre as social action can guide our attention towards the instances of everyday contextualisation which take place as online participants engage with meme culture. Finally, the media play of parody and the unsung everyday activities of users present two sides of the same coin: transformation.

My definition of memes as a genre offers an alternative to most definitions of memes in current digital media scholarship. These have varied throughout the past decade, and many of them have been driven by the ambition to bridge the gap between memes (as used in the vernacular) and the evolutionary analogies of Richard Dawkins’s memetics. Although the usefulness of this connection has

been questioned by recent scholarship (Denisova 2019; Wiggins 2019), the separation of the two notions not only benefits from further emphasis but is necessary to set the stage for my reframing of memes-as-genre. In the place of the ‘memetic’ approach, the genre definition shifts focus from the often-discussed cultural diffusion of memes (that they are made up of multiple artefacts; that they are spread through participatory engagement; that they ‘replicate’ and ‘mutate’) to their *function*. Instead of characteristics which apply to much of social media content in general (such as multimodality and online spread), I re-introduced memes with attention to the social logics of humour, play and creative experimentation. As social media users act upon these social motivations within the boundaries and affordances of social media and digital expression, these potentialities lead to the emergence of new creative acts. The emergent genre of memes can be understood as the recurrent patterns of such creative acts growing so prominent that they needed a new name – which led to the vernacular “borrowing” of the term ‘meme’.

Here, my discussion connected the dots between the disciplines of genre and digital media theories. I argued that memes exemplify both the aggressive ‘hypermedia’ play that Bolter and Grusin associate with the potentialities of the new, digital medium (2000: 46), and the notion of the ‘emergent genre’ described by Miller and Shepherd (2009). In other words, the novel acts of hypermedia play which qualify the digital medium as more than just a change in a ‘channel of transmission’ (Rodowick 2007) are *also* what qualify memes as a new genre. As such, my definition placed the emergent genre of memes in the specific media context of the Web 2.0 social media environment. This approach contrasts some recent understandings of memes (Shifman 2013; Milner 2016) that retroactively apply the ‘meme’ label to past, pre-internet cultural phenomena that also demonstrate some element of transformation or spread or social participation. My re-positioning of memes into the context of social media served to illuminate meme-creation as a type of online expression which is novel and context-specific enough to be called a genre in its own right.

The second key contribution of this thesis concerned the idea of parody, and its wider application to meme culture. I find that parody has the potential to account for much of the rich intertextual (in my approach, 'hypertextual') transformation which turns popular cartoon characters into grotesque monsters, and film sequences into mouldable templates for creative experimentation. In addition, parody's significance in the everyday and legal contexts can further ground the understanding of the relationship between memes and the works they reference. Despite this, even though current digital media scholarship often mentions parody for its potential utility for understanding memes, the significance of this link has not yet been fully stated. I contextualised this as the 'parody problem': I argued that the frameworks of parody recently applied to digital media – ones premised on critique, mockery and imitation of style – were an ill fit for the discussion of memes. This is for two reasons. First, the complex multi-texted and multi-voiced nature of memes resists the overly restrictive frameworks of a singular intent or attitude (in this case, critique). Second, this proposed hierarchy between the original work and the derivative, spiteful parody cannot do justice to the rich, creative transformations exhibited by meme culture.

As a solution, I developed a theoretical framework better suited for the analytical discussion of transformation in meme culture. This framework re-assessed parody's current day application with a focus on 'ambivalence': the complex multi-presence of various intents, interests and purposes that characterise meme participation. Here, I once again connected two separate but complementary notions: the 'ambivalent internet' as discussed by Phillips and Milner (2017), and the dynamic reappraisal of parody put forward by Rose (1979, 1993) and Hutcheon (1985) which I called 'ambivalent parody'. This is a much-needed update, particularly in context of American and European copyright law of the last few decades (specifically, under the legal cases of 'Campbell', 'Deckmyn' and 'Shazam') also moving towards an understanding of parody beyond ridicule and critique. Parody is beneficial for memes because it illuminates some of the ways in which memes reuse other works. Memes demonstrate a creative distance from their referenced texts, which means that meme texts

are first and foremost transformative in nature. This distance is often established through the use of comic incongruity as original works are juxtaposed with playful and humorous pairings (textually, tonally, stylistically and so on). In addition, this relationship is ambivalent in nature: reverence, critique and play may all be ingredients of the same instance of parodic transformation. Moreover, parody in memes is not restricted to the relationship between just two texts (one original work and one parody text). This means that a meme can be decoded as the parody of multiple works, styles and genres at the same time. Further, it also means that a “complete” picture of the parodic connection might only truly crystallise from the analysis of multiple meme texts whose recurring patterns co-construct the parodic meaning.

To demonstrate these ideas in practice, I examined the case study of the Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life meme under the lens of parody. With respect to Summers (2020) whose application of more restrictive parody theory had suggested that Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life couldn't qualify as parody (it is too divorced from *Shrek's* themes and too unclear in its intentions), I argued differently. I found that the framework of ambivalent parody could successfully explore the ways in which the meme re-appropriated various genres and styles in addition to the Shrek franchise and its surrounding media fandom. Moreover, the meme also satisfied the criteria of transformativeness for parody under the mentioned legal precedents in US, EU and UK copyright law (although the parody exception's exact application to works of meme culture remains to be seen). Importantly, however, the primary purpose of my enquiry was not to test Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life, but to test parody for its usefulness in deepening our understanding and appreciation of transformation in meme culture. It served this purpose well. Looking beyond the presumed meaninglessness of the “weird internet”, parody as an analytical tool can serve to uncover meaning in the social and cultural structures of comic incongruity, media play, social performance and creative reuse.

Finally, I addressed the question of transformation as it happens in ‘everyday reuse’: the day-to-day participatory activities of meme participants, and the functions and meanings which crystallise from those activities. I joined previous scholarship (Jenkins et al. 2013; Varis and Blommaert 2014) in emphasising the inherent significance of change in meaning as it happens not only through creation but also through other, unchronicled forms of participation. These include, although aren’t limited to, the sharing, evaluating, using and misusing, understanding and misunderstanding of cultural information. It should be noted, however, that the contrasting idea of ‘virality’ (whereby cultural information spreads through copying, without the agency of participants or contextual changes in the message bearing significance) has also prevailed in digital media and meme studies. The difference between these two approaches is especially important for memes as they are often contrasted against ‘viral’ texts as two ends of a spectrum between meaningful transformation and meaningless imitation. In a separate but related problem, it has also been suggested that meme culture is governed by universally understood collective precedent (Shifman 2013; Milner 2016). I took a stance against these approaches.

I constructed my second case study, on the Pepe the Frog meme, to offer further clarity on these issues. The methodology of this data-driven qualitative content analysis study was informed by the understanding that, on the 4chan imageboard, memes like Pepe the Frog are made to mean in the specific contexts of written forum discussion. This in turn informs the research methods which can accommodate the manual interpretation of image-text pairs as units of analysis. Further, my methodological framework succeeded in the interdisciplinary adaptation of data harvesting and data analysis methods as well as communication studies onto digital media and cultural research. My findings confirmed that, despite the previously “locked in” public understanding of Pepe the Frog, the meme exhibited a large variety of meanings, functions and variations. In addition, the findings suggested that the very same images could be decoded in meaningfully different ways based on their context-of-use and their shifting roles in discussion. These included the communicative functions of

emotive markers, pragmatic markers, iconic and metaphoric markers, social markers of familiarity, identity markers and creative resources. Finally, my findings gave an indication that the meaning of the meme was continuously negotiated as participants engaged in various kinds of social play (from ironic expression to identity play to the exploration of creative resources). The success of these efforts in conversation varied as well. The main contribution of this case study lies in its data-based recognition of different types of online participation and different types of changes in meaning (including both textual and contextual transformation). It provides further confirmation that meaning within meme culture is transformed in both obvious and subtle ways, and that the accuracy and clarity of meme research is enhanced by approaches which consider and embrace these complexities.

Due to the limitations of scope in place that ensured that I would eventually finish writing this thesis, some areas of interest – which I only briefly discuss, or which only emerge from the implications of my discussion – remain. I would like to put forward the ones I find particularly interesting for future research (be that my own or someone else's). Due to the interdisciplinary nature of my research – which has, at points, incorporated ideas from genre theory, copyright law, comedy and play theories, parody and pastiche theories, fandom studies, linguistics and communication studies and data-driven research methodology – these proposed areas also range somewhat in their disciplinary approach. Nevertheless, I would argue that the dynamic application of such theories onto meme studies can further inform our understanding of digital media.

One limitation of my research relates to the relative popularity of my two case studies on frogs and ogres (Pepe the Frog and Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life, respectively). Both of these memes are well-known, controversial and rather well-documented in comparison to other online trends we can discuss under the umbrella of meme culture. My decision to dig up already treaded ground was purposeful: I used both case studies to revisit and re-consider meaning. However, these decisions were also informed by metrics of importance (such as the received traffic or public infamy of the

memes) which need not be representative of meme culture's value in its own right. In other words, the rabbit hole goes deeper, and cultural research is enriched by diverse case studies from the internet. There is plenty to look at and discuss, some of which has received academic attention, some less so. Enquiry could look both to the future (how TikTok trends or everyday AI use recycle and recreate other texts and media) and the recent past (how genres like 'YouTube Poop' and MLG montage parodies experiment with the language of amateur video editing and remix). These areas and case studies could potentially benefit from some of the frameworks discussed in this thesis: for instance, how parody and/or pastiche can apply to the eccentric cartoon edits of early YouTube Poop works; or how the concept of the 'Ugly Internet' can inform an understanding of the grotesque works of open access AI image creation.

Similarly, while my findings of Western-centric data could potentially offer some implications or bases of comparison for the wider international uses of memes, these should not be taken for granted – which makes non-Anglo-American investigations such as that of de Seta's study of Pepe in Hong Kong (2019) significant. National, international and transnational meme research raises new opportunities for analysis; Denisova (2019), for instance, looks in detail at political and national identities as displayed in Russian language meme texts. While my offered examples in this thesis have stayed within the realm of Western popular culture, I find it likely that transgressing this line can lead to further discoveries. Potential future contributions to this field could consider a trans-language approach to meaning-making in memes as well. We can theorise that there are meaningful differences between language, identity and cultural tradition across different countries which resist a universal 'lingua franca' argument. On the other hand, we can also presuppose that some common themes, characteristics and social motivations are comparable enough to reveal interesting dynamics across the "borders" of national meme cultures.

As an example of this, as a dual British-Hungarian national I had been interested in exploring the potentialities of case studies which demonstrated a trans-cultural presence between these two countries – however, this enquiry eventually fell out of scope for this thesis. Valuable research is being done on Hungarian memes, such as the socio-political enquiries of Lukács (2022) or Kallius and Adriaans (2022). Less is done in media studies, even though transcultural and trans-language approaches could reveal findings about the national understandings of popular culture. I am particularly interested in Hungarian social media meme accounts such as noemiivagvolgyi and ponciuszmegmondja which actively blend both national and international elements. These range from the comic recycling of both Western and Hungarian media properties to the incorporation of Hungarian politics and social anxieties. Such research could also explore the unique cultural cross-section of Western media as filtered through the localisation of the Hungarian film dubbing industry, and the impact of this practice on online culture. This is exemplified, for instance, by the dubbed version of Michael Palin’s Pontius Pilate character from *The Life of Brian* turning into the recurring character of Hungarian memes. This latter idea could open the door to broader, interdisciplinary transcultural research. The dedicated dubbing practices of some countries and their effect on the everyday understanding of film language may very well be mirrored in the way that dubbed media properties are then remediated by memes.

A related, though more methodologically centred, question for future meme research concerns the inconsistencies in digital data archival and preservation. I have been particularly moved by the tragic fate of ShrekChan: a creatively rich but largely unarchived subcultural space which is now almost completely lost to time. This reveals a broader concern about the current priorities of broader cultural understanding. Public wikis such as Know Your Meme are ultimately limited in the extent of research they can provide, and the internet data collected by volunteers of the Internet Archive also shows limitation in scope and consistency. Should we take the historical significance of meme culture seriously, we’ll find that the clock is already ticking and that valuable cultural resources (YouTube

accounts deleted, entire platforms such as Vine closing) often disappear from the internet. The sooner we recognise the cultural value of meme participation through academic enquiry, the sooner we can turn our attention to preserving its snapshots and fragments in the form of archival projects, public data repositories and further research. Different types of online content likely require different considerations toward archiving, and it's possible that not all of these considerations have been addressed. For instance, while Internet Archive volunteers may salvage YouTube videos which had been otherwise lost to copyright complications, these uploads often have incomplete metadata, aren't organised by consistent website tags and often do not preserve YouTube comments. Future research could construct an overview of best practice for the preservation and organisation of such digital data with attention to the ideas discussed in this thesis; namely, that both everyday and academic understandings of online works are illuminated by context.

Finally, I would like to foreground the topic of remediation's other side. Much like memes remediate other types of media content, other types of media content also remediate memes – another topic I considered in the early proposals of this thesis. Remediating memes can range from referentiality (see Ruben Östlund's *Force Majeure* or *The Emoji Movie* incorporating popular internet artefacts into their text) to more elaborate formal and stylistic exercises which seek to co-opt or refashion "meme aesthetics". Of course, as I have noted in this thesis, there is no "true", transhistorical meme aesthetic. This, however, doesn't mean that some formal and stylistic trends of wider popularity wouldn't be re-appropriated by digital artists (see, for instance, the internet-driven work of Jon Rafman) or by marketing companies. The case of the latter becomes even more interesting due to the content convergence and syntactical uniformity of social media platforms such as Facebook or Instagram. Due to these circumstances, social media advertisements of the past years have engaged in the aesthetic emulation of popular meme formats to advertise their products. These adverts sometimes incorporate jokes and exploit familiar meme formats, while at other times they only resemble meme texts through their stylistic structuring of image and text. In addition, the co-opting of crude, poor

quality digital compositions further exemplifies the unique relationship between grassroots expression and corporate marketing efforts.

This top-down ‘performing the amateur’ raises an interesting parallel to the remediation performed by memes. Building on research such as Douglas’s ‘Ugly Aesthetic’ (2014) – a stylistic approach which is largely characterised by counter-cultural dissent and the hypermedia play of emerging genres – future research could explore the ways in which aesthetic and function converge in social media feeds. The findings of such research could further strengthen the understanding of genre as social action as primarily determined by function (Miller 1984), but it could also lead to new, complicated questions about where meme participation begins and ends.

The phenomenon of companies and brands, celebrities or even government bodies participating in popular culture is hardly rare, but the digital “stock” they have in manufacturing meme participation is difficult to quantify. Future discussion could test the strength of the genre framework by treading between two extremes: corporate advertising and gatekeeping on one end, and the ideal of grassroots, “equal” participation on the other. Is a Pepe the Frog image still part of what we understand to be the Pepe the Frog meme if it is shared by the Wendy’s marketing team on Twitter? This question may have multiple answers – and parts of my definition, including ‘vernacular’, may need to do some heavy lifting to make a convincing argument. This would categorise texts which can reasonably fall under the description of ‘everyday expression’ and which do not – but there likely isn’t a clear line. This is especially the case if we move away from the two suggested extremes, at which point public figures, dedicated meme accounts and influencers enter the discussion. The exploration of this topic could demonstrate the deep-rooted complexities of both social media content convergence and of participation in general.

Overall, this investigation has served as a re-appraisal of internet “junk”: Photoshopped collages, incongruous mashups, distorted video gags, crude image templates, hobbyist animation. It has put forward the argument that, through complex participatory practices of genre engagement, meme culture recycles pre-existing cultural meaning and creates novel cultural meaning at the same time. It has put under the microscope the seemingly nonsensical in order to illuminate, if only for a second, a vast constellation of meaning – one which is premised on creative reuse and playful transformation.

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