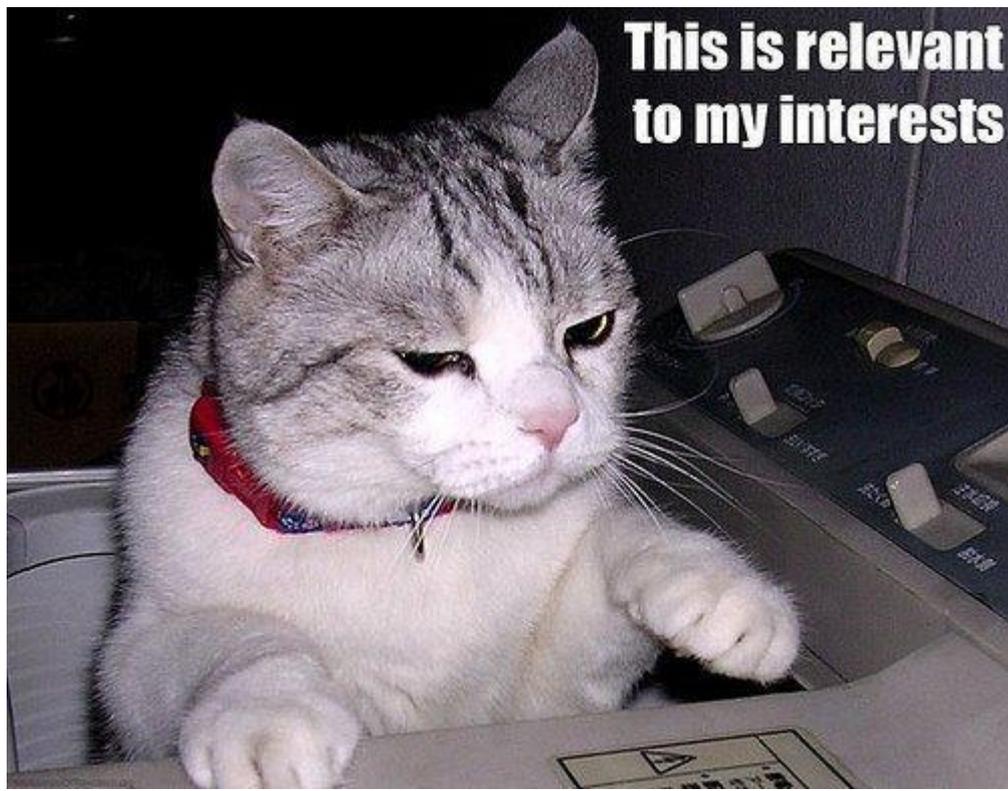


**'Mah LOLthesis let me show u it':**

**The (re)making and circulation of participatory culture:  
memes, creativity and networks**



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## **Abstract**

Internet memes have become ubiquitous in our everyday experiences, both online and offline, permeating a variety of fields; not only are they prevalent in our communications among friends and strangers, they are also present in our political, commercial and cultural experiences. Memes are collective exercises in meaning *making* and creativity made both interpersonally and globally through *sharing*, which is built into the craft-like ethos of internet philosophy. Alternative 20th century strategies (e.g. collage, détournement, culture jamming) underlie much of current online interaction, embodying collaborative cultural practices - currently enabled by the accessibility to remix technology - that echo previous movements (e.g. punk, craft, Situationists International). Online memes are the intersection between participatory culture, remixing and intercreativity.

Whilst literacy of formal aspects might lead to exclusivity, the low level of literacy required to engage with memes makes global access possible. However, this democratic potential might be threatened by the recuperation process that inhibits memes' ability to perform counter-cultural roles, as wide circulation of memes has led to re-appropriations by politicians and commercial advertising. This thesis maps out meme use in a multitude of arenas including: politics (online debate and in protests), commerce (merchandise, use in advertising), and other cultural spaces (from LOLcat art to Lolita subculture). Additionally it follows the unfolding of the Doge meme closely across these spheres, providing insight into phenomena such as Dogecoin tipping and mass charitable actions performed under this meme.

Ultimately, memes are successfully used across various groups and types of relationships (although at times met with some resistance), as their elasticity is able to accommodate the incarnations that place value upon spreadable meaning on a global scale.

**Keywords:** online memes, internet, politics, craftivism, commercialisation, communication, remix, participatory culture, LOLcats, Doge, networks, creativity

## Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
<b>Chapter 1: Literature review</b> .....	7
Social Media.....	7
‘Producers’, participatory culture.....	7
Active audiences - making.....	8
Online circulation.....	10
Remix - DIY.....	15
Situationists.....	17
Punk.....	18
Craft.....	21
Commodification.....	22
Online memes – what are they?.....	23
Meaning making.....	26
Meme/meaning making rules.....	28
Social uses in ‘real’ life.....	29
<b>Chapter 2: Methodology</b> .....	32
Ethnography.....	33
Interviews.....	43
Self-reflection.....	50
<b>Chapter 3: What (exactly) are memes?</b> .....	55
Emoticons.....	57
Timing: content thefts and reposts.....	58
Meaning.....	62
Intra-meme remix/meaning mutation.....	67
Ur doing it rong.....	69
Meaning Boundaries.....	70
In-jokes: inclusive/exclusive.....	72
Motivations.....	75
<b>Chapter 4: Online circulation – ‘All your memes are belong to us’</b> .....	78
Facebook.....	78
I Can Has Cheezburger?.....	83
Know Your Meme.....	87
9gag.....	89
4chan.....	91
The dark side of memes.....	93
Offline circulation of memes.....	98

<b>Chapter 5: Memes &amp; Politics</b> .....	<b>101</b>
Binders of women.....	101
Is Ted Cruz the Zodiac Killer? .....	107
Offline political protests .....	109
#occupy .....	111
Pepper spray cop meme .....	113
Local knitivism .....	116
Connective action.....	118
'Tinquiry', maktivism, offline DIY and consumerism .....	119
<b>Chapter 6: Commercial use of memes</b> .....	<b>123</b>
Meme Merchandise .....	124
Memes? In <i>my</i> advertising? It's more likely than you think .....	127
Offline commercialisation .....	130
Virgin Media ad.....	130
Keyboard Cat for EE.....	134
Maynard's Sour Granny Smith.....	138
<b>Chapter 7: (Sub)cultural uses</b> .....	<b>145</b>
Personal use IRL.....	145
Nicolas Cage window .....	149
LOLcats museum.....	151
Lolita fashion: subculture & memes.....	153
<b>Chapter 8: Doge case study</b> .....	<b>166</b>
Origins .....	166
Doge @ Reddit .....	170
Dogecoin .....	172
Tipping in Reddit.....	173
Dogecoins for charity .....	176
Dogecoins IRL.....	178
'Official' uses - politics.....	180
'Official' uses – commercial circulation.....	181
Doge IRL.....	182
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>187</b>
Bibliography.....	195
Appendix 1.....	223
Appendix 2.....	224
Appendix 3.....	225

## Introduction

In contrast with our experience of momentous media events – from the instant we first saw 9/11 footage, to the first time we heard the Brexit results, or even when we signed up for Facebook – it is unlikely we remember where we were the first time we came into contact with internet memes. However, online memes have similarly shaped our communication, social discourse and meaning making as citizens, consumers, friends and strangers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In recent years internet memes have exploded in popularity and cemented their place in the majority of aspects of our online (and even offline) lives, going from a relatively niche internet phenomena to an almost guaranteed inescapable occurrence to anyone within 10 feet of an electronic device. These funny pictures of cats and thousands of other representations have developed into a global remixing exercise. With this scale of ubiquity in mind, a deeper and more scrutinising look is warranted when it comes to memes, their place in our lives and their role in our relationship with the world as well as with each other. This thesis tackles such a challenge by closely examining meme culture, charting a critical map of the field and addressing some of the main aspects and issues that encompass our daily internet meme experiences. By studying the relationship between memes and meaning making in a variety of contexts I intend to produce a comprehensive understanding of this cultural phenomenon.

As the internet carves an essential place in our lives we witness the development of the relationship between new media technology and our own cultures. This liaison is perfectly encapsulated in the form of the internet meme, which presents us with an ongoing tug-of-war between its technological reliance and its social constructivism. Whilst memes are essentially a cultural product of the structural network that is the internet, it is also a breakaway product from the devices that birthed it, becoming so much more than just the result of electronic machinery. Online memes can have slippery or blanket definitions: we all seem to know what a meme *is* but, as seen in the literature, we have a harder time pinpointing it. For this reason Meikle and I have created our own definition of internet memes as ‘shared, rule-based representations of online interactions that are not only adopted but also adapted by others’ (Esteves & Meikle 2015: 564). It is with this short description in mind that I intend to navigate through my research, as well as using it as a starting point upon which I can pivot my findings. This research is crucial to our current media and

communications landscape, as online memes increasingly demonstrate they are not merely bits of pointless internet humour and have evolved to occupy a much more relevant place in our everyday experiences. We can witness this not only by their sheer volume but also by their varied use, as they range beyond our casual conversations with friends and reach political, economic and cultural contexts.

Being submersed in internet culture for most of my life, I began looking at memes as more than just taken for granted jokes and began seeing them as worthy units of cultural and social communication, one that could be moulded for very personal or very public use, and so adaptive that it can be used by people the world over, regardless of geographic or linguistic barriers. As I began seeing online memes permeating more than just my informal conversations and a few humorous websites, I observed how something so innocuous had managed to gain such a foothold in a variety of our social experiences. From established old media news outlets, to hand-drawn posters at grassroots protests, to one-of-a-kind artistic pieces hanging in museums and galleries, to advertisements by multi-million dollar companies; memes seemed to be cropping up everywhere. The more I saw the ubiquity of the meme, the more I felt justified in pursuing its meaning academically, especially when reflecting upon the lack of research done on this phenomenon. Despite heavy criticism that internet memes face regarding their perceived lack of worth and 'dumbification' of contemporary communication (e.g. '[memes] may be a stupid mediocre joke at best' [Chen 2012: 15]), their sheer amount of daily use and prevalence indicate the opposite. Internet memes clearly matter, otherwise we would not be using them at this rate and they would not enjoy their massive global popularity. This global element has also demonstrated just how creative memes allow us to be in terms of tackling geographical and cultural barriers worldwide; this task is even more impressive when we consider the velocity at which memes travel globally, essentially creating worldwide cultural references in a matter of hours.

The scale and speed of meme circulation pose pertinent questions around their part in global communications and bonding among friends and strangers, the role they play in terms of reflecting worldwide emotional reactions to social and newsworthy events, and their capacity as newfound meaning making tools that help us make sense of the world around us. Emerging from the networked context of the internet, it is also imperative to take into account the cultural and technological influence that this medium has had on the meme

phenomena, which is why the meaning-making aspects of *making* and *sharing* need to be carefully understood as these are the two primary forms of online meme interaction. From my own non-academic experience with memes I became particularly interested in understanding what exactly *were* memes and *why* were they being used as such common forms of expression among us. In order to fully understand these issues I would have to also understand *where* memes circulate. When we consider the pervasiveness of the internet into our offline lives, it becomes necessary to extend these questions into the physical use of memes outside the online space, in turn bringing up its own questions regarding internet culture and its impact beyond technological devices. The overall aim of these questions is to achieve an organic understanding of the role online memes play in our cultural experiences and our meaning making processes in everyday life. In short, this thesis aims to discover what online memes are, how and why they matter to us individually and culturally.

Underlying the analysis of these questions is the awareness of remix, creativity and DIY culture's place among these processes, not only in contemporary terms but also when placed in a historical context. Throughout this thesis I will discuss how memes embody current online participatory culture whilst also playing a part in the remix continuum that has long made up our cultural experience. Here I wish to place it alongside previous creative (and mostly destabilising) movements from which it borrows some aspects or techniques, including the reinterpretation of existing signals into new messages as seen in Dada art, détournement, and punk; whilst at the same time looking at it through a lens of (also frequently destabilising) collective collaboration which is similarly seen in craft making and DIY movements. Regardless of the message that a meme carries – whether it addresses politics explicitly or whether it is about a cat considering whether it should buy a boat – we must acknowledge its underlying political potential as a piece of media crafted and distributed by millions of amateurs everywhere, and understand whether this process has its parallels in other destabilising actions that result from grassroots involvement in everyday politics (e.g. craftivism, tinquiry, punk DIY) or whether its democratic promises are threatened by the growing commercialisation and corporate appropriation of internet memes.

These broad categories shaped the main structure of this thesis, resulting in the creation of six themed, interrelated chapters. The first and second chapters comprise of the literature review and methodology, with the aforementioned six chapters running from

chapter 3 to chapter 8. Throughout this body of work I aim to tackle memes in a broader sense as well as focus on particular meme uses in different contexts in order to gain a deeper insight as to what an online meme really is. In chapter 3 I aim for a more workable definition of an internet meme; I have found that the few times memes have been addressed academically (e.g. Davison 2012; Shifman 2014; Lantagne 2017) they have for the most part produced inconsistent or unsatisfactory definitions. When surveying the lack of academic research dedicated to internet memes it becomes apparent that there is need for an in-depth look into what memes are exactly, instead of relying on semi-official anecdotes and vague definitions. Simply put, we need to understand the basic structure that is responsible for all these LOLs, whether they come in cat form, incidents of mass dancing or intentionally documented cinnamon consumption. Here I also want to track meme circulation to gain a better overall picture of their movements and spheres of concentration, whilst also gaining a clearer understanding of important spaces for meme dwellers. The fourth chapter will follow up on these themes, taking a closer look at what has been laid out in the previous chapter as well as sketching out in more detail questions of meaning, particularly its role in meme use among friends and strangers as well as the consequences of meaning undergoing circulation and mutability. Here I also endeavour to uncover what lies behind the motivation to engage with meaning making through online memes.

It is within these parameters of the importance of making and everyday creativity that I then want to take a look at how memes fit and interact with particular cultural aspects and manifestations within political, commercial and public life. Thus, the following three chapters are concerned with the application of the theoretical process outlined in the first two main chapters to different sections of everyday life. Chapter five applies this critical approach to the political field. Having witnessed memes being used as the face of protests worldwide (e.g. Occupy movement, Arab Spring) as well as being Tweeted by prominent politicians' official social media accounts, it seems memes have found their foothold in current political discourse. Political debates and decisions are being globally discussed through the immediate use of memes, often before official news outlets have time to react to them. Through this mimetic discourse we are witnessing a potential shift of power where citizens are telling established news media and politicians what is relevant to them, instead of having no say in what counts as material for debate. Memes' mutability allows them to be used by any

established political party while at the same time being representative of the dissenting voice of oppressed citizens everywhere, demonstrating both the remix potential of memes and reflecting their (often unnoted) presence in the global political landscape.

Following the same analytical approach in chapter six, I aim to discover the relationship between memes and economic manifestations within our heavily commercialised framework; particularly if online memes are possible incarnation of popular expressions. This apparent contradiction is furthered by the use of memes in corporative advertisements, who profit upon these images that are made by the amateur masses. Ultimately it is this friction between memes as potential tools of democratic meaning making and their exploitation by large corporations for advertisement purposes that I wish to analyse, though this will also be supplemented with other forms of meme makers' relations with commerce (i.e. meme merchandise and meaning making).

But not all memes fall under the use of explicit political purpose or economic use; as outlined in the two previous chapters, online memes are still mainly employed in the context of human relationships and communication, among both friends and strangers. In the seventh chapter I take this basic part of the meme and explore it through larger socio-cultural manifestations such as meme use in art and subcultures. These issues focus once more on the meaning making process allowed by meme exchange, and how this phenomenon works in a larger yet more loosely based group of people. In other words, chapter seven looks beyond meme use that circulates within private conversations and meme-centric websites; addressing instead how memes can permeate established cultural groups such as art circles and obscure subcultures. Here we can also see the application of communicative meme logic in unrelated groups and how they can adopt meme cohesiveness into their own rules of interaction.

The final chapter picks up all the aforementioned questions and takes into account different contexts related to online memes, demonstrating plurality of use within a single meme example. Chapter eight is an in-depth analysis of the popular Doge meme and how it manifests through all these different frameworks whilst still retaining its cult-like status among fans. This case study follows one of the most iconic memes to date and its remarkable imprint upon recent cultural events, whilst at the same time ascertaining what it means to be dedicated to its own loose yet global community ecosystem and unique code of ethics. With

the creation of its Dogecoin cryptocurrency the Doge meme gained an added level of significance; as the Dogecoin community undertook massive charitable actions throughout the world, which not only had significant impact on a local and global level but also shaped the meme's ethos and meaning. Summarily, in this chapter we get to follow a meme through the varying contexts described throughout previous chapters, giving us a view into a meme's circulation and meaning when applied in practice to a unique example.

It is through this multifaceted approach, in addition to my own catalogue of personal experience with meme culture through the years, that I hope to achieve a more holistic understanding of memes and how they shape not only online culture but other significant parts of our everyday life. I intend to study meme use with regards to personal communication, to political reactions, to our role as media creators and sharers (in conjunction with our role as media and merchandise consumers), as well as our capacity to make meaning with others as a collective of human beings. In order to do this it is essential to paint a picture of the current academic landscape regarding meme research, as well as delve into other phenomena such as earlier forms of remixing and DIY. Following this literature review, I will lay out my methodology and proceed to my findings, which will be detailed through the six chapters mentioned above. By looking closely at how memes are made and circulated I also aim to build a current picture of engagement with the process of remix and the role of amateur media makers in contemporary participatory culture. I believe that the resulting research will not only shed light on this ubiquitous phenomenon, but it may also give us a distinct picture of the influence of internet culture at large on nearly all aspects of present daily life throughout the world.

## Chapter 1: Literature Review

Attaining a picture of how online memes have impact across our experiences involves an understanding of the multiple strands that are weaved around such a phenomenon. Radiating from the core concept of internet memes are a variety of other ideas that are either intrinsic to internet memes or are relevant to their context: theories surrounding remixing, collective making, DIY, the network of the internet itself – these are just a few examples of supportive beams that run through the crux of this work. It is crucial to set internet memes against a backdrop of existing research (as well as existing cultural movements) that relate to these established ideas in order to create a workable theoretical context upon which the questions in this thesis may rest; these findings will also provide a pivotal basis for my own arguments, as it is from these earlier discoveries that my own ideas evolved.

### **Social Media**

The proliferation of the internet has brought not only technological advancements but also a change in the cultural and sociological climate. With the development of the internet, digital communication went from being a service only available to the elite (e.g. government, universities) (Ciccarelli & Faulkner 2004: 8; Schneider, Evans & Pinard 2009: 4; Ryan 2011: 10) to, with the aid of the World Wide Web, a communication tool integral to our lives (Castells 2002: xxix; Livingstone 2009: 19; Ryan 2011: 11). This shift was fundamental to our current experience of the internet and its uses, bringing with it the ‘Web 2.0 moment’ (Meikle 2016: 15-16) and although Web 2.0 was an elusive concept due to its ongoing change (Governor, Hinchcliffe & Nickull 2009: 1; Mowlabocus 2010: 70; Rainer & Cegielski 2011: 174) – at times even accused of being an empty concept (Foley 2008: 12; Morozov 2013) – it still marked the early stages of what would then become the social media logic (Meikle & Bunz 2018: 24). It is this social media ethos that must be grasped in order to understand the particular environment where the phenomenon of online memes takes place. In addition, internet memes fit squarely within the analysis of social media logic, as they are built and distributed with the tools provided by this digital framework.

### **‘Producers’, participatory culture**

Resting on an ‘architecture of participation’ (O’Reilly 2005), Web 2.0 originated a new era of interaction (Gauntlett 2011: 7); one where, albeit not being a new notion (Grinnell

2009: 579; Shirky 2010: 19), the term 'participatory culture' began to arise (Bruns 2006: 16; Jenkins 2006: 3). Users were now not seen by academia as passive consumers, but as active producers themselves; leading to new concepts such as the 'produser' (i.e. producer/user) (Bruns 2008: 2; Grinnell 2009: 597). Entrenched in both the computer (Shirky 2010: 22) and the internet (Leadbeater 2009: 6; Gauntlett 2011: 77), the idea of user participation thrived online because of how widespread it could be: anyone with access to a networked computer could participate in creation, and share it on a global-scale (Bruns 2006: 13; Leadbeater 2009: 19; Shirky 2010: 25; Gauntlett 2011: 3), something that goes against the very grain of older forms of media that are still organized around gatekeeping (Leadbeater 2009: xvii; Shirky 2010: 46). There is a wealth of user-generated content in the current online atmosphere (Martens 2011: 49; Kriegel & Aylett 2008: 76; Joshi et al. 2007: 1; Meikle & Young 2012: 56). This has created a change in the availability of media products, transitioning from media scarcity to media abundance (Cha et al. 2007: 1; Cha, Pérez & Haddadi 2012: 257). This has impacted our relationship with the media and its consumption (Cha et al. 2007: 1): we no longer depend on professionalized corporations for content; we are both consumers and producers of content ourselves (Lussier et al. 2010: 159). The ease and rate at which we create user-generated content is also incredible when compared with older, more established forms of media making: Cha et al. state that 'it only takes 15 days in YouTube to produce the same number of videos as all IMDb movies' (2007: 2). It is no wonder, then, that the internet is home to thousands (if not millions) of memes, which flourish within this industriously creative atmosphere.

### **Active audiences - making**

As aforementioned, with the advent of Web 2.0 came an undeniable shift regarding the role of audiences. Yet audiences' perception of texts has been contested within media studies before: Hall's influential encoding/decoding model argues that instead of audiences being passive receivers of information, they contribute to the message's production by accepting, rejecting or negotiating meaning in the texts they receive (Brooker & Jermyn 2003: 91; Procter 2004: 69,70; Hall 2005: 109). These theories seem to gain momentum with the increasing evidence of creativity and activity amongst audiences in the digital era.

Echoing Hall's model, the Web 2.0 has not only impacted on us socially, it has also done so within an economic context; causing major shifts in us as audiences *and* consumers. Similar to its social changes (from passive audience to 'producer'), some theorists argue that the Web 2.0 has also empowered us economically (Grinnell 2009: 578; Anderson 2012: 141-144). Beyond the social aspects, the interactivity afforded by the Web 2.0 has also allowed previously submissive consumers to engage with the making and sharing of content on an unparalleled level. This sort of exchange allows for an online gift economy (van Dijck 2009: 50; Russo 2009: 129; Gauntlett 2011: 95), where people create and build online content in their spare time for free (Rheingold 2000: 49; Coyle 2011: 205). There is a social dimension to the gift economy, it is not only about giving and receiving, it is also about establishing connections between people through gift-giving (Lessig 2008: 147, 148). A gift economy has also been proposed as an explanation for the motivation behind much of online participation and user-generated content (Gauntlett 2011: 95). Some authors consider 'a gift' to be not only the act of making and giving, but also the act of sharing something that wasn't necessarily made by us (Green & Jenkins 2011: 119). This economic dynamic is not something new (Mandiberg 2012: 7; Jenkins 2012: 217; Stalder 2012: 247), and has been suggested to be a return to older forms of cultural creation, reminiscent of the original concept of the gift economy (Jenkins 2012: 204; Benkler 2012: 19).

Yet, what is referred to as economic empowerment to some is called exploitation by others, as the Web 2.0 is built on free labour (Martens 2011: 55, Terranova 2004: 73; Everitt & Mills 2009: 761). Some authors argue that the current structure of the digital arena incorporates exploitation to the point of making it seem normal (Terranova 2003; Lobato & Fletcher 2013: 121); describing the relationship between online creativity and exploitation as co-dependent and inextricable (Andrejevic 2008: 25). This can lead to a feeling of alienation felt by users and fans who freely give corporations their labours of love (Russo 2009: 130, Weatherall 2013: 60, 61). This argument goes as far as decrying this absence of compensation as counter to one of the strongest foundations of the internet and of the Web 2.0 ethos; accusing this practice of being, essentially, antithetical to democracy (Everitt & Mills 2009: 761). Although I will not deny that there is a substantial profit being made from this practice, I do wish to point out that the morality of these acts in question is not the focal point of this thesis. More importantly, albeit valid concerns some of these critiques can't help but reflect a slight sense of misunderstanding of the motivations behind the contributions that are made

by the millions of people who help build the web as we know it today. These critiques fail to account for the free and open-source software ethos and amateur fervour, joy and dedication that fuel the Web 2.0 environment upon which our current digital realities were built (Golden 2005: 19; Muffatto 2006: 185; Hesmondhalgh 2013: 138). This drive to make out of love and not out of monetary reward defines what most contributors of digital culture are all about and how they see themselves (Lobato & Fletcher 2013: 121; Wirtén 2013: 129-130), which also seems to be the logic of internet meme making.

### **Online circulation**

Another critique directed at web enthusiasts is the exaggeration of the emphasis of collective participation; just because people can contribute to online content creation does not mean that they necessarily will. The literature raises this question by stating that the majority of user-generated content is in fact made by a relatively small number of users, making up what is called the 'vocal minority' (van Dijck 2009: 44; Cha et al. 2007: 3; Mustafaraj et al. 2011). As Lussier et al. assert, it is apparent that 'consumption, rather than creation, is a critical driver in the operation of UGC sites' (2010: 160). Yet within participatory culture, making is just half of the ethos; sharing is the other half (Meikle & Young 2012: 125); this is also applicable to internet memes as 'engagement with a meme (...) takes the form of either use or viewing (...) of transformation or transmission' (Davison 2012: 126). Technology allows further participation by facilitating the sharing of our thoughts, creations and media objects with the world; as Leadbeater puts it, 'in the economy of ideas that the web is creating, you are what you share' (2009: 6). While much literature has focused on the ability to make (or the *illusion* of being able to make), not as much emphasis seems to be placed on the ability to share. Although making online content such as internet memes requires a little more effort than to simply link them, we should not dismiss the act of linking as passive. It is misleading to equate users who do not create content themselves with non-active contributors; the circulation of these materials is equally important and active (Green & Jenkins 2011: 111). It is also suggested that content that is received within this atmosphere of possible interaction (even if not fulfilled) is not received the same way as content where there is no such possibility; the mere option of doing so has impact (Green & Jenkins 2011: 110).

Content gains meaningfulness when shared: to share an internet meme is to connect, whether it is with someone in your personal circle or the whole world (Rowell 2011: 14).

Thus, sharing online memes does not only signify the act of linking content, but it also links people *through* its content, understanding and meaning (Xie et al. 2011: 5). Consequently, to be connected to the network is of essence, as it is this linkage between millions of unknown people that allows global inclusion of participation and, consequently, meaning making; as Edwards has phrased it, 'We want to be a live node on the network' (2008: 84). Castells – one of the most influential writers regarding networks – has theorized that the internet is a space of flows (Castells 2000: 407; Castells 2004: 147), which is synthesized as 'the material organization of simultaneous social interaction at a distance by networking communications' (Castells et al. 2007: 171), possible due to the technological possibilities now available in the telecommunications arena (Castells et al. 2007: 171). The idea of a space of flows is particularly relevant to our current networked communication, as the space of flows is not anchored to physical locations, but exists instead within these networks, whilst simultaneously encompassing these (Castells et al. 2007: 171). Castells exalts the growing importance of the space of flows (versus the space of places) in our current networked media climate (Castells 2004: 147); a truism for the growing trend of globalisation and mobile communication (Jones 2006: 48; Oosterveer 2006: 268; De Vries 2012: 138). The impact of the space of flows is something that has been particularly visible within the skyrocketing popularity of social media (Newson, Houghton & Patten 2009: 111). The networked space of flows resonates most accurately within the Web 2.0 environment (Grinnell 2009: 580); essentially, the Web 2.0 aggregates networks that are composed by an unimaginable plethora of individual contributions that are interconnected (Grinnell 2009: 580; Shifman 2012: 200). The importance of networks is fundamental to the understanding of the web as a whole (Ankersen 2012: 392). Internet memes illustrate the role of the network and its place in the 'network society' we currently live in (see Castells 2000). Networks have been inclusively used in previous studies to track memes' existence (Xie et al. 2011: 2), and networks like YouTube have been analysed for social network observance (Xie et al. 2011: 2).

The existence of networks is particularly important for the dissemination of online memes (Everitt & Mills 2009: 752), as internet memes travel through an assortment of networks, ranging from public webpages to personal blogs, echoing the notion of 'networked

individualism' (Shifman 2012: 200; see also Wellman et al. 2003; Green & Jenkins 2011: 115). This is a contradictory combination that is present throughout the Web 2.0 atmosphere (Grinnell 2009: 579), amongst them social networks (Wang & Wood 2011: 5444). Through sharing and circulation content begins picking up new meanings, by being weaved into certain contexts and exchanges (Green & Jenkins 2011: 116). Social networks are particularly relevant to the dispersion of memes as they bring people with common interests together (Grinnell 2009: 595; Green & Jenkins 2011: 112; Broxton et al. 2011: 2). Many websites in the Web 2.0 environment have converged social networking into their existing structure (Schneider 2009: 308; Burrow 2012: xxvii), as this seems like a vital part of what makes a website successful (Broxton et al. 2011: 3). Social networking has made its way into everyday life, entering public awareness (Green & Jenkins 2011: 113). This global communality that is present in networks acts as a fertile ground for creativity and shared meaning amongst every participant (Grinnell 2009: 595; Green & Jenkins 2011: 112; Lindgren 2012: 1). Patricia Lange's 'videos of affinity' (2009; Shifman 2012: 200) embody this sense of a globally shared reference, whilst signalling the importance of the network. 'Videos of affinity' consist of videos created by fans that refer to an original video (usually a home-made version) and that 'establish the connections between members of a social network' (Shifman 2012: 200).

The vastness of the internet often makes its content overwhelming (Morley & Parker 2010: 659; Broxton et al. 2011: 2; Aikat & Remund 2012: 27, 28; Rainie & Wellman 2012: 232). We now live in an era where the pressing question is no longer 'is this information available' but is instead 'where is this information situated'; going from an internet of scarcity (Web 1.0) to an internet of possibly unmanageable abundance in our Web 2.0 times (Jurgenson & Ritzer 2009: 61; Stalder 2012: 244). This problem has been noted by Web 2.0 proponents, who have shifted the focus from issues of creation of content to issues of organization of content (Grinnell 2009: 589; Davison 2012: 132; O'Reilly 2012: 42). This problem of unmanageability has been addressed with the use of 'tags' (Lai & Turban 2008: 390; Lessig 2008: 59, 61; Grinnell 2009: 589). Simply put, tagging is 'the linking of content via keywords' (Grinnell 2009: 589); which not only makes content easier to find through categorisation (Beer & Burrows 2007) but may also add information or context regarding content (Lessig 2008: 60; Peters 2009: 156; Joshi et al. 2007: 1). Tags are a defining product of the Web 2.0 era (Beer & Burrows 2007; Lai & Turban 2008: 390; Meikle & Young 2012: 112-3), as they conform to the same ethos of simultaneous collective user participation. No single person would ever be able

to catalogue the entire internet, and thus tagging must be fuelled by mass user initiative (Beer & Burrows 2007; Gauntlett 2011: 89). Similar to a system of taxonomy, this 'folksonomy' is created by the many users of the network (Grinnell 2009: 590). Ultimately, tags contribute to the augmentation of our online experience (Joshi et al. 2007: 1). The label of 'collaboration', even on such a massive scale, has been questioned regarding such a simple act (Hyde et al. 2012: 60), yet tags do have an additional social aspect. As a tool that was invented with the purpose of retrieving digital objects by connecting certain words with content, it additionally 'creates a connection between the users' (Meikle & Young 2012: 113). Tags can also be seen as a tool of meaning making, as it is the users that create links and definitions for content by using tags (Lessig 2008: 60). With the abundance of memes in the online sphere – and the impact of tagging in spaces where memes are popular e.g. YouTube (Beer & Burrows 2007) - it would be interesting to uncover if tags are useful to understand their circulation or if memes are so pervasive and numerous that they escape attempts of categorisation through tagging.

Yet much of the internet remains untagged (Scharl & Tochtermann 2007: 114), and even with this useful system, we are still overwhelmed by the sheer selection available to us. In older forms of telecommunication media this dilemma was practically non-existent, as the content we consumed was pre-selected for us by others with higher authority within the media landscape (Steinberg 1995: 131; Fortunato 2008: 196). One of the shadowed functions of editors and content selectors was precisely to engage in gatekeeping in order to (amongst other personal agendas) high quality content that conformed to the highest of professional media-making standards were delivered (Mazzara et al. 2013: 90). But traditional gatekeeping does not mesh well with the open Web 2.0 ethos, as it becomes counter-productive (Bruns 2008: 176). Keeping this lack of official gatekeepers in mind, let us return to internet memes – we might search 'meme' on Google and retrieve various memes, but not the ones we are looking for. Online, we have at our disposal an automated filter of words, but we still do not have an automated filter for taste. We used to rely on mainstream media outlets to engage in gatekeeping to filter information for us, making it both convenient and practical (Shoemaker & Vos 2009: 1). Yet what was once one of the main jobs of mainstream media (Shoemaker & Vos 2009: 1) became displaced and has been left instead at the hands of 'a trusted self-selected network' (Meikle & Young 2012: 54), a shift that has also been named 'gatewatching' (Bruns 2005). Bruns defines 'gatewatching' as 'the observation of the output gates of news publications and other sources, in order to identify important material as it becomes

available' (Bruns 2005: 17). By shifting these powers to our own 'self-selected network', content is no longer simply filtered out, but the content that does make it through is usually accompanied by commentary (Meikle & Young 2012: 54). While we have not banished mass media and its gatekeeping methods, the practice of gatwatching seems to have pervaded the network (Bruns 2005: 17). Some critics have condemned this change and decry this filtering as unprofessional (Grinnell 2009: 595); yet according to Bruns (2005: 19), there is a growing need for a framework when it comes to content; it only seems natural that we would want this context to come from people we know and trust. This activity also cements social media networks' important role in being active agents of one of the Web 2.0's core values: democratisation (Lindgren 2012: 1); a topic that shall be addressed more in depth further ahead in this literature review.

This might be why many internet memes make their way into our lives through our personal networks i.e. social media, private instant messaging, emails. Regardless of the channel of choice, social networks work as filters of content; as the content people receive from someone from their network is instantly perceived as having passed a taste barrier of sorts (due to the aforementioned commonality of interests) and is more likely to be viewed than content that comes from an outside source (Broxton et al. 2011: 2). The success rate of social networks for the spreading of user generated content is such that it has been likened to 'the spread of infectious disease in human populations' (Broxton et al. 2011: 3); an analogy that is used to describe online meme behaviour throughout the literature (Green & Jenkins 2011: 114; Wang & Wood 2011: 5442). This analogy extends to the now popularised idea of 'going viral', an over-used metaphor throughout the literature regarding the description of online content (Broxton et al. 2011: 1; Green & Jenkins 2011: 111; Xie et al. 2011: 3; Ankerson 2012: 390; Coleman 2012: 109; Martens 2011: 52; O'Reilly 2012: 38; Stalder 2012: 245). This expression has been equated (and is commonly used interchangeably) with internet memes (Rushkoff 1994: 10; Ankerson 2012: 390). As Green & Jenkins (2011: 116) point out, this particular analogy might not be the most appropriate way to describe mimetic phenomena that occurs online. While the comparison is understandable (i.e. memes do have many of the same properties as viruses), Shifman (2012: 190) points out that there is an important distinction between online viruses and online memes. Shifman (2012) aptly describes their differences regarding the medium of internet videos (original emphasis):

‘A viral video is (...) a clip that spreads to the masses via digital word-of-mouth mechanisms *without significant change* (...) often overlooking cultural and social aspects, as well as human agency (...) the *memetic video*, invokes a different structure of participation. I define it as a popular clip that *lures extensive creative user engagement* in the form of parody, pastiche, mash-ups or other derivative work.’ (2012: 190)

Following the same train of thought, another suggested alternative has been proposed by Green & Jenkins (2011), one that captures the immense capacity of distribution that digital media content is capable of: the concept of spreadability. This is a point of view that has been recognized in other academic writings (Meikle & Young 2012: 124; Shifman 2012: 198). Green and Jenkins also propose that their spreadability model works as an all-encompassing concept to ‘describe how audiences engage with content’ (2011: 111). Though this is a fitting theory, the authors do discard memes as a rival contender for the same position, a position that I believe mistakenly undervalues the potential of memes. Considering the lack of studies of the spreadability model, it might be too early to determine how ubiquitous it will become.

### **Remix - DIY**

Internet memes can take many forms, yet they all engage with the practice of remixing. This relationship has not gone unnoticed by current academics, as demonstrated by its growing wealth of literature (see ‘The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies’ by Navas, Gallagher and burrough 2015). At a basic level, remixing is usually equated with the artistic technique of collage (Lessig 2008: 70), a technique that was popular within Dada art which consists of the montage of images to create a new one (Lievrouw 2011: 36). Yet the scope to mix broadens beyond this medium within the context of the remix, which ‘means to take cultural artifacts and combine and manipulate them into new kinds of creative blends’ (Knobel & Lankshear 2008: 22). Thus, the process of creation of culture becomes so inextricable from the remix format that it becomes effectively dependent on it (Lessig 2006: 16; Manovich in Meikle 2008: 375; Lankshear & Knobel 2011: 97).

Remixing might fuel media consumption and stimulate further media engagement. The ‘produsage’ that occurs in digital contexts engages vastly with remix (Bruns 2008: 240); in turn, ‘the generated content is always unfinished, open for any number of laminations, remixes or paraphrasings’ (Lindgren 2012: 8), leading to an endless cycle of remix and reuse.

Increasingly so with the affordances of the Web 2.0, remixed products may be the first point of contact one has with the original media content behind it (Grinnell 2009: 593); allowing more points of entry to the original media content. Furthermore, this culture of remix has been heralded as central to the understanding of our digital atmosphere (Shifman 2012: 188). Within the digital context, remixing has given access to easier tools to engage in media transformation, as digital content is easier to manipulate and the tools to do so are widely accessible (Lai & Turban 2008: 388; Lessig 2008: 15). This technological accessibility inevitably brings – as Negativland’s Don Joyce states - the democratisation not only of creation (Lessig 2008: 54; see Knobel & Lankshear 2008: 23), but also the democratisation of meaning making. Internet memes allow meaning making to become entrusted to society at large, whilst also celebrating remix culture. As with all media, it is also important to place this type of activity within a previously existing framework.

Despite being commonly heralded as such, remix culture is not new (Knobel & Lankshear 2008: 22) and has revealed itself in many ways, from cut and paste collage to the reworking of common symbols; a link that has been acknowledged in the literature (Lievrouw 2013). Arguably, the remix has always existed: even ancient communities that had to rely on oral accounts for the transmission of culture were aware their stories would inevitably be changed as they circulated (Lessig 2008: 7). This mixing of cultural products became a characteristic of folk traditions (Jenkins 2006: 135). The echo of folk culture in pop culture products (such as internet memes) is underlined by Jenkins, as he states that ‘popular culture is what happens as mass culture gets pulled back into folk culture’ (2006: 136).

With the advent of the printing press and the array of analog cultural products that came after it, we began slipping into what Lessig calls a ‘Read-Only’ culture (2008), which contrary to the previous cultural forms of production and transmission was meant to be only consumed and did not encourage active change or participation with the product (Bolin 2011: 131). Beyond this lack of user creativity, ‘Read-Only’ massified products are rarely able to respond appropriately to everyone they address (Green & Jenkins 2011: 116). What current technology did was to free culture from its restraints of Read-Only culture (Lessig 2008: 38), allowing us to return to the Read-Write culture that characterized our previous form of cultural production and transmission (Lessig 2008: 28), albeit in an unprecedentedly larger, global scale (Lessig 2008: 42, 57). The importance of the remix as an extension of our ability to

engage in Read-Write culture is underlined by Lessig, who states remix 'is the expression of a freedom (...) a capacity for a generation to speak' (2008: 56).

Before internet memes there was the use of *détournement* by the avant-garde Situationist International movement (Debord 1957) which subverted messages by reworking their original references (Meikle 2008: 374); the Dada movement which used collage as a form of artistic subversion (Olivier 2009: 130); the punk movement's subversive appropriation of symbols (During 2005: 126) and everyday objects (Leblanc 1999: 40; Bennett 2013: 573); as well as craft and DIY groups (Gauntlett 2011). Some of these forms of remix (e.g. punk movement, craft groups) additionally emphasise the imperfect work of amateurs. To these groups, what matters is participation in itself, the power to make and to do so collectively (Jacobson 2010: 32; Gauntlett 2011).

### **Situationists**

Situationist International, similar to Dadaists before them, were a cultural and artistic movement most active in the 1950s and 1960s (Lievrouw 2011: 28, 29) that engaged in a practice called *détournement*, which consists of 'lifting an image from its original context and setting it in a new one' (Meikle & Young 2012: 83). This was done as a critical comeback to the current social, political and cultural climate of the time (Lievrouw 2011: 29). The act of remix practiced by the Situationists is defended as a crucial aspect of art and life; the re-use of existing images becomes more than an artistic choice, it is a purposeful action. As Debord & Wolman state: 'Plagiarism is necessary, progress implies it' (1956). Situationists engage in direct political, social and cultural commentary, as these symbols are commonly portrayed and subsequently reversed in their works. This type of critical commentary has translated well into web activism (Lievrouw 2011: 29), as 'many of the techniques, styles, and strategies worked out in (...) Situationism have been absorbed into (...) today's digital culture' (Lievrouw 2011: 30). As a form of culture jamming (Meikle & Young 2012: 84, 85), it is no surprise then that *détournement* echoes in current digital media landscapes.

The political ambitions present in the act of *détournement* are furthered in our current digital landscape by the ease that is now afforded regarding the act of creation and dissemination of (political) remixed content (Lievrouw 2011: 85). Such content is not restricted to the world of the web, as its propagation has gained adhesion in the palpable

world; meaning détourned images can travel faster and can be adopted by a bigger number of people around the globe, not only in cyberspace but also in physical protests. Here, Kaufmann's description of détournement as something that 'turns the reader or public into a warrior' (2006: 37) gains a new global meaning. There is evidence in the literature that points towards the impact of the remix lying beyond the intellectual affiliation given by détournement, stating that at a more basic level these 'popular cultural forms (...) have resonance with the politics of everyday life' (Zuberi 2001: 5). Perhaps this is why so many people take up internet memes (i.e. popular cultural forms) as representations of their political, cultural and social discontent, as these may resonate with them more.

Despite this appreciation for remixing, there is still an eminent question being raised: groups like Dada and the Situationist International might uphold values of remix and might represent a breakout from institutionalised (and, to an extent, professionalised) art-making. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that although these movements defended a more social and accessible view of art, they were still composed by a very select group of people. Not everyone was a Dada artist or Situationist; these groups were, in fact, made up of a very reduced number of artists (Marcus 2002: 1; Lievrouw 2011: 64), that at times made a conscious effort to remain exclusive instead of inclusive (Marcus 2002: 17).

## **Punk**

However, Dada and, more particularly, the Situationist International and their use of remix and proclivity for social and political engagement would resound in another artistic and cultural movement; one that would make up for their lack of democratisation. A notable example that echoes these values is the punk movement, a subculture that was defined not only by its music genre and notable clothing, but also by its values. This philosophy of DIY, remix and 'radically democratic inclusive promise' (Ensminger 2011: 165) would affect all aspects of punk, from music, to clothes, to zines, to art (Leblanc 1999: 38; Habell-Pallán 2005: 49; McRoy 2005: 39; Rombes 2005: 15; Ruggles 2008: 44; Knobel & Lankshear 2010: 8).

Musically, the separation of artist and fan in punk was a blurry boundary (Leblanc 1999: 38), not only because artists were mostly accessible but also because artists and punk media urged fans to become punk musicians themselves (Leblanc 1999: 38; Ruggles 2008: 264). One of the core aspects of punk culture – the appreciation for rough amateurism as

oppositional to glossy commercialism (Leblanc 1999: 38; Ensminger 2011: 49; Spicer 2010: 129) – spoke to and encouraged anyone to try their hand at making punk music, as technical expertise was neither required nor desired (Leblanc 1999: 38; Ensminger 2011: 49; Jacobson 2010: 32). Punk *zine* ‘Sideburns’ stated in one of its issues: ‘This is a chord... this is another... This is a third... Now form a band’ (as quoted in Leblanc 1999: 38). By doing so, punk demonstrates not only the easiness and lack of expert technique necessary, but also an encouragement for people to pick up the tools and do it themselves, echoing an implicitly democratic message that can be visible in internet meme culture. This extends beyond production and into distribution; although the pre-internet era meant that distribution was considerably more difficult than it is today, the encouragement to distribute your media anyway you could (and within the DIY ethos) was nevertheless present (Leblanc 1999: 38). As with internet memes, it wasn’t just a question of making, but also a question of sharing.

Punk’s distinguishable clothing also reflected the DIY and remix ethic of the punk subculture (Leblanc 1999: 40, 52). Through clothing, punks found another layer where their message could be conveyed (Hall 1997: 37). As with music, punk clothes underwent the process of DIY at the hands of punks (Ensminger 2011: 19). The clothing style itself took from various sources, remixing different styles and engaging in ‘stylistic bricolage’ for subversive outcomes (Leblanc 1999: 40). Steve Alba encapsulates the punk ethos of clothing efficiently, by stating: ‘if you couldn’t find punk rock clothes, [you would] make them’ (Ensminger 2011: 110). One of the staples of punk clothing is the appropriation of symbols (During 2005: 126) such as icons of authority (e.g. combat boots) and everyday objects (Leblanc 1999: 40; Bennett 2013: 573); these would be incorporated into punk clothing in order to subvert their original meanings, a process of personal cultural meaning making through stylistic appropriation (Leblanc 1999: 40). This underlying logic can also be seen in internet memes, which many times feature images taken out of context that gain a new meaning through being remixed; echoing punk’s bricolage (Lievrouw 2011: 67), which has gained traction online (Deuze 2007: 76). Through clothing, punks use their style as a tool against mainstream culture (Leblanc 1999: 40). Even visual manifestations of punk art –homemade flyers and posters for punk bands, *zines* and graffiti– reflect the DIY values of amateurism and accessibility. The cut-and-paste amateur aspect of the *zines* and ads might have stemmed from financial constraints (Leblanc 1999: 38), but inevitably ended up reflecting a ‘democratization of art’ (Ensminger 2011: 3). These were appreciated and valued by members

of the punk community (Ensminger 2011: 73); as with music, punk flyers did not require artistic knowledge or skill, just the will to make them (Ensminger 2011: 9, 49).

This amateur stance was unusual at a time and place surrounded by glossy commercialism (Ensminger 2011: 49; Spicer 2010: 129) and perhaps because of this adoption of amateurism as principal, punk is mostly ignored or belittled by mainstream culture (Ensminger 2011: 75). This sentiment of misunderstanding is echoed in the disdain for internet memes and their rough expression of amateurism (Shirky 2010: 18; Chen 2012: 15; Labash 2012). As with other debates surrounding free internet content production by users and their motivations (Broughton 2008: 1; Payne 2010: 239; Strangelove 2010: 121-122), critics might not understand why anyone would make and remix internet memes, as there is no monetary reward. This question regarding motivation and worthwhileness has also been raised within the punk DIY context, to which Jacobson answers 'the idea is that doing it yourself (DIY) is a worthwhile activity in and on itself' (2010: 32). Most importantly, because of this reaction from mainstream media, punks found a way to create their own channels of media, furthering their philosophy of DIY (Ensminger 2011: 75). For punks, amateurism becomes more than a celebration; it becomes a deliberate political stance (Ruggles 2008: 47). Perhaps this is also why internet memes are being used in overtly political protests in the physical world.

There is a recognition of the echoes of some aspects of Situationist International in punk culture: the first influential London punk shop 'Sex' sold clothes bearing slogans that were associated with the Situationist International, such as 'Be reasonable: Demand the Impossible' (Leblanc 1999: 37). These pre-internet movements upheld similar values of remixing, appreciation and encouragement of amateur work, whilst placing the power of making and distributing in the hands of common people. Internet memes are the online counterpart of these activities, as they celebrate this imperfection and herald the ability to make collectively instead. Habell-Pallán's description of punk as: 'expressing ideas and emotions (...) cutting and mixing cultural references (...) to make something new' (2005: 49) fits aptly as a description of meme making. Furthermore, the literature has addressed the reasons why people engage in digital remixing; listing entertainment, kinship, solidarity and political engagement as some of the reasons (Knobel & Lankshear 2008: 24). This is consistent with the broad reasons I present as being the key motivators behind internet meme making.

## Craft

Another pre-online activity whose ethos echoes with internet meme making is the art of craft. The main aspects of craft is to make; within the philosophy of craft 'making is both the means (...) and an end in itself' (Dormer 1997: 154). There is an underlying ideology in craft, which places high importance on the creative aspect and the act of making itself, as well as the act of sharing these creations (Gauntlett 2011: 25). Indeed, the literature denotes that in craft, what matters is not so much the final product, but the act of making (Dormer 1997: 43; Gauntlett 2011: 29). The crafting ethos goes a step further and declares that crafting need not be necessarily a very hands-on physical activity (similarly to the act of making memes online), the spirit of crafting is what needs to be present (Gauntlett 2011: 59). As aforementioned, this lack of importance regarding perfection of the finished product echoes in the ideology and products of punk culture – and indeed in the online sphere of participatory culture. Despite the range of accessible tools at our disposition, there is a lack of importance and desire placed on quality regarding 'homemade' media products (such as internet memes) (Gauntlett 2011: 84). In a sense, this amateur feel is enjoyed as a style; as they are becoming purposefully replicated by professionals in order to make the content more appealing (i.e. professionals simulating the 'authenticity' of amateurs) (Trabsky 2013).

There is an aspect of empowerment that lies behind craft (Dormer 1997: 43; Greer 2008: 9) that is similar to the potential for empowerment that lies behind making internet memes, as with craft there is a freedom to express creativity whilst also (even if not explicitly) empowering us as citizens. This doubles as a declaration that we don't depend on professional ready-made objects (Greer 2008: 10; Gauntlett 2011: 56); we can just make our own and, thus, carve meaning with our own hands. The same happens with making online memes: not only do they allow us to channel our creativity, but this act of making allowed by the structure of Web 2.0's participatory culture can also be empowering (Cha et al. 2007: 1; Lai & Turban 2008: 392; Martens 2011: 49). In turn, this signals a break in our former dependence on professionalised media content that is assembled within the constraints of corporate demands and political agendas.

More than the creative act of making, the philosophy of craft places strong emphasis on making *together* (e.g. quilt making) (Gauntlett 2011: 70). The social aspect that is present in crafting is at times described as the most important feature of this activity, as the sense of

community and togetherness guides the crafting ethos (Gauntlett 2011: 67, 70). This added layer of empowerment through social exchange is also present in the making and sharing of online memes (Broxton et al. 2011: 18). As Green & Jenkins suggest with their spreadability model: it is 'audiences [that] play an active role in "spreading" content' (2011: 116), not professionalised corporative media groups. Furthermore, Gauntlett establishes this connection between the sharing ethos behind crafting and the drive to share homemade videos online (2011: 44). As with online memes, craft and everyday acts of creativity have been unfairly devalued when compared to other creative endeavours like professional art, despite being more common than the latter (Trapp 2007: xi; Gauntlett 2011: 23).

### **Commodification**

Regarding the issue of how internet memes circulate, there is also the question of where memes circulate, and whether this circulation has turned memes into mainstream commodities: although memes may represent the democratic ethos of the Web 2.0, some of the spaces where memes circulate are markedly corporative (e.g. I Can Has Cheezburger network, YouTube) (Beer & Burrows 2007); raising questions about the conflict not only between intellectual property and ownership but also about the status of memes as 'inside jokes'. Much like punk underwent a process of massification when big corporations began selling punk clothes to the mainstream (Leblanc 1999: 53; Ensminger 2011: 19), memes have also been picked up by corporate entities and feature in commercial advertisements (e.g. Vodafone's Double Rainbow ad [VodafoneNewZealand 2011], Smart water [CulturePub 2011]). As the epitome of commodification, soft drink *Dr. Pepper* released a chocolate flavoured version of the drink as a tribute to Tay Zonday's video-turned-YouTube-meme *Chocolate Rain* (Lastufka & Dean 2009: 236).

Whittaker demonstrates the diversity of spaces where memes circulate, ranging from private emails to public websites, by using the example of the 'All your base are belong to us' meme; a mistranslation in a 1990's Sega videogame that became one of the most recognisable internet memes (2002: 174). The 'All your base are belong to us' meme circulated beyond the user-generated spaces online and went on to feature in commercials; as well as on a physical edition the mainstream media Time Magazine (Whittaker 2002: 174). Other internet memes featured in mainstream media include Chris Crocker's appearance in a

commercial film and rock band Weezer's music video clip for 'Pork and Beans' which references online memes (Lastufka & Dean 2009: 235, 236). By doing so, it is possible that memes are undergoing the process described by the Situationists as recuperation, which consists in 'the idea that avant-garde innovations might be recovered for use by the reigning social order' (McDonough 2002: xiii); a return to normalisation of once-marginalised signs by the mainstream (Downing et al. 2001: 59). Recuperation and commercialisation also had a serious impact on the punk movement, which prided itself in its anti-mainstream status (Hebdige 1979: 94; Reddington 2007: 163); Lievrouw furthermore warns of the lack of attention given to the acts re-appropriation that are taking place in the convergent media environment (2011: 81). It remains to be seen if the integrity of internet memes will undergo changes by circulating in corporate spaces and/or for commercial reasons.

### **Online memes – what are they?**

The concept of the internet meme has another predecessor: the offline meme. The word 'meme' was coined by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book 'The Selfish Gene'. In the book, Dawkins defines a meme as 'a unit of cultural imitation (...) leaping from brain to brain' (Dawkins 1976: 192) which 'described any cultural idea or behaviour' (Davison 2012: 122). They rely on imitation to propagate (Blackmore 1999: 4); though they are also built on a sense of intangibility (Blackmore 1999: xii). Much like their initial offline counterparts – and, arguably, more so (Blackmore 1999: ix) - online memes traverse horizontally (Yoo 2011). Dawkins' concept of the meme was meant to act as a cultural counterpart to the biological gene (1976: 192), yet its usefulness as a new concept has been criticized in some of the literature, which equates the relatively new concept of memes with the age-old concept of ideas (Haycock 2011: 225). It is understandable why this concept would be picked up to describe the phenomena of internet memes as both encapsulate the phenomena of 'ideas that spread', yet (as with its offline use) its aptitude to describe the ever-changing online phenomena of memes remains to be seen. Despite their proliferation, internet memes have been largely bypassed by academia and thus lack a stable definition (Davison 2012: 120-122). For purposes of conciseness (though I shall argue further ahead the reductiveness of this definition) I point out Davison's definition of the internet meme, which states that: 'an Internet meme is a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission' (2012: 122).

Much like the impact that accessibility to older media had on the propagation and ability for mutation of memes (Blackmore 1999: 209, 212), the internet has also been a platform where memes have proliferated at an immense rate (Blackmore 1999: 216). One of the big differences between offline memes (e.g. religion) and online memes (e.g. LOLcats) is their speed of dissemination. Whilst the previous may vary in terms of speed propagation, the latter is undoubtedly fast to circulate, which is one of its main characteristics (Davison 2012: 122). Online memes can take a myriad of forms (e.g. text, image, video) and manifest themselves in a variety of ways, ranging from emoticons, to LOLcats, to viral videos (Gurney 2011: 30; Davison 2012: 124). Their content may also come from the most varied sources, as mostly anything audio or visual might be appropriated unexpectedly (many times from mainstream media itself) into an online meme; making the raw material for meme making almost inexhaustible (Sutera 2013: 104). Memes, even in their simplest form, are nonetheless an example of Tim Berners-Lee's idea of intercreativity, which consists of using networked digital media for the 'process of making things or solving problems together' (Berners-Lee 1999: 182-183).

Online memes follow the rules of offline memes in the sense that if they do not replicate and propagate, they will expire (Blackmore 1999: 37; Jenkins, Li, & Krauskopt, 2008: 24). For memes to spread they don't have to be of any particular value; it is instead their ability to be remembered that allows them to spread (Blackmore 1999: 57). This argument is reinforced negatively, especially when it comes to online memes (Jenkins, Li, & Krauskopt, 2008: 13; Shirky 2010: 18). The perceived low value of virtual memes leads many to discard these as trivial, mostly due to the lack of skill and sheer easiness that comes with creating a meme (Jenkins, Li, & Krauskopt, 2008: 13; Shirky 2010: 18). Yet these have a significance that might not be immediately visible, as the 'low barrier of entry to what is, precisely, cultural production means that the same texts can be adapted continuously in response to social, political and cultural events' (Jones 2012: 194). As the literature suggests, the minimal technical skills one needs to create an internet meme might be the key to their high rate of multiplication (Jones 2012: 194). Internet memes, regardless (and because) of how easy they are to make place them in the most democratic of categories when it comes to internet creativity: anyone can make and share them. As Shirky puts it 'anyone seeing a LOLcat gets a second, related message: You can play this game too' (2010: 18). The 'producer' will, on some level, be able to think of their own example, apply it to a meme and thus add to the pool of

internet culture. Thus, making a meme, even if it is the most unfunny LOLcat, is still a creative act, and that is what holds real relevance in this process, regardless of perceived quality of the finished product (Shirky 2010: 18). The importance of sharing comes into play, as the sharing of memes is an integral part of the experience (Shirky 2010: 19); exemplifying what Clay Shirky means when he says that 'we don't really care how individuals create and share; it's enough that they exercise this kind of freedom.' (2010: 172).

'Producers', as with the overwhelming majority of content they produce online, are not paid to make memes and invest their unpaid time in making, sharing, changing, remixing and readapting these objects of culture (Jenkins, Li, & Krauskopt, 2008: 4; Leadbeater 2009: 10; Davison 2012: 132). The obvious answer of doing it for personal recognition also does not apply, since most online memes 'not only often disregard attribution (...) they are also frequently incorporated into systems and among practices that actively prevent and dismantle attribution' (Davison 2012: 132; see also Leadbeater 2009: 16). There is an echo of engagement with society as a motivator (Jenkins, Li, & Krauskopt, 2008: 4), which is not unlike the kind present in citizen journalism (Bratich 2008: 71; Deuze 2009: 257). If we are to follow the theoretical framing of the internet as democratic (though, as mentioned, this is not without its flaws), internet memes seem to epitomise this promise. Instead of seeing them as meaningless creations I view them as – and here I'll borrow Shirky's words to describe open source software, which applies to memes aptly – 'home not just to a valuable object (...) but to a valuable culture' (2010: 143).

These accounts point to internet memes as latent bearers of democratic characteristics. There have been indications in the literature that the Web 2.0 in itself is propitious to a democratic environment, as the invitation of participatory engagement is extended to all that have access to a networked computer (Lai & Turban 2008: 390) – tools that are becoming ubiquitous in our current reality (Zittrain 2008: 96). The prevalence of networked digital media has inclusively been pointed out as one of the reasons for online meme proliferation (Shifman 2012: 189). The ability to socially engage on such speed and scale within a global context is a demonstration of the democratic value of the current digital reality (Lai & Turban 2008: 389). However, as pointed out by the digital divide, this still excludes those who do not have these tools, which in turn omits them from important forms of interaction and access to information (Norris 2001). Critics warn that the exaggerated

emphasis on how democratic current digital media is may hide the repressive aspects of the media (Strangelove 2010: 162), and they also remind us that the internet is not immune to social, cultural and political pressures (Katz & Rice 2002: xx; Dutton 2013: 19), which restricts its ability to be a utopian enterprise of freedom. It is worth noting that although many online memes work on the principle of 'anyone can do this', there is still a level of cultural literacy that is required in order to engage and understand such cultural products, references and interactions to their full extent (Knobel & Lankshear 2008: 29; Spring 2008: 133). This literacy then gives rise to a greater proficiency not only of the digital context but also of the palpable 'real world' context (Knobel & Lankshear 2008: 31). The level of cultural literacy required for the understanding of some internet memes may also be set very high, as the case with LOLtheorists, which features content that Meikle & Young describe as '*unpopular culture*' (2012: 117). Thus, perhaps some memes might be best thought of as working on a principle of exclusion; which makes the democratic label of internet memes problematic.

### **Meaning making**

The relationship between people and culture has largely been of an interpenetrative nature, influencing each other in a never-ending cycle (Tseng & Streltzer 2004: 1). Fundamentally, it is a relationship that revolves around meaning making (Florio-Ruane 2001: 28). Hall refers to the concept of 'representation' as a way to 'connect[s] meaning and language to culture' (1997: 15). Furthermore, Hall notes we are experiencing a 'cultural turn' in academia, which highlights the significance of meaning when discussing culture (1997: 2). Meaning is a disperse concept that is not self-contained (Nelson 1985: 249); it is extracted from cultural objects, which in turn have meaning infused in them (Lassiter 2009: 51). Thus, a big part of what it means to live within society or a determined culture is related to the meaning making process that we value as collective members of humanity (Drath & Palus 1994: 10).

Consequently, it is no surprise that this process of meaning making has been extended to digital culture and its objects. Being proliferous within (and, to much extent, relying on) Web 2.0, it seems only natural that the Web 2.0 works as a ground for meaning making, as 'development of meaning is an essentially interactive process' (Nelson 1985: 251). The many-to-many constant dialogue that occurs online results fertile ground for meaning making

(Lindgren 2012: 14). Other attributes such as remixing have also been indicated as key to meaning making (Knobel & Lankshear 2008: 26); placing the power to 'decide if the assembled bits add up to a new meaning' (Jacobson 2010: 29). Considering Web 2.0's aforementioned properties, this fits seamlessly within a digital framework. Although there is literature that seems to dispel the theory of 'digi-natives' (Joshi et al. 2007: 1), digital cultural objects and practices (e.g. remix) seem to be progressively adopted by the young generation as a form of meaning making and manifestation of their ideals (Knobel & Lankshear 2008: 23). Being a product of digital culture, internet memes also enjoy the status of tools for meaning making. Beyond their apparent triviality, memes are of relevance to the people who understand them and appear to have the characteristics of a kind of global private joke (boyd 2012: 76). It is worth noting that a similar situation occurred before the internet was widespread: the telephone 'phreakers' from the 50's to the 80's also had their own codes transmitted through media and banded together for an apparently meaningless purpose that mattered to them (Coleman 2012: 101, 105). Technology itself can play a part in the social shaping of meaning, as it provides us with 'technologically mediated intentionality', which describes the 'relation between human beings and world mediated by a technological artifact' (Verbeek 2005: 116). An example of this is the prominent meme of the emoticon (Davison 2012: 124). Despite holding value in both digital and face-to-face interaction, online it presents the possibility of gaining an added layer of meaning that otherwise would not be feasible (Davison 2012: 124). On the other hand, technology is also simultaneously shaped by society and ongoing use, and its meaning changes as it is adopted in everyday life (Castells 2001: 28; Baym 2010: 44; Stalder 2012: 242).

LOLcats, as any other internet meme, are extremely flexible (Gurney 2011: 43; Davison 2012: 123); many variations of LOLcats have spawned (e.g. Historiclols, LOLtheorists, LOLdogs, etc) (Jenkins, Li, & Krauskopt, 2008: 17; see also Davison 2012: 130; Meikle & Young 2012: 117). This not only reinforces the power of creative audiences – who can change the course and meaning of texts in an active and unexpected way – but also points towards the active 'processes of meaning making, as people use tools at their disposal to explain the world around them' (Jenkins, Li, & Krauskopt, 2008: 18). Memes' flexibility combined with their recognisable characteristics and associated underlying meanings aids in their distribution and popularity beyond national and cultural boundaries, which could explain why they can be found in many languages and contexts.

### **Meme/meaning making rules**

Despite being acclaimed for their flexibility, online memes enjoy a duality in this aspect: they are malleable (Davison 2012: 123) yet must respect some ground rules in order to be considered successful and recognisable memes. Davison describes this in detail regarding macro memes (2012: 127), whilst Shirky does the same for LOLcats (2010: 17-18). The importance of having these ground rules can also be seen in previous remix movements such as Dada, the basic rules of which were kept alive by correspondence and travel (Lievrouw 2011: 64); signalling the importance of media communication in order for these memes (both Dada and internet memes) to survive aptly. Knobel & Lankshear (2008: 29) propose that there are two dimensions to the understanding of these remixed works: technical and discourse. Whilst the former addresses the familiarity with tools in order to create remixed works, the latter deals with these aforementioned rules which create a space of shared meaning for the adherents of the group (Knobel & Lankshear 2008: 29). Digitally, users may also fill professional media gaps with their own meaning (Shifman 2012: 199).

Returning to the accusation of 'dumbification' against LOLcats (Shirky 2010: 18; Chen 2012: 15; Labash 2012); they are not simply images of cats with broken English, even their apparently random misspelling *must* follow a LOLcat logic (Knobel & Lankshear 2008: 28, 29) (i.e. One must write 'I can haz' and not 'I can have' or other variants; it must use impact sans-serif font and be a humorous comment or addition to the picture [Shirky 2010: 17, 18]). The more these rules are adhered to, the greater level of shared meaning the LOLcat maker will achieve with the people who view and understand the LOLcat (Nelson 1985: 10). These LOLcat rules are adopted by LOLcat makers and sharers, replicating the logic of offline shared meaning systems (Nelson 1985: 10). Despite the rules that one must be familiarised with in order to engage with the world of online memes, much like the case of many offline memes, the barrier of entry into the world of LOLcats and macro memes requires the simple act of observation, which keeps the accessibility level at a very low bar (Davison 2010: 121).

This ease of accessibility may cause further problems in terms of corruption of meaning making. The literature reports how the social and cooperative agreement of the Web 2.0 was threatened during recurring vandalism acts on a Wikipedia page; the Wikipedia community reacted negatively to these acts, hinting at the threat this type of defacement posed to the meaning making process of its users (Hyde et al. 2012: 54). The same logic is

applied to meme-making: when users use memes incorrectly, they are usually criticised by the members of meme communities. This might be because they are (intentionally or not) posing a threat to the process of meaning making and of memes themselves. Yet the characteristic that causes the problem also brings with it the solution: widespread technical affordances are what allow the memes to be kept in check by the millions of users that act as curators and quickly defend against the denigration of meaning (Hyde et al. 2012: 65). It is worth noting that meaning making is not only produced by the creation of digital content. As aforementioned, sharing is just as important as making; meaning is also made by the simple act of sharing. Sharing a piece of digital media is a thought-out act in itself, and by deciding to send a specific piece of digital media, one is trying to communicate something specific to the receiver of this piece of digital media; this act in itself creates more meaning while simultaneously spreading meaning (Green & Jenkins 2011: 114, 126).

Social media has been criticised for its influx of meaningless drivel (Solomon 2011: 2; Moeller 2013: 363), but what might appear to be a sea of empty messages about daily trivia to us is, nevertheless, something meaningful for the people who share it and, most likely, to the intended receivers. Something as simple as a tweet can help build meaning making between millions of small groups of people (boyd 2012: 75). Beyond the agreed connotations behind certain internet memes, these can gain an added layer of meaning by speaking to communal aspects of very niche and specific groups or relationships; acting as a cementing tool for those relationships (Xie et al. 2011: 3). This is perhaps why some people don't grasp the humour of certain memes while they do in others; as Shirky explains, in these situations: 'It's simple. They're not talking to you' (2008: 85). These bits of information matter to the people who share them and to the people who respond to them (Green & Jenkins 2011: 112).

### **Social uses in 'real' life**

Internet memes' mix of participation and sharing is the recipe for 'collective self-expression' (Leadbeater 2009: xviii). In turn, this echoes back to our social need as humans (Grinnell 2009: 595; Shirky 2010: 59, 107), which could reflect back onto physical society, thus returning to us a greater sense of connectedness. I believe this transformative step can be done by internet memes. To further this example, there have been a growing number of protests worldwide where protesters turn up with billboards and posters that explicitly

reference internet memes – memes they have remixed themselves, which bear relevant political and/or social critique. Citizens are choosing to voice their discontent through appropriated signs that already represent a rejection of top-down values, as these symbols belong to and are made by the audience. This removes the internet meme and places it in the heart of active citizenship, which is translated by the act of protesting, giving it an added dimension of cultural and political relevance. LOLcats can no longer bear the label of innocuous mind-numbing activity; they instead hold potential underexplored power of cultural symbolism manipulated by the masses through which societies make meaning (Jenkins, Li, & Krauskopt, 2008: 18). This raises questions about internet memes' circulation beyond the bounded service of the network and their circulation within the palpable world.

Much like remix culture, this sort of internet activism finds an older offline counterpart in craftivism, a concept that encapsulates craft and/as activism (Greer 2011: 175). Craftivism goes beyond the inherently political stance of not depending on pre-made consumer-culture driven objects (Gauntlett 2011: 56) (which, as aforementioned, parallels with internet memes' independence from professional media outlets for content and meaning) and empowers crafters further by allowing them to address politics directly and explicitly through craft (Black & Burisch 2011: 210). Much like the use of internet memes in protest, craftivist pieces can bear strong visual messages that translate beyond national boundaries (Gohil 2007; Turney 2009: 205). Gauntlett (2011) reinforces the parallel between the democratic actions that take place online - such as the ability to make and distribute media content (e.g. internet memes) – and this offline counterpart of political craft. This relation between media and action is, to some extent, also echoed in Meikle & Young's (2012) argument that reinforces media is something we make and engage with ourselves. The rise of citizen activism, widespread use and attention given to online participatory culture in recent political turmoil (e.g. Arab Spring, Egyptian revolution) (Zuckerman 2011; Androutsopoulos 2013: 49) illustrates this point.

Having no fixed embodiment (i.e. they can take the form of text, image, and video) and having no fixed ideological connotation (i.e. they can be used for entertainment, critique, social commentary) adds to internet memes' malleability, which extends their ability to circulate further. Some are aware of memes through mainstream media or word of mouth without having habitual internet habits themselves, demonstrating just how permeable offline society is to online memes (Gurney 2011: 30). By carrying internet memes into the

physical world, participatory culture has risen to a new level of connectedness and meaning (Leadbeater 2009: 24; Gauntlett 2011: 8), evidencing that the lines between these worlds is ever so permeable (Shirky 2010: 37). It also extends the meaning of 'intercreativity', which gains a new dimension by becoming present in the tangible world.

Consequently, internet memes are of relevance, as they are being used evermore on a global scale not only for the purposes of entertainment - a feat in itself, since comedic value isn't easy to translate - but also for social and political purposes. As with other products of technology that came before these (Jones & Marsden 2006: 74), this demonstrates an unexpected turn; as the 'the social use(s) of our new media tools (...) wasn't implicit in the tools themselves' (Shirky 2010: 14; see Rheingold 2002). Internet memes are stealthily but surely making their way into the everyday physical life and language, as exemplified by the 'real-life' use of memes as commentary and by the extensive use of the word 'LOL' in face-to-face conversation. This points to a cultural shift that kick-started online and has replicated in physical reality. The importance of internet memes' shift from a purely online presence to an offline material existence is underlined by Gauntlett, who recognizes the importance of participatory culture online, but nevertheless states that 'the really powerful metaphorical leap would be to go from Web 2.0 to real life' (2011: 8). Internet memes allow us to take that leap, and to close the gap between the online world and our offline life.

As the case with offline memes that pervade all aspects of life (Blackmore 1999: 6), online memes seem to have gained significance and a life of their own, be it the arenas of the entertaining or the political. It appears that now, more than ever, 'media is the connective tissue of society' (Shirky 2010: 54); to what extent this runs true to the offline world - and to what extent media's online memes are socially and culturally relevant in both the online and offline world - is something that remains to be researched here. Having outlined the academic and conceptual backdrop for this thesis it becomes necessary to find a methodologically sound way to tackle the research, where I will be addressing questions of memes and meaning making among the context of various spheres.

## Chapter 2: Methodology

Having established the academic bases through my literature review, I turned to more practical aspects. Considering the project's nature, a qualitative approach is best suited; driving my research are questions of understanding (i.e. how, why) which lend themselves to a qualitative approach particularly well (Swaminathan & Mulvihill 2017: 9-12). Although the data yielded in qualitative research is difficult to pin down to set questions, in this thesis I set out to answer a few of the following research questions:

- What exactly are internet memes in terms of cultural significance and existence?
- Where do memes circulate and what are the processes involved in this circulation (both across online and offline spaces), as well as its implications in terms of how we think about communication and interaction among friends and strangers?
- What role does meaning-making play in the use of memes by those who make and/or share them?
- In what ways are different memes used in varying contexts of users' lives i.e. politically, socially, economically and culturally? On the other hand, in what ways can one meme express its iterations through all of these shifting contexts?

With these questions in mind I eschewed quantitative methods as this approach would not be fruitful for questions of deeper understanding and first-hand experience. Evidence in the literature supports qualitative approaches as suitable for cultural studies and cultural phenomena (Alasuutari 1995: 2; Hine 2000: 18; Paterson 2008: 2; Pickering 2008: 4, 7; Singer 2008: 158). Qualitative approaches have been significant regarding the shaping of virtual communication studies (Hine 2000: 18).

Considering the broadness and richness of these questions, a two pronged approach would be more efficient in terms of results (Stokes 2003: 27). Using more than one single approach will provide a wealthier pool of knowledge, where the findings from different methods will complement each other (Saukko 2003: 23), whilst also avoiding over-reliance on one of the techniques selected. The main methods employed are interviews and a virtual ethnography; though, as I shall elaborate, at times the latter incorporates a variety of techniques within it which makes it harder to define in such clear cut terms. I aimed at taking my extensive experience with memes and use it as a starting point for a blended

understanding between what I interpreted in my findings and what others reported to me. I trust that the combination of findings from both these approaches has provided me with a considerable in-depth understanding of the current meaning and presence of online memes not only in online communication but also its broader cultural impact.

### **Ethnography**

Taking into account the large arena I analysed, I came to the conclusion an ethnographic approach would be very enriching: the meme world is a fast changing space that is overflowing with information, this means a clear-cut definition of its boundaries of circulation and influence is practically impossible to delineate. The internet is in constant change, and despite some memes standing the test of internet time, most memes can be extremely ephemeral and fleeting. The ease with which they can be made and travel through the networks is what makes them almost disposable, and consequently harder to analyse. With these aspects in mind, I wanted to select a method that would respect all those undefined aspects without altering their organic quality; a method that would fit the phenomena I'm researching and not the other way around (Singer 2008: 159).

The literature demonstrates that defining the parameters of what an ethnography is and determining a fixed set of its approaches remains difficult and varies from field to field (Wolcott 1999: 276; Hine 2000: 41; Hammersley & Atkinson 2007: 1; Paterson 2008: 4, 9; O'Reilly 2012a: 1-2); although this might seem like an off-putting trait it also makes it a very supple method that encourages the combination of varied techniques under its umbrella (Singer 2008: 157; Kozinets 2010: 42; Beaulieu 2017: 30), which opens up exciting possibilities for unique understanding tailored to the case at hand. By adopting an ethnographic method, I have addressed some of the main questions of this project (i.e. how meaning is made, what is the synergic context within it, how does this affect different aspects of our experiences); questions which are described in the literature as having been approached in past projects through the use of ethnographies (Hine 2000: 18; see also Baym 1995, Correll 1995, Turkle 1995, Thomsen et al. 1998, Boellstorff 2008, and boyd 2008). Ethnographies concern themselves with the core aspects of determined cultures (Hine 2000: 21; Singer 2008: 158; Altheide & Schneider 2013: 24), their behaviours and incentives (Bruns 2008a: 180) and zone in on their meaning making processes (Schensul, Schensul & LeCompte 1999: 1; Hine 2000: 8); it is a method that has been called 'the writing of culture' (Clifford & Marcus 1986; Altheide &

Schneider 2013: 24). Ultimately, as Hine puts it rather concisely, ‘the ethnographic approach becomes a way of studying the achievement of a meaningful cultural context for participants’ (Hine 2000: 21); it is this depth of engagement and understanding that this method provides through the ‘insider’ perspective (O’Reilly 2009: 109) that I strived for in this project.

The ephemeral and fast-changing quality of meme making and transmission makes this environment a particularly good candidate for the use of the ethnographic method (Thompson 2000: 70). By infiltrating within the space where these creations and interactions take place, I follow these events as they unfold in real time and gain an understanding not only of the virtual objects (which may not be available online for long) but also of the *context* in which they circulate which can be very time-sensitive. My experience of internet memes as part of cultural reaction adds to the weight of contextual understanding that this project must bear. As Hammersley & Atkinson (2007) underline, the relevance of context in ethnographic studies is central to this methodological approach; a point also emphasised by Hine who describes the relation between ethnography and context as ‘inseparable’ (2000: 13), highlighted by other academics as well (Puijk 2008: 40; Altheide & Schneider 2013: 24). Awareness of contextual changes ethnographic data sustains when being presented in an academic piece such as this one is important (Lambert 2013: 55; see Markham 2004).

Traditionally, offline ethnographies have been associated with fieldwork in a foreign place, typically involving the immersion into an exotic culture in order to understand its inner workings (Schensul, Schensul & LeCompte 1999: 4; Pole & Morrison 2003: 12; O’Reilly 2009: 110); a tendency that can be traced to the roots of early ethnographic work (Neumann 1996: 180; Marcus & Fischer 1999: 133; Brewer 2000: 11; Pole & Morrison 2003: 12; Wolcott 2008: 235). Although this glamorous view of ethnography applies to early ethnographic work<sup>1</sup> and some recent work<sup>2</sup>, ethnography encompasses more than this variety.

Departing from its original roots, ethnographies would then begin to focus on subjects that were closer to home, both literally and figuratively (Neumann 1996: 180; Pole & Morrison 2003: 13; Pink 2007: 59; O’Reilly 2009: 110). In the 1920’s and 1930’s, the Chicago School began taking what seemed like an entirely radical approach: studying their own

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<sup>1</sup> e.g. Franz Boas’ 1883-1884 expedition to Baffin Island in Canada (Muller-Wille 1998); Margaret Mead’s ethnography of Samoan culture (1928); Claude Lévi-Strauss’ ethnographic writings about Brazil and other cultures (1955)

<sup>2</sup> e.g. N. Sudhakar Rao’s ethnographic work on the Yanadi tribe (2002); Bisht & Bankoti’s compendium regarding Himalayan tribes (2004);

culture, the culture that surrounded them right there in Chicago (Pole & Morrison 2003: 12; O'Reilly 2009: 110). Under the ethnographic methodology, the Chicago School began studying the close and the mundane, undertaking the study of a proximity not only in terms of geography but at times also in terms of personal engagement, as some researchers were studying familiar cultures and people (O'Reilly 2009: 110). Despite this closeness, some still position the Chicago School academics as outsiders due to their social and cultural position in relation to those who were being studied. Nevertheless, even in these accounts the Chicago School researchers are noted to attempt infiltration into the groups they were studying (Pole & Morrison 2003: 12). This innovative approach to ethnographic studies would come to influence the method up to our contemporary times, demonstrating the value of applying such a method to familiar settings (Pole & Morrison 2003: 12).

The tendency to neglect mundane cultures is likewise observable in academia's history of overlooking the ordinary aspects of everyday life. This is demonstrated by the historical propensity to focus academic attention on what society perceives as being the 'other' (e.g. colonial/race studies, feminism, queer studies), an issue that has been countered by more recent forays into the study of whiteness (Dyer 1997), masculinities (Connell 1995) and heterosexuality (Katz 1995). It was only with these points of view gaining traction that more academic attention began turning to the taken for granted categories of what had been inherently perceived as the 'common'. This is in no way indicative that colonialist, feminist or queer studies are no longer relevant; but instead that it seems more intuitive for academic studies to turn towards what it considers 'the other' or 'exotic', whilst in the process underestimating the impact and consequence of what is informally known. Nowadays it is undeniable that a substantial portion of what is called everyday life includes the contribution of pop culture (Altheide & Schneider 2013: 10). The internet itself has become a commonplace space and tool in our current society, a familiarity that has extended to ethnographers too (Pink 2007: 191). Being a part of relevant contemporary popular culture as well as a product of internet culture, it makes sense that memes are studied under this ethnographic trend. This also seems to fit the methodological tendency regarding recent internet studies: the literature has signalled a shift in online studies, which used to focus on questions of identity, towards an embracing of the ethnographic method in order to understand routine and commonplace interaction that takes place online (Pink 2007: 191; see Miller and Slater 2000; Postill 2005).

Being an avid partaker in the online arena for years, as well as a fascinated observer and actor of the online meme world, it seemed wasteful to not make use of this previously acquired knowledge that has informed my understanding of the internet and my daily experience of cultural engagement. From my own internet forays through the years I began building knowledge of the spaces that were meme-rich, which worked as a starting point for my ethnographic pursuits (e.g. Cheezburger network, 9gag, Reddit, 4chan, Facebook, Know Your Meme). I followed in the relatively recent phenomena of the aca-fan (or the academic-fan: an academic that is a self-confessed fan of a media product), popularised by Matt Hills (2002) and Henry Jenkins (2013). This act of mixing personal interest with academic pursuit might seem to be at odds; at a glance, the partial nature of fandom and personal interest seem irreconcilable with the rigour and objectivity necessary for academic research, going so far as being described as 'uncomfortable' (Peloff & Giles 2013: 75). Nevertheless there are positive aspects to this amalgamation of academic research and personal fan interest, as this kind of research not only ensures there is personal commitment but also tests and pushes the boundaries of research itself (Peloff & Giles 2013: 75, 76). I strongly believe in Jenkins' simply put but encompassing approach to cultural studies:

'I personally do not think we can study popular culture in any form, let alone something like fan culture, from the outside looking in. There are questions we can only answer by examining our own emotional experiences with forms of culture that matter to us.' (2013: xii)

What Jenkins states rings true to my own experience as both an academic and as a fan; sole rejection of knowledge that lies outside academic rigor can make up for an incomplete depiction of such highly invested emotional phenomena. An invested perspective does not necessarily detract from academic thoroughness; it should instead aim to complement theoretical knowledge with empiricism. Although the literature does remark upon the 'rejection of the value of ethnographic methods' (Jenkins 2013b: ix) that was felt previously in the cultural study of fans and fan culture; a return to this method is warranted, as there is validity in its alternative approach.

In recent years there has been a marked change in academic approaches to Humanities subjects, where after many years fighting against the perceived threat of subjectivity that underlined its topics we now see an embrace and acceptance of the values of subjectivity. A case in point is our cultural shift towards attitudes in journalism: whereas the

sole goal used to be clear-cut objectivity nowadays there is a time and place for objectivity within news pieces (Blaagaard 2014: 46). It is not so much a matter of people and media becoming more subjective, it is a question of being more accepting of the inevitable subjectivity that we as humans partake in (Blaagaard 2014: 41). Whilst it can be argued that albeit the concept of the aca-fan seems like a recent trend, scholars have in fact been pursuing topics of personal/emotional interest for a long time before aca-fans (e.g. feminist studies [Stacey 1996: 88], queer studies [D'Emilio 2003: 172], sports studies [Gratton & Jones 2010: 9] to name a few). This private investment is present in anthropological works done by academics that were personally engaged with the cultures and/or movements they were researching (O'Reilly 2009: 111).

However, the study of cultures close to us comes with its own set of issues, one of which is the difficulty regarding impartiality. This is particularly pertinent when it comes to ethnographies; as 'the anthropologist in a foreign culture has to struggle to gain insights; the anthropologist in her own culture must struggle to withdraw from it' (O'Reilly 2009: 111). The fear that ethnographies conducted from a place or culture of familiarity for the researcher might lead to a biased result is a present concern in this type of work (Hine 2000: 54), yet it is worth noting that this critique is also aimed at ethnographies in a more general sense; it is not restricted to ethnographies undertaken in familiar places and/or cultures (Fetterman 2000: 1; Hine 2000: 54). With this in mind, it might seem contradictory to advise that despite the critiques on the ethnographic method, ethnographers must face and embrace the tendentious nature of their approach (O'Reilly 2009: 111). By openly exposing this issue and making the reader aware of its potential presence, researchers are already working towards countering this partiality (Hine 2000: 23, 156; Fetterman 2010: 1). An open awareness of the inherent bias of this practice is often tackled directly through the exercise of reflexivity, where an ethnographer addresses the processes that accompany their relationship with such a close association to the object of study, as well as their own influential perceptions upon the result (Markham 2004; Pink 2007: 23-4; Hine 2017: 26).

Self-reflection as a necessary part of an ethnography is a validation of personal and emotional investments and contributions in spaces where they once were considered hindrances. Despite this potential for bias, ethnographers do not tend to disregard academic guidelines; they still adhere to the codes of research and strive to maintain a high standard of

quality regarding their research in order to retain its value as a piece of academic work (Fetterman 2000: 1). Although impartiality is to be strived for in academic spaces, it is naïve to believe any form of universal truth may be represented in any single academic study. Whilst it is important to maintain research within the guidelines of academic validity, this does not mean that there is no space for personal observations. Schensul, Schensul & LeCompte describe the understanding that results from our complex relation with various elements in 'personal' ethnographic research as 'formative theory' (1999: 2). They value the existing knowledge of the researcher, alongside more academic approaches such as existing literature; additionally popular sources are taken into consideration, as well as the voice of the community in question (1999: 2). Acceptance of the lack of complete impartiality, particularly in the context of ethnographies, then becomes an intrinsic part of the work itself, which must be appreciated as such. It becomes important to embrace the 'uncomfortable' feeling described by Peloff and Giles (2013: 75), as it is from this duality that a more rounded ethnographic piece is born. To an extent, ethnographies are a celebration of their lack of pure objectiveness, as at the core of its intention is the desire to take into account all things that simply cannot be quantified or detached from (Hine 2017: 26).

These shifts are early echoes of further transformations that had other repercussions on the ethnographic method. Besides the change of focus regarding research subjects, the Chicago School's contribution brought forth with it questions regarding the ethnographic approach itself. With the object of study living on their door step, Chicago School researchers were effectively beginning an effacement of a long established key aspect of the ethnographic method: distance, or the act of travelling to a far-away site (Neumann 1996: 180). As we progress, the ethnographic method has seen itself being faced with a changing environment and an altered relationship with space. Aspects such as increasing mobility of both people and contexts aided by the growing trend of globalisation and rapid dissemination of technological advancements (Pink 2007: 27; O'Reilly 2009: 145) have led to the adoption of mobility regarding space of ethnography itself (O'Reilly 2009: 144, 145). Due to evolutionary changes in the field of ethnographical studies – not only the shift from the ethnographical focus on the distant and exotic to the closer and familiar but also the disintegration of the notion of place that came with ethnographies conducted in virtual settings – it seems evident that 'the categories of distance and difference that once fuelled the ethnographic tale no longer seem to work' (Neumann 1996: 180). The literature ultimately calls for an embrace regarding

changes in the ethnographic field, if it is to adapt and survive to the fast changing world of online interaction.

This ethnographic research was mostly carried out online, essentially making it a virtual ethnography or 'netnography' (Kozinets 2010). Alex Lambert's Facebook study was conducted via a virtual ethnography (Lambert 2013) where he demonstrated this can be an appropriate method to research such spaces. The similarity between mobile ethnographies and online ethnographies might not be apparent at first, but the lack of continuity in place and space in both makes them share particular ethnographic qualities. The advent of virtual ethnographies has further complicated such a clear-cut definition, as these may fully question our notions of place (Pink 2007: 27; O'Reilly 2009: 145); an openness that has the ability to easily approach variables of space transversely instead of separately (Fortun et al. 2017: 13). Karen O'Reilly describes this new ethnographic experience of space as follows:

Instead of thinking in terms of places or locations, an Internet ethnographer looks to connections between things (...) they may start in one 'place' then follow leads and networks to other places and spaces. (2009: 217)

Thus, ethnographies have had to adapt not only to the changes regarding places (i.e. the result of cultural meshing as a by-product of globalisation) but also to the leaps that have taken place in spaces (i.e. the introduction of the virtual space as a new place). These changes in perception of space and place within the ethnographic method have been so significant as to question the boundaries of the once so starkly demarcated ethnographic field, shifting our focus from geographical space to fluid space (Pink 2007: 27; O'Reilly 2009: 145).

In order for the ethnographic method to survive whilst also sustaining its methodological value within the digital atmosphere, it is forced to undergo necessary adaptation (Hine 2000: 66); a process that seems to be present throughout a large part of ethnographic history (Wolcott 1999: 276). Considering that I analysed both online and offline context regarding the use and spread of memes, the ethnographic approach was an advantageous method to achieve this: Hine has suggested that by adjusting the ethnographic method, it is possible to gain an understanding of content born online which then travels offline, as well as the changes that might occur to such content when it undergoes such processes (2000: 155). This practice fits particularly well with my research project, as I defend that both online and offline contexts are relevant in order to understand the reality and

globalism of memes. For this reason my methodology also had to undertake steps in order to close the gap between the online and offline worlds.

Being primarily visual objects, online memes must be addressed in an ethnographic approach that allows for their visual characteristic to be taken into consideration. There is a history of neglect when it comes to images in ethnographies as they are rarely given the same focus or importance as other materials, a disparity that has been decried in the literature (Highfield & Leaver 2016), particularly in Sarah Pink's (2007: 6) work. Critics have stated the added subjectivity regarding the use of images to complement ethnographic pieces contribute to their discredit (Pink 2007: 9); however not only are images central to this project, but following my aforementioned arguments I also believe these critiques regarding subjectivity yet again demonstrate some lack of understanding of what lies at the heart of an ethnography. Researching about internet memes places this thesis squarely in the field of visual ethnographies, demonstrating that images and texts are very present in contemporary life and culture (see Mirzoeff 1999), an aspect identified and taken into consideration by visual ethnographies (Pink 2007: 7, 21).

Undertaking the task of an online ethnography required an assortment of means: besides the use of interviews (about which I will go into depth further ahead) I also used other complementary methods such as observation. Being one of the most utilised tools in ethnographic exercises and often used in conjunction with other methods (Singer 2008: 157), observation played a substantial part in my research. The literature attests for the usage of observation within the field of media and cultural studies (Paterson 2008: 2), underlying its role in the information gathering process that surrounds the manifold idiosyncrasies of online communication (Hine 2000: 18).

Observation of online interaction has always been a central part of internet users' experience, most commonly known as 'lurking' i.e. following dealings in online spaces without participating, thus going unnoticed by those who are being observed (Preece & Nonnecke 1999: 1). Lurking is essential due to the importance of the adherence to explicit and implicit rules in such spaces, which when broken or disturbed can cause an imbalance, withdrawal or even rejection from participants (Warburton 2013: 154-5). This has been signalled in previous online research, and it has been suggested that these situations have led to online spaces becoming increasingly sceptical of 'outside' researchers (Kozinets 2010: 77-80). Through

lurking, one becomes acquainted with the customs of the space one is operating in, which is true for both offline and online spaces. An important part of any ethnography includes the adoption and usage of the language of the subjects of study, as it is with this language that the latter will articulate (Schensul, Schensul & LeCompte 1999: 4; Kozinets 2010: 77-80); a thorough understanding of online linguistic nuances is possible to grasp by lurking.

Furthermore lurking is not necessarily the passive action it has been portrayed to be, as there is a wealth of both meaning and data that can be ascertained through observation alone (Hine 2000: 25); it is not only what is explicitly said that can count towards a knowledgeable understanding of an online space. In an ethnographic study it is at times difficult to separate pure observation from participation, as researchers often have to slip in and out of both modes and engage in 'participant observation' (Hine 2000: 47, 54; O'Reilly 2009: 150; Altheide & Schneider 2013: 23; Lambert 2013: 50). As Beer & Burrows state, one of the changes that the virtual ethnographic setting will bring forth is the growing shift 'from the role of observer to that of participant observer' (2007: 11), echoed by other online researchers (Kozinets 2010: 21). It is also an approach that seems to fit naturally with the medium and context I am working with; I could partake in a fully observatory role (i.e. solely 'lurking' in online spaces), and although this is a big part of what my research entails, it is almost impossible to not partake in some interactions with the online space I am researching.

As outlined in the literature review, online culture revolves largely around gift culture, and in this context it seems reasonable that participants should not give their time to someone who is not interested in giving anything back. An ethnographic relationship should be based on dialogue and mutual input, which is why it is particularly important to include the participants in question regarding research results (Murchison 2010: 58). This should be more than a question of courtesy, as these participants are what essentially build up the researcher's findings; it is only ethical that the former are included in the full process, including sharing the findings and making them available to those who have contributed towards them. Online communities in particular should not be usurped and treated as disposable, as mistrust might hinder further research, and there is no reason to not maintain a respectful relationship throughout the research process. Following the advice present in most of the online ethnography literature (and my own experience of these spaces), I

approached each online space in a way that demonstrated my own engagement and understanding of them and their internal logic.

I selected online spaces that I knew were meme-rich from experience, supplementing this with my interviewees' own contribution towards this list. Interviewees mentioned a few of their top meme dwelling spaces, which were: Reddit, 9gag, 4chan, Cheezburger network and Facebook. Thus, all of these are discussed in this thesis, with the exception of 4chan for reasons that will be made clear shortly. I also incorporated offline meme encounters that I either came across physically or through preliminary research, utilising these as starting points of meme incarnations which I then married to the literature. I left an invitation for participation or contacted the moderators in almost all of the listed online spaces, with mixed results. I received no responses on 9gag when I extended the invitation to users that wanted to participate in this project, I contacted the Cheezburger team and although a member agreed to the interviewing process they did not respond to my attempts at contact. Due to the nature of its architecture Facebook would revolve around my circle of Friends, which was not the intention of this project. In short, due to these issues these spaces were analysed ethnographically (since they had been flagged as relevant by both my interviewees and my own experience), despite not featuring in my interviews. Reddit users did respond and I have included the contribution of two moderators in my interviews.

I decided against engaging with 4chan for a number of reasons: in terms of practicality, it was not very fruitful to engage with 4chan for this project in particular. The website is notorious for its use of anonymity when it comes to participants, and because the structural aspects of the website encourage anonymity, it is difficult to follow conversations and interactions. Secondly, it is unlikely that much cooperation would have taken place even if such an invitation had been extended. During his time spent researching 4chan, Rushkoff (2009) described his experience as being in a 'bad neighbourhood – one where if you break some custom you're unaware of, you could get hurt'. After my forays into 4chan this is something I can definitely recognise in my own experience. Hostility (particularly towards those with evident outsider status, e.g. academics) is not only at times looming over some cyberspaces in a thinly veiled fashion; it is often displayed outwardly as a proud form of interaction.

In addition, I decided to avoid direct engagement due to the graphic nature of some of the 4chan boards. Many famous memes started in 4chan and subsequently spread throughout the rest of the internet, memes such as LOLcats originated in the 4chan boards through something called 'Caturday': every Saturday, cat pictures were posted in the Caturday thread. The Caturday tradition is still practiced, though now this includes very graphic images of mutilated and dead cats. This is not abnormal behaviour for the context where it is placed (i.e. 4chan's /b/ board), however I cannot bring myself to filter through such disturbing content. Rushkoff (2009) describes the ill sentiment he felt when he encountered disturbing and illegal content on 4chan, which is very similar to what I felt when attempting to approach it. There is also the issue of relevance: these images of mutilated and dead cats are *not* internet memes. For these reasons, the invitation to participate in the interviews was not extended to this online space in particular.

## **Interviews**

In order to supplement my netnography I conducted seven in-depth interviews, I made use of these in order to grasp 'how audiences understand media and cultural texts' (Stokes 2003: 3). The interview results not only confirmed or denied the data extracted from the content analysis of the websites in terms of meme popularity and circulation but also added a layer of understanding regarding internet memes' translation to the social world of physicality. By using this mix of qualitative approaches I hoped to gain a broader understanding of the internet meme, its use and cultural significance. The use of interviews has often been associated with audience studies before (Awan & Gauntlett 2011: 360); this proves especially interesting when applied to the type of creative audience we are dealing with. This method is one of the most utilised tools in academic research, with particular adherence in the study of British social sciences (O'Reilly 2009: 125). There is evidence in the literature that suggests this method has been productive in past research regarding internet users more specifically (Pink 2007: 38). Previous cultural studies have explored creative media participation, and at least one in particular states that interviews would have been a more appropriate method for the study at hand (Gauntlett 2005: 172).

Interviews have also been noted to work particularly well in conjunction with ethnographies (O'Reilly 2009: 127; Kozinets 2012: 46), though some aspects of the

interviewing process worked within a certain level of independence from the ethnographic approach. That is, some interviews were an intrinsic part of the ethnographic study, as I interviewed people I found whilst undertaking the virtual ethnography, whilst others were sourced from other contexts. The reason for this decision is whilst it might be evident to interview people whom I interact with during my ethnography; it became apparent that for an equal understanding of the offline circulation of memes, I would have to look beyond the online spaces I was studying. Thus, in some instances I had to work backwards: from the meme (found in an offline place, for instance) I would find the person responsible for it, regardless of whether that person was circulating in the online spaces I analysed. This allowed me to see some of the offline displays and contexts within which memes exist, as well as talk in person with the interviewees in question, providing me with a higher quality of cues present in face-to-face interviews. The issue with this approach was the reduction of my pool of interviewees to my physical proximity to them, which undermines the potential of circulation found in online memes. To counter this problem, I contacted people who posted online evidence of their engagement with memes in the offline places.

I then was faced with what kind of interview structure I wished to utilise; most literature defines these along the lines of structured, semi-structured or unstructured interviews (Wengraf 2001: xxv; O'Reilly 2009: 126; Edwards & Holland 2013: 3; Brinkmann 2014: 285). Semi-structured interviews are particularly useful considering the nature of this project, as they afford participants with enough space to explore the proposed topics and questions whilst also providing me with manageability. It allows cross-checking of repeating elements across data as well as permitting the recognition of differences (Schensul, Schensul & LeCompte 1999: 68). I intended to strike a balance between having structure and being unstructured by having a set of questions whilst not being afraid to stray from them into a more loose form of conversation (O'Reilly 2009: 126). By allowing interviewees to dictate the flow of conversation whilst guaranteeing that my main enquiries were answered, I aimed to continue this project's aspiration to be driven by users' experiences of memes. This freedom is extended by the use of in-depth interviews, allowing participants the time and opportunity to respond to my questions in a more thorough and detailed way (O'Reilly 2009: 125).

Before interviewing began I found that some preparation was conducive to workable results; although I did not want to constrain the direction of the interviews as to not lose their

spontaneous quality, I found that going into the discussions with a good sense of theoretical underpinnings was a helpful way to aid in the structuring of interviews more efficiently (Schensul, Schensul & LeCompte 1999: 2). The semi-structured approach allowed for elasticity, which at times led to very fruitful avenues I would have not otherwise considered. It also allowed the interviewees to have some control over the course of the interview, lending a more authentic version of their point-of-view. Other positive points related to the combination of unstructured interviews and observatory methods include the possibility of the researcher to grasp the larger context of their research, allowing them to navigate and edit their direction and focus accordingly (Schensul, Schensul & LeCompte 1999: 44).

The interviews conducted happened within an informal atmosphere; with a considerable part of the process consisting of online in-jokes, memes and Dogespeak (i.e. the grammatically incorrect vocabulary associated with the Doge meme) – examples within my own interviews include 'ermagerd, buy all the things' when mentioning food shopping or 'To the moon!' when discussing the future of Dogecoins. This came naturally to the conversation; it was an appropriate use, as it has been noted in ethnographic literature that 'all communication between researchers and the members of a group under study must be based on the group's own linguistic structures and meanings' (Schensul, Schensul & LeCompte 1999: 4). Taking this into consideration, it seems logical that many interviews reverted to these 'linguistic structures and meanings' found in the culture being researched.

Similarly to previous cultural studies undertaken by Baym (1995, 1998), Correll (1995) and Lambert (2013), a mix of online (whether by email or live chat) and face-to-face interviews were conducted (Hine 2000: 21). This approach has also been noted in the literature as an appropriate way of tackling the study of online cultures in particular (O'Reilly 2009: 216). I allowed my online respondents the liberty to select which online method suited them best for the interviews, to which almost all selected email. One of my respondents felt more comfortable with instant messaging, which allowed for a closer reproduction of the face-to-face interview through the immediate interaction allowed by such instant communication technologies. It also permitted for a more natural flow of conversation to take place, particularly in comparison with written emails, which did not necessarily allow for immediacy, since instant messaging permits typing to occur in real time. This in turn means that there is less time for an edited response, contrary to the case with emails which can be

endlessly edited until sent. On the other hand this is not a very practical approach at times; unlike the case with emails, some conversational details may be lost in the immediacy of instant messaging. Some respondents are from different parts of the globe, making it difficult and impractical to schedule a time that suits both parties to be present at the same time for an online conversation. The remainder of my interviews took place face-to-face, though this possible pool of respondents was restricted to my geographic limitations. The latter were recorded and transcribed so as to level the playing field with my data from the online interviews. Having all of the data turned into text aided my navigation through it, allowing me to collate the information more effectively and to select relevant excerpts more efficiently.

My interviewees were found in a manner of different ways; some were stumbled upon randomly and others were approached due to their involvement with memes. In order to enlist people for the interviews I remained true to the ethnographic method: whilst I contacted a few respondents online due to relevant content they had posted (e.g. D.R. and M.P. are Dogecoin mods on Reddit; Z.B.'s online and offline presence relies heavily on memes; A.TYCI. and B.R. are politically engaged meme makers), others were stumbled upon coincidentally (e.g. upon seeing a window plastered with memes whilst walking in Stirling, I knocked on the respective door and J.C. answered; the accidental discovery that N.M. owns a physical Dogecoin). Though I contacted a few mod accounts from Doge and Dogecoin related subreddits (Reddit being arguably the most active Doge related space), only D.R. and M.P. agreed to be interviewed in-depth for this project. A.TYCI was also interviewed online – I contacted a Scottish feminist activist group and asked if any members used memes politically and if they would agree to be a part of the project and A.TYCI responded. Although B.R. did not belong to the aforementioned group she also made and enjoyed political memes, some of which came from the group; B.R. was contacted due to her posting of political online memes overlapping with geographical proximity to me, which allowed a mixed online/offline interview approach. I met Z.B. in academic circles; her work also touches upon many topics surrounding internet culture and it became apparent she too was an aca-fan, sharing her many meme-related pages with me. In short I used a mix of research based pursuit on my part and accidental encounters in the physical world in order to reflect organic meme interaction in daily life.

Although my sampling for interviews did not follow a rigid pattern, which was done in order for my thesis to retain a sense of consistency with its natural flow, I attempted to

engage with the users of the main platforms that I focused on in this thesis. The platforms I am referring to include Reddit, ICHC, 9gag, with most of these being used in conjunction with other kinds of social media such as Facebook (see chapter 4). Most of the respondents recruited from these online spaces derive from Reddit, which is known for its internet savvy users when compared with the other spaces listed. Because I set out to understand the various ways memes impact internet users' personal lives, I knew the respondents gathered from these spaces had to be fairly meme savvy whilst also aiming for different backgrounds in terms of recruitment pools. In other words, what links all people interviewed is that memes have been adapted and adopted to different contexts of their personal and/or social, economic, political lives; to ensure there would be results that would speak to at least one of these meme uses I contacted people whose visible meme interactions demonstrated some intersection between the aforementioned categories and online memes. It can be said that my criteria incorporated a blending of evidence of this visible intersectionality of meme use and some aspect of randomness, as it then depended on who responded or agreed to my call for action.

I also found respondents through finding meme makers that demonstrated an engagement with political activism or evidenced meme use in the offline world. Following other netnographic studies such as Lambert's intimate study of six Facebook users (2013), I made use of a select number of people to feature in my research. Although initially aiming for eight interviews I ended up with a total of seven due to the lack of response from one of the interviewees. Despite not reaching my initial target, a number of other ethnographic studies with interviews have also featured seven respondents (Cutler 2014: 44; Janesick 2004: 110; Schaap-Jonker 2008: 229) as well as qualitative studies in a broader sense (Eskilsson, 2010; Jorgensen, 2013; Wykes 2017); this number falls within the five to eight ratio that is often suggested and/or used for a number of qualitative interviews (Carey 2012: 117; Tracy 2013: 138; Kelly 2019: 101), including ethnographic interviews in particular (see Troyer, Cáceda & Eguíbar 2015). Three of these respondents were female and four of them male (see **fig. 1**).

<b>Male</b>	J.C.	D.R	N.M.	M.P.
<b>Female</b>	B.R.	Z.B.	A.TYCI	

**Fig. 1:** Gender division of interviewees

Though gender was not a central point to this study, I endeavoured to engage with a sample that contained a close number of female and male participants in order to attempt a more balanced approach regarding people's experiences. Although the uneven number of participants meant that true equilibrium was impossible to achieve, I feel my own contributions, account of experiences and thoughts impressed here work somewhat towards balancing the gender difference. It is essential to attempt to close the gender chasm as much as possible, since gender inclusion and representation are important in academic studies; particularly when these focus upon topics of a technological nature like the internet, considering there is a history of female alienation in both (Thagaard 2000: 1797).

The ages of the participants range between 26-32 years old. This was not an intentional pursuit of a specific demographic seeing as my parameters did not specify age (nor was I aware of the specific age of my online participants when I started) however it falls within one of the most common age group category when it comes to technology and media engagement studies (i.e. 25-34) (Statista 2014; National Statistics Publication for Scotland 2016; Ofcom 2017). Three of the interviews were conducted exclusively online (M.P., A.TYCI., D.R.), two interviews were conducted exclusively offline (N.M., J.C.) and the remaining two (Z.B., B.R.) were a mix of online and offline interaction. Utilising a balanced mix of approaches to the interviews was fruitful: whilst the face-to-face interviews provided me with an immediacy and physical cues that are not available through the internet, the online interviews allowed participants to react or respond with a variety of memes, which can only be done in a limited fashion when offline. There are, however, similarities that find a way of linking both online and face-to-face interviews: whilst the former would attach related memes to their responses via email/instant chat, the latter would make verbal references to memes in our conversations.

The interviews took place over a wide expanse of time: for the face-to-face interviews, these lasted around 2 hours, with other additional conversations taking place which informed a substantial amount of my preparatory work. These interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in their totality, which although time-consuming proved very efficient in terms of data richness (Seidman 2006: 115). In order to retain some offline characteristics I wanted the interviews conducted by email to be more than a question and answer format, although these

did make use of some loosely formed questions<sup>3</sup> (with some tailoring to take into account particular visible aspects of their meme use), they were mostly correspondence, where both sides could write freely about their experiences, feelings and ideas relating to memes. These online missives took place within a period of 6 to 8 months.

The two methods selected were not used separately, but were applied in unison; by using these together I constructed a stronger basis for my argument and made sure I was not basing my findings purely on my own interpretations of what I observed and experienced. This triangulation – which consists in the use of two or more methods to tackle an object of study – lent a higher level of credibility to my research (Jensen 2008: 139). Hine (2000: 21) corroborates my own combination of techniques by affirming that: ‘The use of different ways of observing and communicating with participants provides a kind of triangulation through which observations can be cross-checked’. The methods I have chosen work particularly well together, which translate in a more seamless presentation of results. Interviews have repeatedly been advised to be used in conjunction with the ethnographic method (Schensul, Schensul & LeCompte 1999: 44; O’Reilly 2009: 125; Lambert 2013: 50-1). Their combination has at times been even difficult to separate, as ethnographic work is almost never used as a single method and almost always entails interviewing (Pink 2007: 8).

Interviews are a tried and tested approach within academic studies, and when used in conjunction with virtual ethnography, its strength reinforces the validity of both. Through interviews I aimed to help level the power between the researcher and the research subject by giving the latter a platform. By asking participants to talk about their own creations and experiences through the use of interviews, the researcher is not automatically imposing their interpretation of the phenomena at hand but is instead allowing the participants to lend their own elucidations. On the other hand it is also useful to conduct further studies beyond the sole reliance on interviews; other netnographers have praised ethnographic data’s ability to supplement information gathered through interviews, since the latter can become 'somewhat artificial and decontextualized' without the aid of the former (Kozinets 2010: 56).

In short, this consideration of various types of input provides a more well-rounded approach to this research. Additionally, as what I wish to observe consists of media objects that are online, some observation has also proved to be a useful tool to gather information

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<sup>3</sup> See appendix 1

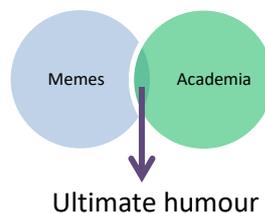
and subsequently infer meanings. Content analysis was also used in indirect ways, as it informed the substance of some of my previous publications whose findings were in turn used here (see Esteves & Meikle 2015; Esteves 2018). As a final note on methodological aspects, it is worth keeping in mind that periodical questioning and challenging of any methodology, especially when faced with such a changing environment, is advisable as it keeps it in check and results in a more efficient tool for research. Unfortunately the scope of this thesis could not address pertinent questions about the relationship between demographics (e.g. race, gender, age) and memes which would have been interesting to pursue; hopefully these will be focused on in future studies.

### **Self-Reflection**

Self-reflections are essential to ethnographers, as it gives them a chance to unpack their own often problematic engagement with closely followed research topics. Going through this experience myself I can understand the value of such practice, as I was often wanting for a separate space where I could unload the mixture of thoughts, feelings and experiences that, although working as an underlying structure, did not find a place within the main body of work. As mentioned, memes and internet culture have been a substantial part of my everyday experience and normality, they are present not only when I interact online but also beyond it, although this does not apply to all of my interactions. Online culture has informed much of my experience as a communicative human being and it has always had an important place in my social interactions. For these reasons I knew that it would be challenging to pursue this kind of research, as this was not simply a task for me to achieve some form of accreditation.

Similarly, when I began my research interactions of an academic nature these were also quite familiar to me not only due to my own academic pursuits but also due to my experience as a university teaching assistant; additionally a substantial number of people close to me are academics themselves. Yet I gathered from the start it would be a challenge to reconcile these two arenas that were so familiar to me and yet so divergent from each other for the most part. This proved to be the case when I interacted with other academics - whilst most had some idea of what memes were (and a few were fervent users too), others had no idea what these were. The overwhelming majority of reactions regarding the subject

of focus of my thesis were a mix of disbelief and amusement, which is not unlike the reactions that I imagine initial cultural or film studies had in their early days. In short, although this was not always the case, academia and online memes seemed for the most part to circulate in different crowds. Throughout my thesis I address how memes are used intersectionally in different contexts, and I found that the memes that interested me the most were often the ones that had this intersectional nature to them. While this is likely to relate to the idea of boundaries that I explore throughout my thesis, I found a particular satisfaction in memes that featured academic topics as these addressed two things that were of relevance to me simultaneously.



Thinking in terms of Goffman's theory of identity and performance, having these two 'identities' of self come together (i.e. academic and meme enthusiast) could mean a conflict of sorts, as my experience of these facets were for the vast majority usually kept separate.

The usefulness of the connection between memes and Goffman became apparent with dual nature memes, which usually occurred in academic conferences: because of the particularly high literacy (both cultural and academic) that is demanded in order to understand the academic meme in its entirety, the available audience for it is considerably small. Whilst people unfamiliar with academic concepts might not understand the academic reference in the meme, academics that would be familiar with the reference in question would often lack the cultural literacy that is required to understand the employed memes and their rules. This inevitably made me think of this relationship of the (public) self and how it changes when in different public settings: what happens when you show that you are both a meme enthusiast and an academic at the same time? This is a question that, although not central to my focus, was very present in the backdrop of my research process and is very relevant to anyone that experiences this schism of cultural intersectionality. It is a struggle worth bringing to the fore in terms of future discussions of these topics within academia.

There were at times clashes within the academic spaces where I presented my work regarding the concept of the meme. As mentioned above, the idea of the online meme

presented in this body of work was not always very familiar to academics that came into contact with my work, particularly researchers of differing fields. To some, the concept of the meme was firmly tied to Dawkins' conception of it, and thus the lack of a more biological approach to the concept in my work was at times noted. Although I believe that there is plenty of space for the pursuit of a more biological understanding of the meme, I also believe it has now been (re)claimed by social and cultural studies, where it has developed its own diverging path in an organic way. Whilst there might be academic acceptance when it comes to the study of the mundane and the popular within cultural studies, I also found that there are limitations within these spheres and that we must be careful so a hierarchy of legitimacy is not built around popular culture; we must avoid the trap of elevating some aspects of popular culture to the status of worthy while at the same time devaluing others because they do not have the same kind of legitimacy yet. Perhaps here we can take a page from what my personal and professional encounters with activism have taught me: it isn't about feeling comfortable, if you feel comfortable then you are doing it wrong. We must challenge our imagined boundaries of research worthiness, whilst continuously rethinking new approaches to communication as well as new ways of approaching this type of study.

Researching a topic that was so close to my own lived experience was predictably not without its problems. The ethnographer, particularly one that turns 'inward' into their own culture, should attempt to give voice to those it studies; however it is hard at times to not let expectations and lived experiences shape our results. This is true of all research; however this is a danger particularly present in cultural ethnography. Although personal experience and academic rigour is necessary for this project, I found it was important not to lose sight of what was meaningful for those who are making the meaning that I was so intent on studying. That being said, I believe ethnographies have space for the ethnographer's own experiences to colour the end result. Even areas such as journalism are shifting from a focus on the hard truth to other valuable traits which include the admittance that the hard and objective truth is never really possible, and that human perspective can at times make for more enriching news reporting. After all I *am* a part of the meaning making group I am discussing.

On the other hand, although going into spaces where I knew memes were at home was commonplace for me, it felt a bit odd to frequent these with the knowledge that I was doing this not only as a meme enthusiast but also as an academic. Online spaces, particularly

of the meme abundant kind, do not tend to be immensely approachable when it comes to being researched, for a number of very valid reasons (e.g. past misrepresentation, suspicion towards institutions, a reluctance to be pigeonholed). Some of the spaces I encountered during my online forays were not particularly welcoming; this was not surprising to me, both as an online dweller and as a researcher. That being said, this did not mean that there were not online participants that were very willing and positive in their responses towards my invitation to be a part of this project, as can be seen by the responses present in this body of work. I found that approaching people individually and/or privately for my research worked best, instead of attempting a public large scale approach in online spaces. Additionally, I found that when I interviewed the people involved in this project, they were all very receptive to the idea of helping towards this project. Offline encounters and approaches to further research and inquiry were much more responsive than initial online contacts; no doubt there is an element of face-to-face interaction that facilitates empathy and makes rejection difficult.

Finally, being a subject so close to me, the fear of misrepresenting meme ecology was one of my biggest concerns; diving into this project I was very aware of being careful to not give an unfair or false portrayal (even accidentally) of the culture and spaces I deemed so important and relevant to my own ideas of communication. However, no piece of research may ever be considered entirely representative, no matter how accurate or inclusive it may strive to be, and with this in mind I attempted the best I could under the necessary academic guidelines. There are plenty of factors that will always stop this from happening, be it due to sampling size or researcher bias. Yet I believe that research into these fields is still vital nonetheless, as some form of truth and representation must come out of it. I believe I gained a new level of understand myself of something that I have been so familiar with for so many years, and to me that demonstrates the validity of undergoing such risks.

Throughout this thesis I refer to online memes in general; as previously mentioned in my literature review this encompasses a very large range of memes, as these can take on many forms (e.g. text, video, image) and can be created and disseminated at an incredibly fast rate. Whilst many memes may be born without warning, many may also fade away; this vastness and instability of the meme world makes it difficult to pinpoint these and subsequently generalise about them, as they are never in a fixed state. While I aim to give a fairly accurate and inclusive portrayal of the online meme world, for the purposes of research

I often refer to examples of LOLcats as the basic example of online meme phenomena. The decision to use LOLcats as a default online mimetic measure arises from their ubiquity and impact; LOLcats are one of the most commonly known memes, their popularity is perhaps due to their simple format, which is also easier to research and document than, for example, the format of video memes. Furthermore, LOLcats make a good template for online meme research due to their endurance, as they have been circulating for a long time and continue to do so, proving to be one of the memes with the longest lifespan and adaptability. Their ubiquity confirms their status as an online meme staple, and thus it they might be used as a go-to symbol of online meme recognition and activity throughout this thesis. Despite this, I also include other memes in my research, especially if they are brought in by my respondents or if they are particularly relevant in an online space or offline place.

Having this self-awareness is essential for a productive netnography, yet I believe my other chosen method of in-depth interviews will supplement the possible downsides of being too involved in the culture I am studying. My interviewees' accounts and experiences will only make my already considerable understanding and familiarity of the topic even more complete. By telling the story through all of our eyes combined I hope to provide a representative account of what memes are, where they circulate and what is their meaning in contemporary social, political and economic contexts. In order to be able to convey such a picture, I must begin by addressing the nature and definition of online memes by unpicking the concept in the following chapter.

### Chapter 3: What (exactly) are memes?

In this chapter I will explore the reason behind such prevalent use of online memes and shall deal with questions of motivation and meaning. These will take into account the role of remixing among the practice of online memes, which has been touched upon in the literature review. In this chapter I will also address issues of boundaries relating to memes and meaning, particularly the (at times complicated) relationship and negotiation of meaning that occurs due to their widespread and versatile circulation.

Being carriers of culture, memes are parcels of meaning that are circulated and changed. When discussing meaning in memes, we must acknowledge the possibility for an existence of a plurality of meanings within the same meme; as pieces of (re)appropriated and remixed media, it is only natural that the various components that make up a meme bring with them distinct contributions towards meaning in the final product. As touched upon in my literature review, when changes in context come into play, meaning is inevitably shifted, altered or added. Considering that memes are commonly built upon the (re)appropriation of images, it is commonplace for meaning to be pulled into different directions at the same time; the (re)appropriated meme becomes a mesh of conjoined meanings that gather in an object, which is then circulated through many different spaces. These diverging versions will not necessarily be accessed by the same people with the same kind of context, nor will they necessarily be read the same way (see Hall 1980). Thus there is an inherent contradiction regarding the use of this appropriation: by appropriating other cultural references the meme becomes at the same time both more accessible and less accessible.

The popular iteration of the 'Binders of Women' meme (a political meme that is explored in a more in-depth manner along with others in chapter 5) that makes a 'Dirty Dancing' reference exemplifies this clearly, as it features Patrick Swayze's character Johnny with meme-type superimposed text stating 'Nobody puts Baby in a binder'<sup>4</sup>. This is a play on the film's famous 'Nobody puts Baby in a corner' line uttered by Swayze, whilst also tying in the Mitt Romney 'Binders of Women' faux-pas blurted out in one of the presidential debates that took place during the 2012 US election. When two separate meanings collide in a meme, there is a contradictory undercurrent that runs through it. On one hand, it lowers the usually elevated bar to participate in political critique, the possibility of engagement in the political

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<sup>4</sup> See chapter 5 for image

forum is extended to anyone that makes or shares a political meme – it's as simple as taking a political blunder and typing it on a pre-existing picture of a popular film. It's this openness and instant recognition we see in memes regarding global conversations that make memes a central form of social and political discussion for my interviewee A.TYCI.

The easiness of this process means that it might occur without one consciously noticing it; this became visible when the majority of my interviewees stated that they had never created a political meme when first queried. However, upon further discussion it became apparent that many of them had created and engaged with political memes; because the process was so easy and the medium was so light-hearted, they initially did not see what they were doing as 'political' meme activity, despite some of it being overtly political in the nature of their content e.g. making memes about David Cameron. Additionally, some of the political memes made by my interviewees were not seen as political in content because they did not address capital P politics, but instead engaged with the politics of the everyday. This reaction is unsurprising, as there is evidence that the politics of the everyday, despite being commonly engaged with on a daily basis by all, is not seen as overt political engagement (Trentmann 2012: 522). Thus, even though this accessibility to political engagement might not be overtly perceived by those that engage with it, it is still present in internet memes.

On the other hand, if we turn to the 'Baby in a Binder' meme as an illustration, it becomes apparent that in order to understand the significance of this meme one must not only have some contemporary political knowledge (i.e. understand the Binder reference) but also a significant amount of cultural literacy, one that reaches into 1980's filmic pop culture. This particular exercise of digital media image remix is a type of literacy that is underlined by Knobel and Lankshear (2008: 28). This places the meme in a contradictory dyad, which is further complicated by the ways in which these circulate through different spaces. As I'll address in chapter 4, the change in space(s) where memes circulate brings with it changes in meme significance itself, as different contexts lend different meanings to the meme.

This contradiction in targeted audiences may seem alienating at first, however it may also be seen as uniting: our current social and political affairs enmesh with pop culture and media content, thus it makes sense to discuss both of these issues within the same breath. Despite this contradiction, it becomes evident that memes are appreciated for their meaning over their visual appearance, as the latter can at times be of unimpressive quality. Internet

memes do not rely solely on their visual appearance and might be separated from it in order to continue their circulation through non-visual outlets (e.g. sound, text), further asserting them as more than just funny pictures. Throughout my interviews, emphasis was not put on the visual aspects of a meme, but instead on the potential shared meaning that lies within it. This layering of meaning can range from what can be considered a relatively simple form that requires a low literacy level to a complexly layered meme with multiple messages.

### **Emoticons**

To address issues of meaning regarding online memes, we must first look at how online communication creates meaning through its communicative practices in its simplest forms; upon which online meme communication is built. This issue was tentatively raised in the methodology, where I stress the importance of the use of appropriate language and understanding of the online context. The role that language plays online is crucial to the understanding of online interaction; due to the reduced cues available, online textual communication resorts to the manipulation of writing conventions to counter this problem. One way to achieve this is through emoticons. Addressing the expressive challenges within these 'new human communication environments', Kukulska-Hulme states that:

In electronic communication, punctuation and spelling may differ from what is expected in other media (...) engagement in online debate may call for new language forms and graphic symbols, such as the smiling face on its side :- ) as an example of an "emoticon"  
(1999: 54)

Emoticons were born from a desire to prescribe emotional meaning where it was difficult to do so (Kayany 2004: 275). In early internet communication, text was the only form of interaction available: although it was possible to transmit larger packets of information (e.g. images) this technology was not available to the masses. Despite early internet proponents claiming this eradicated the body from the online sphere, providing a utopian space where equality of voices could be achieved or a dystopian place where everyone could and would lie about who they were (Turkle 1995; Shields 1996; Goggin & Newell 2003: 111; Wertheim 2004: 220), neither were fully the case. Even through text, the body managed to make its way into the seemingly abstract space of internet interaction; certain punctuation symbols translated tone and facial expressions, which became known as emoticons.

The importance of context is also there when it comes to the use of emoticons; Green and Jenkins state that a very simple yet powerful form of remixed context can take place by simply adding an emoticon to an emailed piece of media, particularly if the emoticon jars with the attached message (2011: 115), effectively providing an assembled structural meaning for the substance (Davison 2012: 125). This kind of cultural bonding, through symbols and language has also been noted in early online communal spaces: although no longer popular, MUDs were widely used by internet users; here a shared culture began to arise where meaning was posited in the way communication took place (Hine 2000: 19). With time online spaces and their moderators acknowledged the importance of this form of communication and officially began to embrace emoticons as part of their interaction (Davison 2012: 124-5).

It is relevant to understand the role of emoticons in internet interaction because they are a very simple yet widely used example that elucidates the importance of cultural norms regarding communication online. Kozinets underlines this importance and recognises that although a researcher might have to learn these codes (including emoticons) in order to engage online, these then become adopted by the researcher, who begins using them naturally (2010: 69). As Hine has stated, these online interactions give rise to a specifically recognisable online culture (2000: 19). Kozinets also advances that understanding this particular kind of textual communication in online spaces is a way to understand online culture more deeply, as this kind of communication can be placed under the umbrella of cyber culture itself (2010: 12). As Hine notes, 'linguistic devices such as emoticons (...) contribute to the formation of a community with shared practices, shared knowledge and language and collective goods' (2000: 19). In a sense, memes are also a type of shorthand loaded with meaning that is understood within internet spaces, and have the same formative and communal value. This relation between memes and emoticons has been pointed out in the literature (Davison 2012: 125); building upon that correlation I will add that if emoticons are an early form of a type of insider-type of online language, then memes can be said to be a more recent and developed form of this kind of language.

### **Timing: content theft and reposts**

The issues of meaning and circulation might at times become intertwined, as they both share a key relationship with context. Part of what shapes a meme's meaning is the context that it circulates in. With this in mind, the issue of timing regarding content becomes

relevant, and in some cases even vital when it comes to disputes over content. Timing affects how a meme is perceived and ultimately impacts its meaning; this is visible in two (sometimes interrelated) ways: content theft and reposting.

It has been established in the literature review that authorship is not usually sought when memes are made online (Davison 2012: 132; see also Leadbeater 2009: 16). In addition, memes 'are also frequently incorporated into systems and among practices that actively prevent and dismantle attribution' (Davison 2012: 132); this establishes a degree of intentionality when it comes to eschew the trappings of attribution. Davison goes on to state that it is within this anonymity that memes encounter their freedom to flourish (2012: 132), which is supported by my interviewee J.C. However, J.C. adds that claiming ownership of an existing meme is not met with much acceptance, that it corrodes the very underlying logic of meme anonymity. Many spaces will claim memes as their own; technically they are, since all content posted in spaces like Facebook and meme sites belong to the website in question as soon as they are uploaded, and thus they have the legal rights over these. This claim over memetic content can come in the form of a website watermark or stamp that is automatically added to every uploaded post. There is an element of controversy at hand here, as an object that evades notions of authorship becomes, ironically, remixed into corporate ownership. There is something here to be said regarding the attempt at the ownership of an object that rejects it; echoing the modus operandi of content ownership that is practiced by large content aggregators such as Facebook. It seems memes might not be attached to users in particular, but that they might be associated with the space where they are posted. The space assumes the role of authorship that evades the users, potentially evading the users' initial intent.

At times there are accusations of content theft that can be seen in the comment section of posts; this is where the issue of timing ties in with the issue of content theft. Timing relates to the dispute of stolen content because it may be the only piece of evidence that stands in these accusations. Most content is immediately timestamped when posted, so it becomes relatively easy to compare dates in different posts. The issue lies in finding the original post in the immense sea that is the internet in the first place. Due to this difficulty in pinpointing original posts among such an overload of information (an issue pointed out in Erickson's 2012 Mashable article), disagreements can break out regarding meme novelty and authorship, not in terms of a particular author, but in terms of which space hosted it first.

This is not an issue exclusively related to one type of content; novelty is central in the circulation of certain kinds of media. In the case of the news, there has been an increasing trend towards 'getting there first', which at times can compromise the undertaking of getting it right (Bennett 2013a: 165). The bearing of novelty is also seen to be relevant in meme circulation; despite needing the momentum of circulation for their prosperity (Bonchi, Castillo & Ienco 2011), they also need the freshness of remixed versions of the same meme in order to stay relevant. Due to the instant speed of dissemination in an online context and the fast pace at which online communication takes place, the process of novelty degradation happens at a much faster pace (Bonchi, Castillo & Ienco 2011). Whilst in my interviews reposting does not appear to be as serious an infraction the type of content theft described above, it is nevertheless a more recognisable offense that was signposted by several of my interviewees. This issue of time is relevant to meme meaning, as too much repetition can be off-putting when it comes to meme consumption. This was pointed out by N.M. in our interview: 'A meme is funny first time round, maybe second time around if it's really funny, then it waters down humour wise'. Memes that are heavily repeated may not only lose their humour but also their impact and meaning: 'If the meme fits use it. But don't over use them. They become tired' (B.R.). On this subject J.C. added: 'Reposts are seen negatively (...) I understand the annoyance around reposting'. There is also support in the literature for this logic, equating the longevity of a meme with its reduction in circulation and relevance (Schwabach 2012: 20).

Velocity is ever more paramount in terms of relevance, thus the importance of speed becomes visible in the apparent hierarchy of internet spaces where memes circulate. This sense of hierarchy regarding circulation and time sensitivity became apparent in some of the interviews (e.g. J.C. lists meme spaces as per their content novelty). This is a sentiment also echoed by N.M., whom states it is important that he sees content first hand, adding he has noticed an online pattern where a lot of original content comes from Reddit and from there it circulates onto other web content aggregators; this is likely to explain why N.M.'s content with memes comes almost exclusively from Reddit, as this is a space known to be at the forefront of some internet trends and memes. Similarly, J.C. and D.M. list Reddit as one of the most innovative spaces for new memes, which is why they are so fond of it. Much like the case with news, there is a loss of value attached to the fading of novelty: if the same iteration of a meme gets repeatedly reposted without any kind of remix, it will become meaningless and gain negative notoriety.

Picking up upon the relationship between memes and news once more, many memes I came across during my research related to something that had been in the news very recently or was very newsworthy and would end up in the news very shortly after. This too was confirmed in one of my interviews:

‘Memes have become so popular with news consumption online in recent years as people share them and retweet them so much that it's difficult to not know what big news stories are going on in the world’ (A.TYCI)

Both news and memes are used by us to make sense of the world; as A.TYCI clarifies, memes enjoy a status of news breaker for many and may be our first point of contact with current events. Memes make great reactions; the topical property of memes (described by N.M.), as well as their humorous nature and easiness to make, make them good at being responsive to current situations, whether general news updates, political or social events. This is true regarding a vast amount of contemporary news pieces: since the writing process of this thesis began, my own experience includes witnessing memes about SOPA/PIPA, Trump’s election in the US and Kermit’s and Miss Piggy’s divorce. In my interview with A.TYCI the topic moves towards this rapport between news and internet memes, confirming the findings listed above: ‘Comedy and memes have a definite relationship with news and the sharing of news’. Conversely, J.C. supplied the opposite response regarding memes and news: as he follows the news avidly via publications and news outlets he does not experience breaking news through memes, but rather *reacts* to breaking news via memes. The cycle feeds into itself, however the direction of this symbiosis may vary from person to person.

There is an interesting relation between how N.M. describes memes (i.e. topical) and journalism; where we are seeing memes being used as political satire and critique not unlike political cartoons that have been prevalent for centuries (Freedman 2009: 56; Navasky 2013: 49; see chapter 5). Some memes are made specifically as reactions to particular news or events (see chapter 5 for ‘Binders of Women’), however their meaning continues even after the event has lost relevance because they are able to adapt and to portray other situations where a shared or similar reaction is warranted. However some memes fail to be adapted beyond the original topical event that spurred them, and although those memes may continue to circulate among friends as particular kinds of in-jokes, these tend to inevitably die out: in a Darwinian fashion, if they do not adapt, they suffer a cultural death.

The perception of the online spaces themselves also seemed to be important when it came to users' engagement with cybernetic venues. A couple of my respondents conveyed the same reaction to specific online meme repositories, despite not knowing each other: 9gag was flagged by both J.C. and N.M. as a space that was aimed at a younger population. This perception was based on assumed behavioural aspects of the users and their comments, as well as on cues that were present in the posts themselves: a fair number of posts that appear on 9gag mention the experience of being in high school, for example. This perception regarding 9gag users was off-putting to some respondents, who in turn did not engage with 9gag, despite its high use of memes. For these respondents, the process of meaning making was simply not available to/for them on 9gag because they did not identify with the content or the perceived audience. N.M. states that when he sees memes about final exams being posted on 9gag he can't relate because this is no longer a part of his reality, he finds no personal relevance or meaning in these posts and states he 'anti-relates' to them. This can link back to issues of inclusion and exclusion regarding memes: while the theme of exams might make many *producers* feel included, the other *producers* for whom exams are not a part of their experience feel excluded not because they don't understand the content but because they cannot relate to it at the current point of their lives. In short, meaning making also relies on who we perceive the other makers of meaning to be; if we do not relate to them, we will struggle to relate to the meaning they are creating.

## Meaning

As reiterated throughout this chapter, one of the central themes this thesis keeps circling back to is meaning. As I've laid out in my literature review, meaning is intimately connected to these forms of digital media remix and their subsequent sharing. The cultural exchange that is the back and forth of meme circulation not only acts as a reflection of values of individuals but also as a message that the speakers transmit outwardly, to whoever encounters it (Green & Jenkins 2011: 119). It is unsurprising, then, that meaning appears to arise naturally out of many of the interview experiences and answers. Meaning might rarely be directly addressed when talking about memes, but it inevitably tints a lot of the things discussed with my interviewees. Ultimately memes are used because they mean something: both in a literal sense (i.e. they stand in for a straightforward message and are comprised by

an elasticated yet bounded meaning) and in a more abstract sense (i.e. they carry personal meaning for those that use them). In order to delve a bit further into the process of meaning making and memes, I find it useful to apply the following definition of meaning:

‘(...) [there are] three different kinds of meaning: subjective meaning, established within the individual's meaning system as a whole; shared meaning, established between two or more speakers within a given context; and objective meaning, a repository of the culture. (...) [These] represent, respectively, individual, social and cultural meaning.’ (Nelson 1985: 11-2)

These three types of meaning making have been found in my ethnography and interviews; further cementing my initial theory of correlation between internet memes and processes of meaning making. As outlined in chapter 1, an increasing amount of people are turning to the digital remix as a form of meaning making (Knobel & Lankshear 2008: 23). Meaning making is a communal activity: shared frameworks of meaning play an important part in the creation of a group identity, ultimately working as a unifying force among widely differing people (van Aelst & Walgrave 2004: 106-7). It is these global selections regarding which content contains resonating meaning that result in the end product of cultural significance (Green & Jenkins 2011: 112). However we cannot equate the content alone to culture, this premise would be reductive of larger process at hand; it is the *act of sharing* such significant substance that also defines our cultural products and global meanings (Green & Jenkins 2011: 119-20). A major motivation I came across was the ambition to further connect to other people that already have meaning in their lives. Z.B. states this is a driving force behind her meme making efforts; no longer happy with the limits of specificity found in most memes, Z.B. wished to tailor these further to fit and reflect her own experiences with her own group of friends, thus reflecting their shared realities more accurately:

I was trying to create on my own [memes] as they soon started to have a huge influence on my everyday chats with friends - both on and offline (...) [memes] started making more sense when they represented topics I was familiar with. (Z.B.)

Underlining the importance of the act of sharing communal meanings is Z.B.'s use of pre-internet memes in the same circulatory logic:

Before the memes, when we were younger we used to quote *South Park* or *The Simpsons*, so I think this could be the natural evolution for us (Z.B.)

Here memes do not replace communication but rather act as a tool that strengthens it, much like other earlier forms of communication and meaning making circulated among Z.B.'s group of friends. This exercise of cultural exchange allows a communal meaning to arise, yet as stated above there is also room for personal meaning making and internal interpretation of this meaning.

The concept of online meme has only gained shape in recent years, despite being present in online interaction from the start (e.g. emoticons). Initially, memes were labelled under the umbrella term of 'viral' content; however it has been established previously (see literature review) why this term is inadequate for this phenomenon. N.M. also picked up on this distinction by stating that:

The model of memes we have now didn't exist back then. Modern memes started in 2003-2005 – before that they weren't memes in that sense, they were viral content that spread around the internet (...) Later on there was a shift in memes, around 2003 they changed into collaborative efforts; websites appeared for you to add your own text to a particular image and I think that's what kicked off memes in the mainstream. (N.M.)

N.M.'s perspective demonstrates a schism in meme history: the early days when online memes were called viral content and 'modern' memes, which would become a widely acknowledged concept. With this divide other changes became apparent: memes were no longer the preserve of computer enthusiasts, they were now widespread beyond the IRC chat pages where N.M. first encountered them. Additionally, websites began providing platforms that allowed easy meme remix, making them more readily available. At the risk of sounding deterministic, N.M.'s observation demonstrates how technological affordances have played a part in terms of the mainstreaming of memes; we can recognise a cycle where memes become easier to make and thus become more popular to mainstream audiences who may not be as computer literate or as internet savvy as early technology adopter such as N.M. At the same time, N.M.'s observation also shies away from a technological deterministic view, as it unveils the division between memes as viral and memes as remixable 'collaborative efforts', having effectively changed memes from what he perceived them to be before. He goes on to add that there was also a change in quality when memes became more mainstream and widespread, arguing that because in the earlier days there was not such an influx of memes, the ones circulating were more carefully thought out and aimed to evoke strong reactions.

N.M. recalls a few very shocking memes that were circulating at the time, these stood out in his memory despite being considerably old, as opposed to the overwhelming myriad of them circulating today. What transpires in this conversation is N.M.'s association of a different type of meme culture in his early experience than the one that developed after their mainstream acceptance. With the change in meme practice came a change of meaning making and the process of building culturally significant aspects of N.M.'s everyday experience.

It became apparent that my interviewees' personal experiences with meme culture had been shaped differently, which in turn shaped them and their own meaning making processes. Despite also being heavily involved with online culture and memes, J.C.'s own experience of the internet differs from N.M.'s. The former began using it frequently at a later stage (calling his early involvement with memes in 2011 as being 'a bit late to the party'), and yet he too picks up on changes throughout his own engagement in online culture, despite having a smaller scale of comparison than N.M. who has had over a decade of a head start on internet memes. Both N.M. and J.C. were some of my most internet-involved respondents, which translated into their interviews: both showed a good grasp on appropriate language and concepts regarding these topics, which made me perceive that memes were a core part of their meaning making and understanding of the world in general.

As certain memes are adopted as a token of communication among friends and other relationships, they become a form of personal bonding exercise among them. Z.B. describes her use of memes within her group of friends as 'something you would use in your dialogue with [friends] to create a peer language'. The relational aspects underlying the use of memes and the search for a shared deeper meaning among its users became evermore evident in some of my interviews:

'Regarding using memes in conversation, I'm not sure if I do so out of habit since memes have been a part of my life and friendships for years, or if there's some underlying subconscious desire to find out if the people I am talking to are on the same page internet-wise.' (D.R)

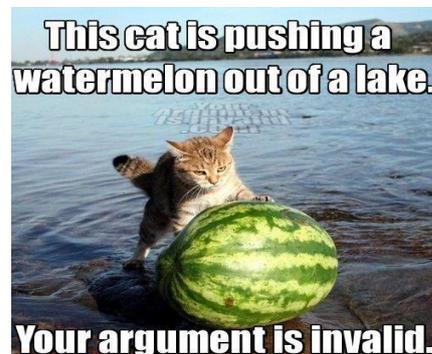
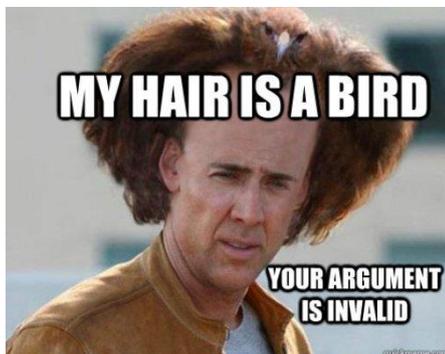
Internet memes can be used as identifiers of knowledge, acting as a code that determines one's relationship with and understanding of the internet itself. I began to see that the meaning attached to memes can, for some people, run very deep; it is not only a form of communication and entertainment but something bigger: 'My life is a meme. Once you have these things imprinted on your memory for so long, you begin to think in memes' (D.R).

This pervasiveness of internet memes in personal communication is also recognised by B.R., however she points that there is a negative side to such reliance:

‘We've got[ten] lazy and don't articulate things with our own words any more. [Using memes] is easy and it makes you feel 'social' (...) they're a downgrade in terms of expression.’ (B.R.)

Thus while memes have an important role in her social interactions, B.R. does not hail meme interaction as a substitute for what she deems as deeper forms of communication. This criticism has been echoed in some of the critiques laid out in my literature review, though I found that some of my interviewees (such as B.R.) avoided taking clear cut sides on this issue; the reality is communication and meaning are just not that simple, and memes are flexible examples of these complexities at work.

One of N.M.'s favourite memes is a good example of how memes are malleable in a variety of ways. Contrary to most memes, the constant element in this meme is not the visual component but the catchphrase instead. There is a visual logic that must be followed: ‘Your Argument is invalid’ must have an absurd picture to serve as an illustration, however the image itself is not constant and can range from an eagle Photoshopped onto Nicholas Cage’s head to a cat rolling a watermelon out of a lake:



This meme’s meaning is not solely dependent on its visual form. Indeed this is one of the reasons why N.M. enjoys this meme so much, as he is able to engage in the creative exercise of supplying the visual imagery for it, making it incredibly adaptable. Unlike the macro memes that feature characters such as Douchebag Steve and others, these memes are not anchored in particular images; they are anchored, instead, on both the underlying message and on the repeating phrase ‘Your argument is invalid’, making it easy to apply to very particular images. The KYM entry on this meme features a counterpart meme called ‘Your argument is valid’, which removes the absurdity present in the original version of the meme. In one example, the accompanying image is of a non-descriptive image of Nicholas

Cage which works as a normalised counterpoint to the previous image of him where there is an eagle Photoshopped to look like his hair. This process of recuperation is not unlike the one present in the recuperation of détourned images. Much like the result from the process of recuperation, when the absurdity or counterpoint of the image is gone, so is its subversive effect. Arguably the ‘Your argument is valid’ meme effectively presents no humour; it is also relatively unknown in comparison to its absurd opposite. Here we can ascertain that recuperation is not as engaging as appropriation; and it certainly is not as entertaining.

Memes not only maintain and establish significance among friends and internet fans alike, but they also help institute new meanings. J.C. states ‘Internet humour has brought a lot of things into my cultural world view that I wouldn’t have been aware of’, citing TV show *Adventure Time* as an example and how his first contact with it was through memes, which prompted his curiosity to discover the source of the meme; ultimately becoming a fan of the show. Here memes work as points of entry to new cultural products – not unlike Bennett’s ‘hyperlinked communication networks’ working as points of entry (2004: 124) –bridging to something else that became meaningful to J.C. by expanding on his cultural awareness and media consumption. Jenkins (2014: 66) describes this phenomenon in relation to Harry Potter Alliance fandom online and how it works as a political entry point for many fans.

### **Intra-meme remix/meaning mutation**

This porous relationship between memes and fandoms demonstrate the remix potential they possess, as memes themselves are not exempt from being objects of additional layers of other meme mashups. In my netnography I found memes intertwined with an additional meme to create a dual meaning meme. An example of this is the recognisable image of Advice Dog Photoshopped onto Good Guy Greg’s head:



This conveys two messages: something that is well intentioned (Good Guy Greg) but ultimately a piece of terrible advice (Advice Dog). As the meaning of this message can be read as both, the visual aspect of these mashups will also attempt to convey such a communicative duality. It is worth noting that these (re)mashed up memes are not very prolific as they require more effort to create; unlike 'regular' memes, there are no templates for these. However, their existence points towards our desire to elevate the expressive use of memes in a way that can more closely mimic our complex communicative practices. The multi-layered property of these kinds of memes evokes a particularly postmodern quality to them, as their modularity becomes more complex and their boundaries become less stable.

This kind of meme arose from the necessity to convey more complex ideas whilst still making use of the meme form; our everyday communication is not always straightforward and unilateral, thus it makes sense that these properties are also reflected in meme communication. D.R. stated in his interview that at times meme meaning mutation would be taken into his and his friends' hands, moulding memes to their own codes and making them very unique among their own group of friends: 'we often adapted them to be dropped into obscure references and turn things into a joke' – here remixing is seen as the frontline of social bonding and personal meaning making. This reading might contradict earlier implications that seemed to verge towards technological determinism, as it demonstrates just how memes can be manipulated in order to fit our own communication and expressive needs as a society. Furthermore, online memes have also found a way of disseminating without the absolute reliance on the technology that created them: examples of this can be seen in online memes being expressed offline; demonstrating that communication may also be the driving force behind meme use.

When memes circulate they mutate; this is necessary for them to survive and to keep on being fresh, even if this mutation must occur within the guidelines of meme rules. There is another kind of meme mutation: J.C. makes the connection between the similarities among the Advice Dog meme and the Bad Advice Mallard meme, stating that they are basically the *same* meme but with different images. His point is very valid; the contrary nonsensical advice featured in the former is the same that composes the latter. It is interesting to note that Advice Dog was an early image macro type of meme and that it is practically out of circulation at this point – in fact, none of its examples were found (without intentionally searching for

them) in my ethnographic dwellings online alone. On the other hand, the novel Bad Advice Mallard is part of a more contemporary trend of single pictures of particular animals with captions and no colourwheel backgrounds. What seems to have happened, as J.C. astutely points out, was a substitution: the Advice Dog format gave way to Bad Advice Mallard, despite both fulfilling the same purpose. Here we see evidence of memetic material being recycled and repurposed, yet again the key for their survival seems to be adaptation; Advice Dog belongs to a group of memes called Advice Animals, which comprise of a variety of different types of animals providing different kinds of advice, some of which (including Advice Dog) are portrayed in front of a colourwheel background. However, more recent versions of Advice Animals do not tend to feature the iconic colourwheel that is more closely associated with their earlier counterparts. This observation also points towards J.C.'s thorough engagement with memes, it reflects his knowledge of their history; this underlying curatorial role played by those that engage with meme culture will be addressed in chapter 4.

### **Ur doing it rong**

Although timing and context are able to affect the reception of memes, there are other factors that impact on meme reception. Some respondents stated that one of the most unforgiving things within meme use is the disregard for a meme's rules – or, to put it adequately, 'ur doing it rong'. N.M. describes the misuse of memes as their 'perversion' and has trouble understanding how the underlying logic of memes is not grasped by anyone that partakes in them: 'When someone uses memes incorrectly, I wish I could punch people in the face over the internet'. On the same topic M.P. automatically describes the misuse of memes as a 'fail', a simple yet insulting weapon on the polite side of the internet.

The skillset of observation, research and understanding that comes with memes may not be obvious to all; extensive years of internet use as well as exposure to online culture and its unspoken etiquette are likely to have prepared N.M. for this process. These strong reactions towards the inadequate use of memes found in my interviews signal towards the importance of keeping their meaning intact; this care to police the use of memes paired with the curatorial work seen in KYM (see chapter 4) evidence this need to protect a meme's meaning. The logic follows that if a meme's rules are not respected, the meme and its meaning begins to degrade, which may subsequently result in a degradation of meaning

making on a broader scale, particularly for those whose social and personal relationships are based on meme-like interaction. Memes are composed by amateur content; in a world where we have been accustomed to a top-down feeding of culture, memes are a way to place both content and meaning making in our hands. This may evidence a growing rejection of mainstream media values, even surpassing mainstream media content in some mediums (Cha, Pérez & Haddadi 2012: 2), making one's own media and meaning gains added significance. For this reason not only do many feel strongly about the misuse of memes but in particular feel a notorious dislike for those in positions of power (e.g. corporations, politicians) to misuse them (see chapters 5-6).

Substantial changes might be perceived as derivative to the online communities at large; the notion of cultural identification with online meme makers means that the sense of collectiveness and their loosely sketched ideals and/or logic itself might feel under threat, particularly for those that identify with the communal aspect of meme culture. When Stephen Colbert urged his viewers and fans to edit specific Wikipedia pages inaccurately, resulting in copious amounts of edits with no intention of veracity, there was a backlash from the Wikipedia community, who felt that not only their collective hard work had been defaced but also that their ideological values as a cooperative had been undermined (Hyde et al 2012: 56).

Despite their accommodating ability to be remixed, the importance of intrinsic meme rules is vital, and when these rules become compromised the persons, corporations or entities that do so are met with backlash. There is a modular property to memes, although the words and examples might change, the inherent meaning that is connected to a meme must remain the same throughout its circulation. In short, memes are elastic to a certain point and that point is reached when their core underlying message is put under threat.

### **Meaning boundaries**

Online memes have an organic property to them, accruing signifiers as they circulate; however this organic property also means that their growth and meaning do not necessarily stay the same throughout a meme's lifespan. I have encountered several anecdotes about memes becoming obsolete: when your parents use them, when they appear in mainstream (offline) media, when they saturate (or even just when they reach) your Facebook page. These answers not only varied from space to space but also from person to person; I was able

to verify this discrepancy among my own interviewees, as their boundary for meme relevance lay in different places.

As aforementioned, timing plays an important part for memes and their impact, similarly timing is found to be intimately connected to a meme's meaning lifespan. Much like the case in offline cultural memes before them, online memes might peak early in terms of their relevance, only to become obsolete later. However due to the nature of immediacy and importance of novelty in online spaces, this process happens at a much faster pace: online user generated content dates very fast, studies show that this type of content has one day to make its mark, being mostly virtually inexistent after this timeframe (Lussier et al. 2010: 5).

Online spaces have a hierarchy in terms of circulation; this will play a part in terms of relevance: what might be new content for one online space might be old content for another. Additionally, as memes gain personal meaning as they are used as communicative tools among groups of friends their relevance may stay alive as they become adopted in these social settings, regardless of whether they remain popular and circulate through wider spheres. As this occurs, adaptations and spin-offs of famous online memes may be born among this kind of relationship. N.M. states this is the case with his girlfriend; their own remixed memes shared among themselves are not known to the wider public, and thus bear no relevance to anyone but them.

Although individuals might feel a particular kinship with certain memes, this will depend largely on the message that they are conveying. Personal values will also inevitably influence how a meme is perceived: B.R. explicitly pointed out that she enjoyed memes that aligned with her humanitarian and equality driven values. B.R. stated that she did not engage with certain memes if their message directly contradicted her deep held civic and social beliefs, demonstrating that as people may use memes to make sense of the world around them, these to some extent also used as a perpetuation of one's already existing understanding of the world. Much like previous research on newspaper consumption habits where it was deduced that people read newspapers that reflect their pre-existing political inclinations and thus tend to avoid titles that may counter their world views (see Klapper 1960), it seems like meme consumption follows the same trend. In short, it appears that whilst memes may bare audiences to new information it is unlikely that individuals would alter their core values due to meme exposure alone.

### **In-jokes: inclusive/exclusive**

We must place this exchange of meaning through memes within a broader global organisational framework. Group identity is central to communities and regardless of size it must invariably rely on delimitations i.e. what constitutes as part of the group and what does not (Stalder 2012: 251). This permanent development of a community's identity has a synergetic liaison with media usage (van Dijck 2009: 44), this dynamic being noted elsewhere in internet culture (Coleman 2012: 113). The dual nature of cultural inclusiveness and its simultaneously unavoidable exclusion also permeates the nature of online memes.

I found my interviewee B.R. summarises memes very aptly, describing these as 'in-jokes on a large scale', an idea that was echoed in my ethnography<sup>5</sup>. By stumbling upon this idea of a global inside joke, I was intrigued as to how this opposable interaction could be sustainable. Further demonstrating this dual nature is Z.B.'s main usage of memes: 'I knew that anyone used to the online culture could get the meme-ish style (...) but the jokes were mostly private', showcasing how both types of interaction can be straddled. This idea kept on reverberating in my interviews, with others making similar connections regarding this aspect of memes: J.C. shares the opinion that 'memes are the inside jokes of the internet, essentially creating a divide between people that get the joke and people that don't'. At this point it had become clear there was an emerging sense of distinction between 'us' and 'them', supporting the idea of a divide and of the exclusive nature of online memes despite their inclusivity.

At first I wanted to understand if the idea of community could be applicable at all, seeing as meme makers and sharers are so widespread and incongruent. However throughout my observations and interviews this doubt was dissolved; meme makers were far flung and diverse and might not have a lot in common with their fellow meme fans, but there seems to still be a sense of belonging (even if tenuous) when it comes to meme recognition and appreciation among people as pointed out by Z.B.:

The feeling of belonging to a community works even if the community is wider (...) all of you know that you belong to a wider community of internet nerds, or fans.

What transpired was that we must change the *idea* we hold about communities and their scale, as this will lead to a reshaping of our understanding of meaning making processes. This

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<sup>5</sup> See Appendix 2 for Reddit screenshot stating 'Memes are inside jokes for strangers'

sense of belonging described by Z.B. resonates with the same dyad I found in experiences of political comedy, about which A.TYCI describes a ‘sense of camaraderie’ through the unifying sense of group that is alive in the shared meaning of the former.

One of the most popular memes I came across in my research was the ‘Success kid’ meme<sup>6</sup>. There is something inherently inclusive and social in its message, as it is equipped to evoke a sentiment of recognition. It speaks of familiar experiences and wishes to simultaneously find recognition in those who read them. Sharing is essential to the experience, as the point is for others to recognise the feeling of ‘success’ felt behind the action in question. This experience does not need to be one necessarily lived by the readers, although the reader does recognise that the outcome is positive due to the codes being employed. The Success Kid meme allows us the possibility to share good news and/or a sense of positivity that we have experienced on a large scope. In short, the point of this meme in particular is to include and resonate with as many people as possible.

Returning to meme boundaries, even when described in the positive light of affability this is an extension of the ‘us’ and ‘them’ divide; for a sense of group cohesion to arise, there must be an element of exclusion at work simultaneously. This concept has been explored by several disciplines, from the subaltern in post-colonialism (Gramsci 1971), to intersubjectivity in phenomenological studies (Husserl 2006). With boundaries comes the issue of what gets to compose the notion of meme for different individuals, whilst some memes are recognised and appreciated by millions of people across the world others are not seen as meme material and go undetected. Meme popularity may differ because some images or situations are more relatable than others; as N.M. explains, an image of a dog slipping on ice is much more universal than the Tron Guy meme<sup>7</sup>. This observation relates to how *accessible* the references in a meme are, as they require different levels of digital and cultural literacy. Whilst the later meme requires an understanding of the 1982 film *Tron* as well as some familiarity with cosplay, the former meme only requires the acknowledgement of a dog’s lack of coordination on a slippery surface. It is this layering of literacy that might also ultimately impact the boundaries and meaning of a meme for many. Similarly the ‘sense of camaraderie’ that A.TYCI describes regarding her experience of memes pertains to Scottish politics for the most part

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<sup>6</sup> Which features a toddler making a fist against a colourwheel background; it is used to convey a positive outcome- see chapter 6’s Virgin Media section for examples

<sup>7</sup> Which is comprised of a subpar and ill-fitting Tron cosplay outfit being worn by its maker, who bears a serious expression

and thus can have a hard time gaining the traction that more general memes may have. While A.TYCI's shows how memes can convey ideas and feelings of likeminded individuals regarding British politics, these may also convey nothing relevant to those who are not aware of the intricacies of British political life. For some, active and conscious exclusion is an inherent part of the collective meme conventions, as depicted by Z.B.'s experience:

'[Meme sharing is] definitely exclusive, because if you get it then you're smart, cool and "one of us" (sic), a kind of showing off subcultural capital (...) [communities] that prove/reinforce their boundaries through memes' (Z.B.)

The sentiment of ostracisation can be stretched to its limits when we encounter particular types of memes. An elitist example is LOLtheorists, these are grouped mostly within a LiveJournal community of the same name which features textual online meme references that are applied to academic theories, usually superimposed over images of the academic in question. Although these kinds of memes are not generally representative of the level of complexity of most memes, unpicking one of these examples will work as an illustrative insight into the modularity and plurality of meanings that are negotiated within a single meme. One such example stood out to me for its comedy and multi-layered complexity:



This meme appears to be very simple, however in order to understand it one has to be acquainted with a tripartite coalition of meanings: firstly, we must recognise the reference to the 'Don't Tase me bro' meme that was popular in 2007<sup>8</sup>. We must also recognise the person

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<sup>8</sup> This meme gained notoriety through the controversial Taser attack bestowed upon a verbally confrontational university student during a Q & A with US Senator John Kerry; the filmed incident was uploaded to YouTube and the victim's pleas towards the police during the attack became a meme.

pictured, which is particularly challenging due to the fact that unlike memes or celebrities, academics are not usually instantly recognisable, seeing as their physical attributes are scarcely public knowledge. In this case it is famed academic Laura Mulvey, however it is hardly expected for anyone outside feminist cinematic and/or cultural academic circles to be able to identify her by her picture alone. Lastly we must understand the academic reference written across the meme and its reference to Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, ultimately working as a wordplay on the original 'Don't Tase me bro' meme.

The LOLtheorist breed of meme requires a high level of cultural and academic literacy, which inevitably becomes more of a tool of exclusion than one of inclusion as the high investment necessary for the full understanding of these memes translates into a considerably small pool of people being able to understand them. The consequence of this kind of exclusion is the weak circulation of LOLtheorist memes, yet despite making for an unpopular meme, it is worth noting their role regarding meaning, even if it is to a relatively small and scattered group. Memes do not have to be automatically simplistic forms of culture; they are able to mix the easiness that lies behind creating a meme with the complexity present in the LOLtheorist memes.

Throughout my research the relationship between comedy and online memes also became apparent, emerging frequently in most of my interviews. Both follow their own logics of circulation, both are notoriously difficult to trademark, and yet the perceived 'theft' of these is considered a grave faux pas by their respective communities. Beyond discussing comedy with me, many of my interviewees demonstrated their own flair for comedic effect, a detail that is likely to have become lost in academic translation throughout this thesis and yet is relevant in terms of ethnographic value. Many of these jokes were meme-related, creating that sense of fellowship that permeates online meme culture.

## **Motivations**

Understanding the incentive behind the voluntary creation of online content by millions of people is possibly one of the most pressing questions when it comes to our current online social ethos and has been asked with regards to a variety of both entertaining and useful content (van Dijck 2009: 50; Gauntlett 2011: 97). Millions of blog posts and images are created and uploaded daily, where authors do not seek monetary compensation, leaving us

with social and psychological reasons for this kind of engagement that openly defy the idea of profit making (Benkler 2012: 19). Despite lacking a universal answer for this question (Beer & Burrows 2007: 7); existing research has made some headway. The literature shows a notable focus on the possible motivations behind the contribution of the extensive free in-depth knowledge available on Wikipedia (Kuznetsov 2006; Forte & Bruckman 2008; Mushiba, Gallert & Winschiers-Theophilus 2016: 5) as its resulting repository of knowledge has developed into one of the most significant collaborative efforts of our time (Reagle Jr. & Lessig 2010; Shirky 2012: 237). It is with the same attention that I approach the motivations behind meme making, as another global act of collective meaning making and creativity.

Whilst understanding the motivations of all individuals that engage with online memes is unmanageable, it is possible to untangle some aspects that lie behind the drive to engage with memes. The notion of online gift culture may help us understand this process, as it has been linked to other forms of user-generated content (Barbrook 1998; Jenkins 2012: 204; Swartz & Driscoll 2014: 298). Gift economies – where something is given without expecting something back – have been noted among several different cultures, playing an important social part throughout civilizations (Cheal 1988: 1-4). They have enjoyed a rise in relevance in our contemporary society, as the internet has encouraged the free flowing exchange of both ideas and digital content (Barbrook 1998); the gift economy has particularly shaped the Web 2.0, which is made easy by the accompanying easiness of exchange of digital products (Burnett 2010: 447). Considering our current liaison with gift economies, meme culture is befitting among such dialectic trends. There are other possible motivations that draw a similarity with this ethos: self-motivation has appeared in the literature a few times (Benkler 2006). Connected to the idea of self-motivation is the desire to further the ‘common good’ (Lai & Turban 2008: 394; Bennett & Segerberg 2013: 34) and contribute towards a larger goal than immediate personal gain. However this is not as selfless as it may seem, considering that within self-motivation may lay a desire to further circulate one’s ideas and beliefs; here self-motivation becomes enmeshed with self-validation (Bennett & Segerberg 2013: 36).

There is a grossly overlooked motivation when it comes to the rationalisation of meme making: the guileless act of having fun. It might seem reductive to explain these complex processes as a matter of entertainment alone, however when we consider the lack of time and attention given to the act of play in adult society it becomes a defying deed to resort to

superfluous merrymaking. The literature assents that creating something unexpected and fun instead of undertaking it as a job also guarantees its sustainability (McSwiney & Michaud 2014: 273-4), which could justify why memes are popular. However this issue becomes convoluted when memes are not being exclusively circulated by producers; corporations and political institutions are also circulating these, which complicate our understanding of meme meaning making. Ultimately a large part underlying motivation regarding meme engagement will depend on who is doing the engagement and in what context. The motivations behind the circulation of memes online by a corporation or political group will differ greatly from those of online users; an issue I shall explore in-depth in the following chapters.

In this chapter I unpacked the concept at the heart of this research, demonstrating how versatile, prevalent and engaging online meme are. From issues of content theft to their expected use as reactions to the news, memes have made their mark within the modern social conscience. We were also able to gain a better understanding of what memes mean to those who use them, as well as the part they play on a personal level of human interaction. With a clearer understanding of what memes are, we can now turn our focus to where memes exist online, which will be the focus of the upcoming chapter.

## Chapter 4: Online circulation – ‘All your memes are belong to us’

In this chapter I shall analyse how memes come to be online, where they circulate and what occurs during this process of circulation. Additionally, I will ascertain what impact circulation has on a meme’s life and significance, and how changes in circulation may translate into repercussions on the meme itself. Due to their malleable properties, internet memes are not restricted to a single online space but instead enjoy a mobility that features them in multiple and scattered online spaces. This far and wide dissemination of memes is too relevant to their organic existence to be dismissed. To understand where memes inhabit and their context I shall research online interaction ethnographically, which will lay the necessary foundations for a better understanding of subsequent chapters.

Circulation is key to online memes; understanding where and how memes travel sheds light on questions about meme transmission, providing insight into their cultural relevance and presence online. Intrinsically connected, in order to understand why they circulate (see chapter 3) we must understand how this process of circulation occurs. By describing how memes circulate, as well as making use of the direct input of meme makers/sharers, we gain an understanding of the wider picture of memes. Although discovering single motivations behind engagement with memes are hard to establish<sup>9</sup>, we may gather information about the broad picture of meme making and sharing by analysing spaces of meme interaction.

I begin by addressing the unbounded nature of online memes. Being organic pieces of remix that are often recycled to address different references at once, memes sit comfortably with Kristeva’s ideas regarding intertextuality: ‘Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another’ (1986: 37). As such, memes question the boundaries of text, as they are permanently open to be changed. Kristeva’s notion of the (un)bounded text is beyond my scope; notwithstanding it is helpful to keep this concept of the permanently (inter)changing text in mind as we delve into the understanding of what memes are and how they undergo transformative feats.

### Facebook

Despite their lack of proclivity for being bounded to a particular online space, memes can frequently be found within social networking sites - as the biggest social networking site

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<sup>9</sup> Also addressed in chapter 3

on Earth, Facebook is no exception (Pew 2016, Facebook 2017). However, we must look beyond the assumption that memes would inevitably feature on such a large scale networking website, attempting to understand how circulation of memes occurs within this space and how the characteristics of the space itself affects the circulation of memes.

The literature provided some accounts of the relationship between viral content and Facebook: Broxton et al. comment on the spread of viral videos that circulated through Facebook in 'large-scale cascades' (2011: 4), indicating this type of content gains traction within the context of social media. There is an emphasis on the social aspect of social media (Lussier et al. 2010: 1); ultimately social media is popular due to this component of communal interaction, a trend that judging by the impact and volume of discussions revolving around social media in most aspects of our lives seems to be popular within current online synergy. Although there is acknowledgement of the circulation of user generated content that goes on in social media such as Facebook, it is the importance of the social aspect of social networking websites that is stressed, whilst the former is underplayed (Lussier et al. 2010: 1). Yet there is a danger in simplifying this statement, as it hints to an overlooking of the extent to which user-generated content is intertwined with the act of social interaction. As argued throughout Gauntlett's aptly named *Making is Connecting* (2011) user generated content may be seen as merely a by-product of interaction, yet it provides a basis for interaction to take place, becoming inextricably linked to the sharing itself. Some research has been done regarding the circulation of memes in social networks (see Wei et al. 2012), yet these studies tend to focus on rate of dissemination, largely bypassing factors relating to meaning. It is this latter aspect that I intend to focus upon, as it will add an insightful understanding to the existing literature.

Unlike what happens within an internet forum where people assemble around a specific interest, for the most part within Facebook people congregate around each other; the Profile page focuses on and revolves around the user, whilst the tailored Homepage acts as a symbiotic ricochet where content that should (in theory) be of interest is aggregated seamlessly to us in a fashion that is eerily similar to the *Daily Me* concept described by Negroponte decades ago (1995). Due to this property of social media, memes enjoy a more unencumbered and potentially far reaching transmission within these spaces as they are able to reach masses that might not visit meme websites in particular. This is not exclusive to memes, as Facebook provides users with a variety of content that experiences the same

situation: everyday on our Facebook pages it is likely to encounter content that has been taken from a website dedicated to specific subject matters. However there are limits to this free flowing transmission, as users are always limited to what their Facebook Friends post, which in terms of news circulation has proven counter-productive, as there is evidence that suggests users tend to socialise with similar minded individuals, with whom they likely share at least some degree of political agreement, in turn feeding into an echo chamber effect (Carr et. al 2017: 62; see also Quattrociocchi, Scala & Sunstein 2016). Additionally, Facebook receives activity feedback through data of user engagement and tailors content that reinforces users' beliefs and ideologies (Pariser 2012: 5). Although memes are not as readily categorised as political inclination, it seems feasible that the same logic of circulation applies, resulting in their limited transmission among those who are already inclined to be into meme culture. Conversely, because memes are so elastic it is impossible to assign them to a single affiliation, not only can they be used in a variety of contexts but their use is evident well beyond a small niche of internet culture fans. This in turn results in various points of entry, which ultimately may result in counter acting the aforementioned effect of like-minded users and may expose non-frequent meme users to meme culture.

According to J.C. and N.M.<sup>10</sup> Facebook does play a part in their interaction with memes, as both named Facebook as a space where they would post and share memes. However, when quizzed about the nature of this symbiosis, J.C. and N.M. replied that Facebook was not a central aspect of their engagement with meme culture; in fact it occupied quite a peripheral role when it came to their online experience of memes. Both stated they didn't share many memes on Facebook and the ones they did share were carefully selected: only memes that they knew their Friends would understand and/or appreciate would be shared. Relevance within the Friends circle was the most important aspect of the criteria regarding the decision to share a meme on Facebook; this points towards a middle ground between the meme as a private joke and the meme as a recognisable joke within a vast and impersonal internet space. Additionally it confirms the echo chamber theories mentioned above. For J.C. and N.M. Facebook was not a meme-centric space but instead a social space where memes were utilised as a form of communication that remained quite personal, as the intention was to resonate with their (relatively small) group of Friends. J.C. stated he did not

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<sup>10</sup> Note: network analysis is beyond the scope of this thesis and thus I shall not rely heavily on the personal realities of my interviewees' Facebook profiles for this section

have strong motivations to post memes on Facebook, as not all of his Friends were as meme literate as himself and thus found this was an ineffective form of communication within this context. None of the respondents have pointed to Facebook as their source for memes or as their primary space to engage with them, making it apparent that although Facebook plays its part in this context, this role is limited.

Depending on each Facebook profile, memes may feature more or less heavily. However there are more global factors that may impact on the prominence of memes on Facebook profiles. In December 2013, Facebook announced they would be changing their posts' ranking system in the newsfeed; this change involved re-prioritizing content for its users, by featuring 'high quality content' such as news stories more often and more noticeably than other content such as memes (Kacholia & Ji 2013). Facebook stated this decision was based on the marked increase of people that turn to Facebook as a source of news content, instead of just social interaction (Kacholia & Ji 2013). In turn, this decision will have eminent repercussions for meme circulation, as memes will appear with less frequency on news feeds and thus might elicit less response from others. Despite the continuous elevation of user generated content on social media sites, it appears to be the trend that 'quality' content (the implication being content that is professionally made vis-à-vis amateur content) still dominates these spaces; a case also seen with Youtube's list of its most popular videos which regularly feature professional music videos (Snickars & Vonderau 2009: 11).

According to a Facebook survey, memes were not something many people expressed a desire to see in their news feed (Kacholia & Ji 2013). The fact that memes are circulated at such a high rate in social media (Esteves & Meikle 2015: 562) appears to be at odds with this statement. According to the Cheezburger network<sup>11</sup> they make up the 4<sup>th</sup> most shared brand on Facebook (Cheezburger Network 2014). However, this lack of desire to see memes in newsfeeds might just be an indication of what I have highlighted earlier regarding criticism against online memes: when people don't appreciate memes, it might be the case that this is because the meme is, as Shirky puts it 'not talking to you' (2008: 85). There is some evidence regarding the veracity of Shirky's argument in my research, as some of my interviewees felt discouraged to share memes on their Facebook due to a possible lack of understanding by their eclectic group of Friends. If memes are tools that can be used to maintain and

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<sup>11</sup> A particularly big online space where memes are frequently posted (more on this within this chapter)

strengthen relationships through online interaction, Facebook's decision regarding memes can impact not only on memes as an isolated phenomena but subsequently on forms of communicating and strengthening personal relations.

Facebook's original statement refers to high quality articles and (low quality) memes; yet this is not very specific; what exactly will be counting as high quality content is something that needs to be clarified further. It has been made evident, however, that memes are considered 'low-quality' content in Facebook's view. The underestimation of memes as a form of tailored communication between people who know each other seems evident in this circumstance, which is contradictory of Facebook's platform as a way to 'connect with friends' – an expression used often to describe Facebook's purpose. This stance seems to echo Google's previous decision to counter low quality content which took the form of Google Panda, an updated version of its search algorithm. This consisted on a change in the Google page rank algorithm for the same aforementioned purposes Facebook deployed: in order to rate what Google considered high quality content above what Google considered low quality content (Sullivan 2011). Fears regarding the consequences to this filtering of non-quality content have been voiced regarding Google Panda, as there seems to have been collateral damage with the change of algorithm, unintentionally harming what might be considered (even by Google's standards) good original content (Fox 2011; Good 2011). Thus, despite Facebook clarifying that memes will be considered low quality content, there might be non-anticipated outcome to this decision, which has extended impact on how memes circulate or indeed what will be considered a meme. This will raise issues of its own, as it will be difficult to filter content that evades clear definition.

These Facebook changes are relevant to the understanding of meme circulation, as they are not only likely to impact meme circulation and have subsequent consequences regarding personal relationships that are somewhat based on meme interaction but they are also likely to impact the dissemination of memes<sup>12</sup>. Ultimately this change in Facebook policy indicates how prevalent and free roaming online memes have become, to the point where

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<sup>12</sup> Understanding how memes circulate more specifically within social networks has its values, however this is beyond the breadth of what I intend to achieve with this thesis; to engage in social network analysis of how memes travel would be a work in its own and although this chapter attempts to understand how memes circulate online it is not particularly focused on a quantitative approach to this question but rather on a qualitative understanding of this phenomena. Here I refer to epidemiologic studies regarding internet memes that have already been conducted (Bauckhage 2011; Wang & Wood 2011) which cover this standpoint more fully and adequately.

Facebook has taken an official stance in order to attempt to curb meme dissemination. Furthermore, it cements the antiquated devaluation of popular culture (Nachbar & Lausé 1992: 32), which Storey aptly describes as the process of seeing popular culture as a 'residual category' composed of things that are not considered good enough to be elevated to the status of high culture (Storey 2015: 6). As established in the literature review, the erasure or devaluation of popular culture leads to a very partial understanding of culture and experience as 'to ignore popular culture is to ignore a significant part of human life' (Fedorak 2009: 14).

Similarly, YouTube reflects this dichotomy, as it is designed for amateur content to be uploaded, yet the most viewed videos within YouTube are professionally created content, including professionally produced content that features in other mass mediums e.g. television shows and music video clips (Burgess & Green 2009: 43-46). Additionally, as Uricchio points out, the Web 2.0 promise of YouTube may be falling short of its expectations as a full cycle interaction is not possible (i.e. downloads are not allowed) (2009: 25). It also does not encourage remix, as YouTube is notorious for clamping down on remixed videos that feature unlicensed use of music. YouTube may have encouraging mechanisms in place for homemade videos yet it applies punitive action for professional content that is uploaded without consent from the parties in question, e.g. large corporation within the music and film production/distribution companies. Facebook appears to be doing the opposite by giving preference to news stories created by news outlets and by minimising the exposure of user-generated memes. The similarities between YouTube and Facebook lie in the apparent desire of their audiences for an increase in professional content, which is ultimately Facebook's argument for their decision to re-prioritise content.

Beyond Facebook, there are websites that have continuously come up both in my own experience of online meme use and in the interviews I conducted. Some of these include I Can Haz Cheezburger (IHC), Reddit, 4chan and 9gag. I have included additional spaces such as Know Your Meme (part of the Cheezburger Network), as I believe this is a very relevant source of meme history which has proved influential in the shaping of memes.

### **I Can Haz?**

I Can Haz Cheezburger (IHC) has been incredibly influential when it comes to the dissemination and circulation of memes. It is the most famous sub-blog of the giant

Cheezburger Network, which is an online network that aggregates image based sub-blogs by topic. Although LOLcats predate ICHC<sup>13</sup>, it was with ICHC that the LOLcat meme gained widespread acknowledgement; this has been picked up by the Cheezburger network itself, which states that it ‘holds the distinction of bringing Internet culture to the mainstream’ (Cheezburger Inc. 2014). With its growth, the Cheezburger Network has branched out in terms of featured content, including memes, no longer only serving as a LOLcat platform. At the time of writing, the Cheezburger network includes ICHC (animal related, including LOLcats), ROFLrazzi (content that encompasses celebrities and offline media such as reference to TV shows), FAIL Blog (documented instances of ‘fail’ or embarrassing situations, mostly of non-famous ‘everyday’ people), Memebase (specific space to post memes, though it features a variety of content), Geek Universe (related to ‘geeky’ things like videogames), Español (content in Spanish) and Know Your Meme (a wiki for memes which shall be addressed further). These subcategories suffer changes from time to time; at the time of writing some categories have been eliminated (e.g. The Daily What), others have been discontinued but are still available to be viewed (Historic LOLs) whilst others have been recently added (Español).

This taxonomy reflects the changes in interests when it comes to memes: as some types of blog categories die out and others are created, the featured categories of memes (and which memes circulate, as they become conditioned to some point by the existing categories present in the Cheezburger Network) reflect the relevance that they hold at the time of existence. Being highly mutable entities, memes are subject to constant change and variation; this adaptability has been taken into account by Cheezburger, who attempt to follow trends of mimetic activity by creating new categories according to popularity. Considering this relationship, it becomes difficult to discern the delimitations within this symbiosis, i.e. if the memes being submitted are influencing the changes occurring in Cheezburger or whether the changes in Cheezburger are dictating which memes will be posted. Being a corporation built upon the work and submissions of others, it is likely that the submitted content paired with the amount of traffic certain sections of the network receive are the dictating factors in terms of changes in the network and, ultimately, meme exposure.

It has been noted that the change in medium itself changes humour, as spatial and technological properties shape the delivery of the joke (Kuipers 2006). This comes to reaffirm

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<sup>13</sup> See subsection on ‘4chan’

the part played by the technological aspect of online meme inception and circulation, as much of their properties are owed to the medium and its technological affordances. The extent to which online memes owe their existence to the technology that allows them can also be traced to the emoticon, a meme in its own right. Although emoticons have arguably originated offline (e.g. Harvey Ball's iconic yellow smiley face) and have been used for many years in textual media (Van Den Bergh & Behrer 2016: 177), there is an inextricable relationship between the emoticon and the digital environment (Kozinets 2010: 69; Davison 2012: 125), which effectively cemented the emoticon as we know it. This is due to the limitations regarding emotional cues in online spaces (which, initially, were entirely text based) making the emoticon an attractive resource in order to add emotional tone to an otherwise moderately flat form of communication (Kayany 2004: 275). Thus, despite emoticons already existing previously, their adoption and rebranding by the technological medium of computer mediated communication gave them a newfound relevance where they could thrive more easily than before. As mentioned in the literature review, this is also true of memes in general – despite existing before, it was through the affordances of computer technology and internet infrastructure that memes reached new heights.

In spaces like ICHC, the role of the comments section is significant, not only from the standpoint of research purposes - as these provide insight into the reactions to the content posted in a retrospective manner - but it also appears to be relevant to the meme itself. Beyond capturing the immediate reaction to the meme in question, the comment section is where a dialogue among different posters takes place (Ahmad & Lutters 2011: 7). The importance of this type of dialogical interaction has been noted before and beyond meme spaces; their importance is particularly felt in the comment section of blogs – as they give feedback to the author of the post, which is most likely what the author is eliciting in the first place (Ahmad & Lutters 2011: 7) – and in the comment section of online news articles, where the communal act of discussing current events becomes visible to all. In these instances, the opportunity for visible interaction with the post and with other members allows a greater degree of participation that is afforded by this particular type of online allowance.

This opens up many possibilities, some of which have commonly overlooked results: the 'knowledge of the crowds' has revealed itself through the comments section, as some comments have added crucial information to the original post, even when the original post

was written by a professional writer or journalist (Grundy et. al 2012: 68). This beneficial dynamic has not gone unnoticed by some news outlets, as positive attitudes towards commenting have been reflected through the mere existence of a comment section in virtually every online news post, reflecting the value that most news outlets gain through comments. An example of the latter would be *The Guardian*, whom maintains a section in their website called 'Comment is free' where users are encouraged to discuss news posted by *The Guardian* in order to foment debate. This stance of openly encouraging discussion through the online platform of comment sections leads to an inevitable discussion of democracy within online spaces. The relationship of the internet with democracy seems to be battled out in these spaces, and although there are many issues surrounding online freedom of speech and subsequent abuse, overall these spaces attempt to extend the democratic ethos of the Web 2.0.

Websites that feature a comment section have the option to moderate their comments (either before or after they are published) or to leave their comments unmoderated, bringing into question the limitations to democratic engagement in online spaces. Depending on factors such as available staff (whether paid or volunteering) and their stance regarding online freedom of speech, different online spaces will have different approaches on the matter. ICHC falls within the category of the former: according to the community guidelines, the Cheezburger network reviews both content and comments (ICHC 2014); these are post-moderated<sup>14</sup>. Comment sections bestow most of the websites that we use today with the oft used label of 'interactive' (van Aelst & Walgrave 2004: 113)<sup>15</sup>. Interactivity and its social component was heralded early on as one of the key shifts from the web 1.0 to the Web 2.0 (Lai & Turban 2008: 391), and through the relevance of comment sections within meme websites there is a visible nod to the importance of the concept of interactivity.

Besides allowing a greater level of interactivity with the meme posted, ICHC comment sections demonstrate that the engagement that takes place may lead to a negotiation of the meme itself. Despite having some widely accepted ground rules that are enforced through policing (which also happens in the comment section), the dialogue that occurs in the comments at times denounces friction and disagreement over what is acceptable use of a

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<sup>14</sup> i.e. users' comments are automatically published when written and moderators may delete these only after they have been posted

<sup>15</sup> Though the constant abuse of this label regardless of how easy or meaningful it is to engage with a website's content has rendered the term almost irrelevant, as aptly summarised by Fuchs et al. (2012: 5).

meme. It is unsurprising that this question arises, since memes are a product of constant remix, which will continuously push the boundaries of the 'original' version of any given meme. This negotiation serves to remind us that the relatively lax delimitations of a meme are prone to an ongoing mediation of boundaries. Thus, when it comes to memes, circulation leads to negotiation; as content undergoes notable mutation there is a need for mediation.

### **Know your meme**

Within the Cheezburger network lies Know Your Meme (KYM), an informative set of webpages that describes and documents online memes; working as a meme library, where we can find a repository of an incredibly large number of entries. In order to warrant an entry page on KYM, memes must become relevant enough, which implies they need to circulate a considerable amount in the online sphere. According to KYM's page on what is viable for submission, 'notability and impact are not based solely on the amount of views. Memes that are considered for confirmation should somehow influence internet culture in a noticeable way' (KYM 2014). When memes are submitted to KYM they undergo a vetting process in order to achieve the status of a confirmed meme. Part of this process includes determining if a meme is influential; to do so KYM has published a six point criteria list (KYM 2014).

KYM has received a positive response, being the recipient of internet specific awards such as the Webby Awards – which have been called 'The Oscars of the Internet' (Richtel 1999) – within the Cultural Blog category (The Webby Awards 2012). KYM has also featured in many mainstream media outlets such as *The Guardian* (Dee 2009). Know Your Meme engages in research of memes through its team of moderators and it also receives submissions from its users, these can become confirmed memes<sup>16</sup> or they can go 'deadpool' (i.e. memes that were unsuccessful in their pursuit to be recognised). Know Your Meme is designed as a type of wiki application, where multiple web users around the world can contribute their knowledge of memes, even confirmed ones, keeping the large amounts of entries in a state of permanent editing. Here we see, once again, the intersection occurring between the driving ethos of open source software and online meme culture, particularly the embodiment of Lévy's description of collective intelligence, which states that 'No one knows everything,

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<sup>16</sup> i.e. a status that memes achieve when they achieve determined criteria; see chapter 2 for more details on this process

everyone knows something' (Lévy 1997: 13, 14). KYM makes the best of the fact that users can contribute with what they know, making for a much broader and complete picture than their own research could ever solely achieve. The similarities with open source software ethos can be seen again with the voluntary nature of the contributions themselves. Thus, by using a wiki based system, Know Your Meme is able to provide users with a more complete picture of what memes are, where they originate and where they may be going, as many eyeballs are tracking and publishing at once. The choice of wiki system is also apt since memes are in constant change and permanently undergoing re-adaption with increasing use.

Along with the cataloguing role that KYM plays, it also works as the central form of meme curation. The curatorial role and the accompanying thoroughness taken up by KYM in order to verify its sources and confirm its entries indicates there is weight placed on the veracity of facts that surround memes; KYM takes great care in order to provide information about meme origin, meaning and current use. Similar to academia, confirmed entries have links to original references, which underscores the importance of veracity in the curatorial role that KYM plays. Know Your Meme's authority comes from the earnestness with which it undertakes its meme research and curation. Additionally, KYM is one of the most reliable sources regarding meme history and definition, considering the lack of academic focus on online memes and their specific origins. However, it is worth noting that KYM belongs to the Cheezburger network and thus is subject to their editorial judgement. This might pose as a possible source of conflict regarding the integrity of memes, as their potential for democratic quality might be put into question when considering the editorial context of KYM. Despite being largely shaped by the wide range of internet users that circulate them, memes and their meaning are also at the hands of ICHC's more structured editorial pressures.

As with ICHC, KYM's entries are moderated, however it is arguable that their moderation causes a greater impact on the meme sphere than meme moderation happening elsewhere. Since many internet users refer to KYM entries in order to describe or introduce memes – evidenced by my interviewees' own use of it as a way to point out their favourite memes to me – it becomes clear that the role of KYM in shaping the understanding of memes is significant. At the same time this is problematic: since KYM is an influential source when it comes to the history of online memes, ultimately the Cheezburger network has the final word on most of meme formation. The impact of editing and the selection process that occurs in

the site raise challenges regarding the ultimate shaping of meme history (and, subsequently, their meaning). Additionally, Know Your Meme (like ICHC), features external advertisement on their website, bringing into question once more the issue of commercialisation and creation of capital from advertisement revenue through the long hours of free labour that result in the freely given content made by the website's contributors.<sup>17</sup>

This act of preserving meme history comes as an interesting and seemingly contradictory one; after all, online memes are not regularly affiliated with specific individuals or authors and actively dismantle the trappings of authorship in general<sup>18</sup>. Online meme authors are rarely recognised; if authorship can be established at all. As a variety of memes are event-bound (i.e. arise as a reaction to a current event), they have also shown a tendency to be ephemeral. This too contradicts the curatorial nature of KYM – although it is likely precisely because so many memes are made at such a fast pace that KYM would be interested in keeping a record of them before they are forgotten and fall in disuse. Ultimately, KYM shows that keeping a detailed record of memes is of importance for internet history; much like Wikipedia demonstrates that an accessible online repository of information that can be continuously edited is of cultural relevance.

## **9gag**

Another website that features memes extensively is the popular 9gag page. The website works as a content aggregator, compiling memes from their submissions. The submissions are then downvoted or upvoted, which will dictate their visibility on the front page of the website, lending an invisible democratic system to the website; if the majority of users do not approve of the meme, it will not get upvoted and it will ultimately 'die' in the fresh submissions page. This is a visible way of putting into practice the simplified meme ethos of 'if it doesn't spread, it's dead' (Green & Jenkins 2011: 116).

Although it features a lot of memes, 9gag also features many non-meme related posts. This characteristic paired with the tardiness with which their content is posted has led me to devote less focus on 9gag in comparison to other meme-centric sites. Memes are incredibly time sensitive; as they lose relevance and impact very quickly, it is more productive to focus

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<sup>17</sup> These issues will be dealt with in depth in Chapter 6

<sup>18</sup> See literature review

on other spaces that are also meme-centric yet with a fresher approach to memes. After frequenting popular meme spaces, it became evident 9gag lagged behind time-wise, a criticism that is often visible in post comments. This discovery was backed up by some of my interviewees (J.C. and N.M.), whom when questioned about preference of online space in meme interaction placed 9gag at the bottom, stating that they did not find engagement with 9gag to be appealing as many posts were outdated or were already circulating in other online spaces long before they reached 9gag. These findings point to the importance of speed regarding online interaction, also underlined as important by both interviewees; fresh content is given heavy weight when it comes to meme relevance, as noted multiple times within this thesis. Because online interaction is instantaneous, it is easy for content to lose relevance and become obsolete quicker. N.M. added that after seeing the same meme a few times, it no longer was funny, thus it was important for him to engage with it at the source, as seeing it further down time-wise only made it lose appeal.

It is possible that the perception of audience also plays a role in desire to engage with memes in a particular online space; J.C. stated that 9gag was 'full of 13 year olds', which made it both unappealing and hard to identify with for a man his age. This perception is not necessarily correct, as statistical information places 9gag's main audience as being males within the age range of 18 and 24 (9gag 2015); however this is still a very young age range when considering a broader societal picture. Furthermore, this perceived antagonism between age groups within these spaces echoes other issues present in fan cultures beyond memes: Hollows has demonstrated that no matter how alternative a subculture can be, entrenched ideologies (e.g. gender, age) are often found among them (2003: 49). 9gag has a more international audience than sites like ICHC, this is likely due to the website not being US based (which is the case with many popular internet pages, including ICHC); the website works entirely in English and is based in Hong Kong, the posts very often refer to the international quality of '9gaggers'.

9gag has been the target of several attacks, metaphorically and literally, one of these in the form of a Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack which consists of a coordinated saturated access to a targeted website, resulting in the inability to access the website by any users (EC-Council 2010: 6-17). The details of the motivation behind these attacks vary – some strongly disagree with the content posted on 9gag, whilst others feel that the community

itself can be toxic and harmful<sup>19</sup>. DDoS attacks can have an impact on the circulation of memes: if a website is inaccessible, its content (e.g. memes) will suffer in terms of accessibility. The intention of the DDoS attack in this case is to impede access to the 9gag webpage; a form of collective boycott<sup>20</sup>. Using DDoS attacks as a method of evidencing disapproval towards a specific webpage indicates the significant role that circulation and visibility play in terms of the online sphere. To use the impediment of access as a weapon is to acknowledge the importance of access in the first place, as it attempts to halt the circulatory nature of digital content. Other forms of attack have come through creating anti-9gag pages to protest their content and culture: a Tumblr page named 'Stop 9gag' describes the site as follows: '9GAG is an Internet website that is exploiting and attacking innocent disabled people and children for their fun'.

#### **4chan**

Although popularized by the ICHC network, many online memes (including LOLcats) originated from 4chan. Due to the digital medium which circulates perfect copies that never degrade regardless of use, it is particularly difficult to find the very first point of origin of memes, as these begin to multiply and appear in different points of cyberspace within very small timeframes. Considering the relationship meme makers have with authorship, it is no surprise that there seems to be no particular battle for recognition of authentic point of origin. Additionally, it is practically impossible to know beforehand what will turn into a meme and what will not catch on, as one of the characteristics that permeate memes is their unpredictability. There is a particular dislike for memes that are forced, even if these are genuinely relevant and popular they may end up being perceived as forced, which impacts memes negatively. Despite the difficulties encountered when it comes to pinpointing a particular source of memes, the consensus is that the majority (particularly the most successful ones) originate from 4chan (Byrne et al. 2016).

4chan is markedly different from all other online spaces described within this thesis. Contrary to most popular webpages, 4chan is not a social network, it is instead a bulletin board; it does not consist of profiles as it runs on anonymity, meaning that participants

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<sup>19</sup> These issues will be tackled further ahead in this chapter

<sup>20</sup> The impact of DDoS attacks has been noted within the legal context too, as they are a criminal offence punishable by incarceration (Brenner 2012: 50)

interact without an anchored identity. As explained by the website's FAQs, it is not possible to register a username, thus actively dismantling authorship of website content. This, in turn, resonates with the relationship between authorship and online meme creation; such a similar ethos of creation and participation might account for the reasoning behind the symbiosis of online memes and 4chan. The anonymity allowed in 4chan sets the website apart from all others listed here and it is perhaps out of this environment of total permissiveness that creativity is allowed space to experiment with various memes. If these end up being rejected or unpopular, the personal sense of rejection felt by the poster is likely to be less impactful, as the component of public loss of face is not present, which might lead to a disinhibition effect, more specifically of the toxic kind (i.e. rudeness, threats, mean spirited attacks) (Suler 2004). On the other hand, the allowance for anonymity in 4chan has given rise to much criticism of the website, as this policy has led to extremely graphic content to be posted, including illegal content of a disturbing nature. The ability to study the website academically thus raises difficult ethical issues and poses serious moral questions; this negotiation has been hauntingly detailed by Douglas Rushkoff's description of his academic forays into 4chan (Rushkoff 2009).

The impact of 4chan is undeniable in the creation of memes, however it does seem that the environment that governs the website makes it inaccessible to many. The level of online cultural literacy demanded in order to engage with the website and the amount of unspoken social rules that users are required to follow are incredibly high. One cannot simply wander into 4chan without a fluent understanding of their working culture; that is if one wants to make sense of any of it *and* come out unscathed. This notion is aptly conveyed by Knight & Cook who have stated: 'If the internet is the Wild Wild West (...) then 4Chan is the rowdiest, drunkest saloon in town' (2013: 152). Despite being an academic who is familiar with researching digital spaces, Rushkoff also described this antagonising feeling while researching 4chan, designating it as 'a bad neighbourhood – one where if you break some custom you're unaware of, you could get hurt' (Rushkoff 2009). I have addressed this issue in my methodology, where I explain my own experiences whilst attempting to research 4chan.

Despite these impediments, I believe it is important to describe these basic processes that memes undergo whilst incepting from 4chan. As with other types of avant garde cultural spaces, 4chan's status as one of the primordial site of online culture is undercut by the perception of the bulletin board as preventing mainstream accessibility. Considering this

difficult environment, it is understandable that while many memes originate within this controversial online space, it is only when they leave the 'confined' perimeter of 4chan that they enter the mainstream and become more accessible. But even after memes leave 4chan it does not mean they are immune to being corrupted. The internet, as we are about to see, is not a black and white space where simplified notions of good and evil are separated by different webpages; memes can take a life of their own, which might not always bear a positive outcome.

### **The Dark Side of Memes**

As this thesis delves into meme use, the notion of creativity as something inherently good pervades its rhetoric; this is unsurprising as the vast majority of academic literature equates creativity with positive traits, with a very disproportionate amount of academic attention being given to the negative outcomes of creativity (Cropley 2010: 1, James & Taylor 2010: 33). However, due to their malleability, memes can also be appropriated for less savoury uses. Much like some of the issues that arise with free speech in a democracy, memes can also bring with them the possibility of being intentionally used for harmful or malicious purposes, even if whilst doing so they demonstrate a creative quality (James & Taylor 2010: 37). As we consider the many aspects of meaning making throughout this thesis, the question here becomes: where lies the line in terms of what is culturally acceptable meme-wise?

According to KYM, the 'I can count to potato' meme was created in 2009, it features a picture of a smiling child with Down Syndrome in front of the recognisable rainbow colourwheel background that is the backdrop for so many memes. The meme began circulating with the caption 'I can count to potato' and all its variations rested on this picture being captioned with other offensive and callous ableist jokes that cruelly belittled the image of the child featured, and, by extension, other disabled people. It was often a response posted in forums and comments as an attempt to insult someone's intelligence, equating a moment of questionable intelligence with having Down syndrome.

Not only are the negative effects of such a meme immediately recognisable in terms of its impact on the disabled and their subsequent emotional distress at such an insulting portrayal, as well as helping to cement existing ignorant societal notions of disability, but this

meme in particular also affected someone with Down syndrome directly. The child featured in the meme is Heidi Crowter, upon discovering that her picture was being used for these purposes, Ms Crowter and her family became deeply hurt and upset. Whilst it is true that the internet moves at an incredibly fast pace and things become obsolete with unparalleled fashion, the opposite is also true: the internet never forgets (Whitty & Joinson 2009: 123). Here this gains a twofold meaning; as the altered image and its multiple remixed copies will continue to float around in online spaces in some form or another, making the prospect of the meme's records being permanently erased impossible. Additionally, the meme will remain alive as long as the people remember it; for the Crowter family this might be their lifetimes.

Due to the damage this meme has caused the Crowter family (and the disabled community at large) it is unsurprising to find that friends and supporters of the Crowter family have tried to have the meme taken down when they encounter it in online spaces (Zimmerman 2012). As pieces of media production that circulate publicly, cultural wars and negotiation regarding socially acceptable limits in freedom of speech also play out in memes; having sparked a debate on these issues, this meme serves as an apt example of that (Erickson 2012). There is also something to be said about the easiness and pervasiveness of online attacks that far surpass what we would allow in polite society: bullying and ableism are, of course, a part of the offline world too, however this prevalence in online culture means 'the Internet has made it easier to engage in criminal activities in part because the criminal is distanced from his or her victim. The technology acts as a dehumanizing filter.' (Hilton 2010: 150). Due to the difficulty in pinpointing original meme authors online, accountability proves hard to dispense. Because of its murky authorship, this meme in particular has also served as grounds to feed an ongoing feud among differing meme-heavy online spaces: there is some evidence that infers 4chan users attempted to place blame on 9gag for the origin of the meme (Operation Potatogag 2012; Zimmerman 2012), which does not come as unexpected: animosity between different online meme spaces has been flagged earlier in this chapter.

The case of the 'I can count to potato' meme is not isolated; there are other instances of memes being used for less savoury intentions. As we have seen above, re-contextualisation can lead to severe consequences in people's lives, to the point where the results can have longstanding effects way past the meme's prime time. Another case that fits a similar pattern

is the 'Ugly Chinese baby hoax' meme; according to Know Your Meme it consists of a forged online news article, stating Chinese national Jian Feng sued his wife after she gave birth to a baby with unattractive features and further admitting to having had plastic surgery prior to their relationship. The article has never been proved to be true, but it spiked interest in 2014 when an image was paired with the hoax. As stated on its KYM page, the image featured a beautiful couple with three children whose features had been altered to unsightly characteristics on Photoshop and was originally an ad for a plastic surgery practice that stated 'The only thing you have to worry (sic) about after plastic surgery is the explaining you'll have to do to your children'. However its more popular re-contextualisation - which led to its virality with the claims of concealed plastic surgery on the part of the mother - trumped its original humorous advertisement origins, obscuring the fact that the image *was* an advertisement fabrication. Subsequently, the female model that portrayed the mother in the advertisement was targeted and harassed for what was perceived as a moral crime she had not committed, leading to incredible difficulties in her personal life, from causing her partner to leave her to being made virtually impossible to hire as a model due to the negative press associated with the meme (Jung 2015).

I first came across the debunking of this meme via 9gag; a post had been created by a 9gag user warning of the negative impact memes could have in people's lives, ending in a plea for other users:

'(sic) meme makers, please be careful of what you publish, as false information can destroy a person's life. After all memes are supposed to make people happy and not have [a] negative impact on anyone'<sup>21</sup>.

This message comes out as surprising, considering 9gag played a part in disseminating (and, possibly, creating) the aforementioned damaging meme featuring Ms Crowter. The message of care featured in the latter post regarding the model seems to directly contradict the thoughtlessness of the 'I can count to potato' meme. We may never know what lies at the heart of this change of perspective by the 9gag community, but this change of behaviour regarding the impact of memes on the particular individuals featured in them may demonstrate that as time passes we gain a greater understanding of the internet, its culture and ultimately its consequences. In short, it appears that we too adapt our behaviours and

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<sup>21</sup> See Appendix 3

perception of how the internet should work as memes gain stronger footholds in our everyday culture.

These two examples pertain to memes that are created with the sole intent of being damaging towards those represented in them. However, not all memes that inflict damage set out to do so initially. Despite not being created specifically for this purpose, the Pepe Frog meme has become co-opted by racist hate groups, an association that has become so strong that it has been formally recognised as such in mainstream political discourse: both 2016 presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and the Anti-Defamation League have published statements condemning the meme's new acquired meaning (Koebler 2016; Pepe the Frog: General hate symbols, 2016; Lantagne 2017: 4, 5). After unsuccessful attempts to realign Pepe's meaning via #SavePepeCampaign (Solon 2016), the author of the Pepe meme declared the meme is dead – quite literally, as he created an iteration of the meme in a casket and openly announced to have 'killed off' the character (Vincent 2017). Similarly, companies that had products associating to the meme have recalled Pepe-similar merchandise in order to distance their brand from the meme's newfound meaning (Maclean 2017). Despite these attempts to salvage the meaning of the Pepe Frog meme, it became evident that the meme itself was an unstoppable force and it took on a life of its own; it would continue circulating and accumulating meanings along the way, irrespective of the nature of those associations. Putting it simply: 'A meme can become a hate symbol by social consensus' (Milner & Phillips 2016). This case clearly shows that creativity (and memes) may not always represent positive values, nor are they inherently good. However they have shown to be a good indicator of the social and political climate that we live in; as I have stated throughout this thesis 'creativity does not occur in a vacuum but in a social context' (Cropley 2010: 9). Runco furthers this idea by equating creativity with a tool which can be used for positive or negative outcomes depending on the intent that drives it (2010: 15, 26).

When we speak our ideas in the physical world, they inevitably attach us to them; our voiced opinions and our own selves become indistinguishable. Yet online it is easy to make content without it being traced, which changes this dynamic. Even when content can be linked back to us online, the online disinhibition effect means that it is far more likely for individuals to say and do things online that they would not in the physical world. The reduced cues that are available in online communication may act as encouragement for unsavoury

communication, whilst simultaneously protecting the identity of those engaging in such behaviours<sup>22</sup>. These factors, paired with meme mutability, open the door for memes that might bear highly offensive and even illegal messages. The darker side of meme use can be seen in the form of memes with oppressive messages: these can be sexist, homophobic, racist and ableist, to name a few. In these instances we see the downside of the easiness with which one can create and disseminate memes, as some of these memes can be used to continue existing oppressive structures at the least and work as direct threats to safety at the most. This point was underlined by one of my more politically aware interviewees:

I don't really have much against [meme use], unless it's offensive. There are a large number of pretty sexist or racist memes out there (...) and I disagree with these being used  
(B.R.)

Unfortunately this is a natural consequence of democracy and low liability regarding communication: other mediums have shown that the misuse of technological communication for malicious purposes is not new<sup>23</sup>. This is not partial to internet memes alone, but instead reflects larger societal issues regarding attitudes towards minorities, prejudice and structural oppression that find outlets in different mediums, forms of communication and interaction. Commenting on the relationship between our heterogeneous milieu and negative creativity, James and Taylor state:

The sense of uncertainty that can result from high environmental complexity and the intergroup conflict that can result from social diversity can yield negative emotions such as anxiety, fear, and hostility. This may lead creativity to be channelled into such negative avenues as devising schemes for harassing outgroup members. (2010: 49)

This describes the process of fascist appropriation of Pepe The Frog. As stated before, the street does indeed find its own uses for things and unfortunately this does not always equate positive or progressive outcomes. In these instances it is difficult to argue that memes foment public discussion and advance any form of democracy, when these values are undermined by the very content of such messages. Therefore, even though the democratic liberty of free speech is being put into practice, the very messages that are being disseminated may be antithetical to the ideals of a democratic society. Memes, in an ironic contradiction, can then

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<sup>22</sup> See Suler's *toxic* disinhibition effect above (Suler 2004)

<sup>23</sup> e.g. with the invention of the telephone, other by-products arose such as the abusive/prank phone call, bullying texts, etc.

be used democratically for the dissemination of anti-democratic content. Here we must bear in mind that online spaces are organic, and although we can attempt to create a snapshot of them at a particular time, they are constantly evolving; this applies to both the people that frequent them as well as the cultural shifts that take place within them through the years. Lastly, this has also served to remind us that creativity itself is an organic concept, and that 'while creativity normally is regarded as a tool for enabling positive, affirming change, there is no reason why it cannot be used for negative, destructive ends' (Hari 2010: 340).

### **Offline circulation of memes**

Memes pervade the online sphere in a myriad of ways, ensuring the success and survival of these as they travel far and wide. The most visible sign of this success is the online meme's ultimate conquest: the offline world. Memes have become so encompassing that they have successfully transitioned from online spaces into physical offline places. As with the online sphere, the circulation of memes in the offline sphere has been increasing, taking place in a variety of contexts which shape the meme as it circulates through these palpable spaces.

As pointed out in the literature, an important aspect of online social interaction is the mediation that takes place between people; it is the assortment of mediated material that composes all of our online communication (Esteves & Meikle 2015). Hence, being a product of the internet, online memes are also bound to be mediated in the online sphere they circulate in. This act of mediation is central to online memes; one of online memes' key characteristics is their inextricable link with technology and its affordances (both technological and cultural), placing them squarely within the study of the Web 2.0<sup>24</sup> - i.e. online memes are always being ultimately mediated through digital technology. Despite this innate link, online memes are growing in their offline presence. Accordingly, the conjoining of online memes and digital technologies that allow them to be created and circulated creates an issue when memes traverse into the offline world, as the mediated aspect and digital qualities that are so connected to online memes becomes lost in translation. This in turn questions the very nature of online memes, as a necessary negotiation regarding online meme definition becomes apparent within this offline context. Yet the negotiation need not be so drastic, as online memes exist beyond the online context that is so attached to them

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<sup>24</sup> See literature review

(Esteves & Meikle 2015). Internet memes might lose their digitised qualities in the offline world, but they are still mediated even in the palpable world; this process of offline occurs through writing/drawing or speaking. Thus, some form of mediation still remains an integral part of the online meme, regardless of whether that mediation is digitised.

Regarding meme transmission, the boundaries between online and offline spheres are very blurry. This is not exclusive to memes, as current trends evidence a blurring of the online and offline spheres in other contexts, such as the visible shift towards the emphasis on single (and 'true') identity for all online spaces. Facebook's persistence in using our 'real' identity<sup>25</sup> goes beyond mere suggestion and becomes compulsory, as Facebook does not allow the use of fake names for its profiles (Facebook 2017). Facebook's founder Mark Zuckerberg summarized this stance clearly when he stated that 'Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity' (Kirkpatrick 2010: 198). It is worth noting that Facebook and other internet corporations have a stake when it comes to the use of true online information in the digital world: the access to this information is stealthily sold through licensing agreements to other companies, providing valuable marketing data about millions of people; thus this information is only of value if it holds true or reflects some kind of reality that can then be used to sell products back to users in a more tailored fashion (Fuchs 2012: 34).

However this approach regarding 'real life' material and online spaces spans beyond these current commercial pressures, as literature regarding online identity illustrates that despite opportunities for deliberate misrepresentation, there is a tendency to transpose significant aspects of 'real' perceived self-identity into online spaces (Baym 2010: 152). In other words, while it might seem most people would be tempted to lie completely about who they are online; this is not the case for most. Early academic writing on internet spheres placed it within a realm separate from that of the offline world; one of the internet's early allures was this particular ability to become 'anyone'<sup>26</sup>, describing technology to potentially overcome issues such as racism and sexism, as the internet gave you a voice without a face (Turkle 1995: 265). Yet it soon became apparent that this utopian dream of online equality did not fulfil itself; the internet did not end discrimination. As we progressed, we began occupying online spaces with more bodily aspects than ever: from thousands of pictures to factual personal information, we occupy the virtual world with our real details. The initial

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<sup>25</sup> i.e. our legal names, accurate information about ourselves

<sup>26</sup> i.e. allowing for complete erasure of any personal defining markers such as body or voice

stance of online avatars' ability to fabricate entire online personalities that are nothing like their real life counterparts may still be defended by a few, though the majority have reached a level of understanding of the internet that avoids idealistic or dystopian extremes.

Despite some discourses regarding online and offline separation of identities and spaces, it has always been difficult for the internet to separate both, which has become more evident with the current digital media landscape. Thus an attempt to split the topics within this thesis cleanly between online and offline meme circulation would feel contrived, resulting in the blurring of lines among the online and offline chapters of this thesis. This interlocked reality was further confirmed by my interviewees, who saw digital media as an integral part of their lived experiences, not as something separate from their everyday realities. Due to this perception I will address offline uses of internet memes throughout this thesis in terms of context instead of relying on the separation between the online and the offline spheres.

The importance and gravity of context has been underlined throughout this thesis: context is half the message, and it is the shift in contexts that (de)constructs the message's (i.e. the meme's) ultimate meaning. Memes are re-contextualised messages that encourage further re-contextualisation, thus their original context rarely makes it throughout its remix journey intact. For this reason I've outlined in this chapter some of the main spaces where memes circulate or originate, as well as the baggage that comes with each space. From the 'mainstream' perception of Facebook's circulation of memes to 9gag's darker creation of less palatable memes, these pieces of online media are able to cross over into varied online spheres. Their audience might shift as they travel, making them belong to no one single group of meme makers or sharers. However there is an act of convergence that unites these memes: their cataloguing into Know Your Meme, which attempts to curate and define as many memes as possible. A history of memes is being created, and anyone can use this tool to educate themselves about a large variety of online memes. Due to the significance of framework when it comes to the understanding of memes, it is essential that the issue of meme circulation is addressed – not only where memes circulate but also how they circulate – as this is connected to their meaning. The contextual groundwork for meme circulation has been laid down in this chapter for this reason; understanding the former will be crucial in order to understand the latter in following chapters, where I will be looking at how memes are used in specific political, commercial and subcultural contexts.

## Chapter 5: Memes and Politics

Memes also make their mark in terms of political use; here<sup>27</sup> I turn to the politicised possibilities afforded by memes, both in terms of explicit engagement with politics and their inherent political quality. It is unsurprising to find this global meaning making tool has found a natural extension of its use in the political realm. Online activism has been in itself a point of contention: whilst many rejoice at the possibility of being included in the global political drive for change, others have critiqued this utopian view claiming that online public engagement with politics does not equate 'real' activism, and instead delays palpable societal transformations since it gives online users the sense they have contributed towards change when they have not. This is often labelled 'slacktivism' (Christensen 2011), referring to the effortless activities that accompany internet engagement with politics and/or activism.

Politics has featured throughout this thesis in some form or another (e.g. DIY, remix culture), these are political issues concerned with lowercase p politics i.e. the politics of the everyday. However within this chapter I focus on the more common definition of politics (or capital P Politics i.e. government) and its meme uses. It is important to bear in mind that at times both capital P and lower case p politics can (and do) meet (Janks 2012: 151), consequently we must consider how this symbiosis plays out; making it challenging at times to keep them separate. In order to illustrate how memes play out in Politics I shall be drawing upon recent examples mostly surrounding the US political landscape, as it has yielded widely circulated memes in recent years. The examples I have selected aim to highlight different contexts within which memes play out in the current political landscape and how memes are a useful tool to follow a global discussion of and interaction with politics. Within this section I shall also be branching towards examples of memes that marry DIY culture with politics, informed by the use of memes within the craftivist movement.

### **Binders of women**

Being aware of the changes in meme culture is imperative, as the world of memes moves at a very fast pace: a meme can go out of relevance as quickly as it rose to

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<sup>27</sup> I discuss memes and politics in my published research (Esteves 2018), some of the examples discussed here can be explored further within it.

prominence. This is particularly visible with memes relating to political events, where memes can be an effective reactive tool. A vivid account of this could be seen during a round of the 2012 US presidential debates. A popular meme arose during the 2012 US elections race, born out of the second presidential debate. Candidates Obama and Romney were asked about the unbalanced relationship between gender and the workplace, particularly the pay gap experienced by women. In a failed attempt to demonstrate the active pursuit of equality for women in the workplace, Romney provided an inadequate answer, stating that his office 'brought us whole binders full of women' as potential employable candidates.

This response backfired as it exacerbated not only the reductionist view of women as failing to hold an equal standing as men in the workplace but also demonstrated that Romney lacked legitimate understanding of these issues; equating women to lists in a binder is hardly demonstrating real knowledge of gender inequality. These aspects did not go unnoticed in the online realm of meme-makers, who immediately picked up on Romney's blunder and began disseminating various images portraying remixed contexts: from pictures of Romney with women popping out of binders to pop references being manipulated in order to fit the binders joke. The many variations that spawned out of this meme personified the remix aspect present in memes, as well as the originality that such a culture allows e.g. a picture of Patrick Swayze in 'Dirty Dancing' stating that 'No one puts Baby in a binder'.



This elevates the comical level of the original meme, while keeping it fresh through remix as it circulates. These various versions echoed the act of détournement, both in terms of technique (i.e. remix) but also in terms of content (i.e. political critique), though the former employed considerably less effort and less emphasis on visual effect than the latter; a necessary trade off when speed and inclusion are priorities.

Due to the speed granted by digital transmission, the binders comment gained momentum online which could only be picked up by the mainstream media at a much slower pace. The meme started circulating online minutes after Romney's comment was uttered and by the time it was picked up by mainstream media it had already gone completely 'viral'. Despite being a joke, this foreshadows something much more significant: here memes were the first tool used in order to engage in political criticism, embodying a voice of protest that is both impactful and quick to make. The immediacy of reactionary memes is considerably important, as they are highly time-sensitive.

Despite the strong impetus felt by the meme at the time of the debate, according to Google Trends it did not take long for its relevance to plummet<sup>28</sup>. According to Google Trends, the search term 'binders of women' (and other related search terms such as 'Romney binders') was considered inexistent before this incident. It then peaked to its full capacity on the 17<sup>th</sup> of October, a day after the debate, which took place on the 16<sup>th</sup> of October. This delay could be due to the debate taking place in the evening (local time); as most of the online activity regarding the second presidential debate exhibit timestamps of the 17<sup>th</sup> of October. Other sources back up the prevalence that 'binders full of women' had on the online sphere on the night of the Presidential debate (and shortly thereafter); according to a Mashable's Contributing Editor:

'The phrase became Google's number-three trending query for the night, after "who is winning the debate" and "live debate," according to Google Politics' Twitter feed. (...) search interest in the word "binders" increased by 425% during the debate's first hour' (Li 2012).

The immediacy with which the 'binders' meme took off is a by-product of its context. Google Trends shows that meme phenomena may have varying patterns in terms of online circulation: whilst some memes are substantially relevant for a very short period of time (e.g. binders full of women), others enjoy a more complex and sustained existence (e.g. LOLcat). In the case of the latter, the life cycle of the meme is, nevertheless, subject to ups and downs, with LOLcats in particular experiencing a slow overall decrease of popularity in terms of Google search terms, though this decrease does enjoy some periods of upwards popularity or stability. The search term 'I can has', however, has remained considerably steady, even in the

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<sup>28</sup> Note: although Google Trends has an extremely broad perspective of what is searched online it is however not all encompassing of online activity

face of the 'LOLcat' decrease. It is worth noting, however, that in terms of Google Trends, the LOLcat has never experienced a sharp peak like most of its reactionary and short-term meme counterparts. This indicates that while some memes have a high level of impact during their ephemeral existence, others might experience a more extended life without disproportionate peaks. The former type of memes is adequate to fulfil the needs of a reactive meme like 'binders full of women', i.e. a meme that is born as reaction to a particular incident, working as social and cultural commentary to a particular situation, in this case of a political blunder<sup>29</sup>. The lifespan and time bound comparisons between inherently political memes (i.e. memes whose fixture is centred on a political event) and non-political memes demonstrates the different roles that both these types of meme fulfil when it comes to our societal communication, which in turn reflects how we reach for different types of meme models according to what it is we are reacting to.

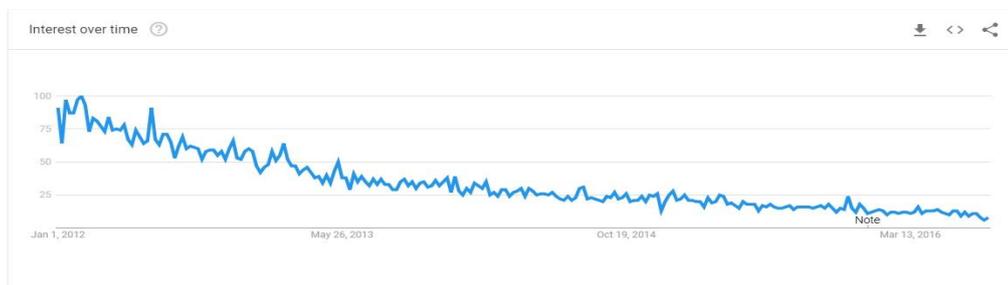
These results only reflect Google searches and although a strong indicator of meme popularity in terms of circulation it does not measure actual meme circulation. There is, however, a correlation between Google Trends and the actual circulation of the meme, as it becomes evident the ephemeral type of meme becomes practically extinct after the incident that caused it. Using the 'binders of women' meme as an example, a search in the I Can Haz Cheezburger (ICHC) network reveals that there are at the time of writing 67 posts tagged with the word 'binders' throughout the website; out of these only 22 refer to the Romney gaffe whilst the remaining 45 are unrelated. The 'binders' memes were all posted in October 2012 with the exception of one post in December 2012; of the 22 relevant posts 19 were posted within the week of the Romney incident<sup>30</sup>. These findings corroborate the information provided by Google Trends: people engaged with the 'binders' meme shortly after the event happened because it held more relevance then.

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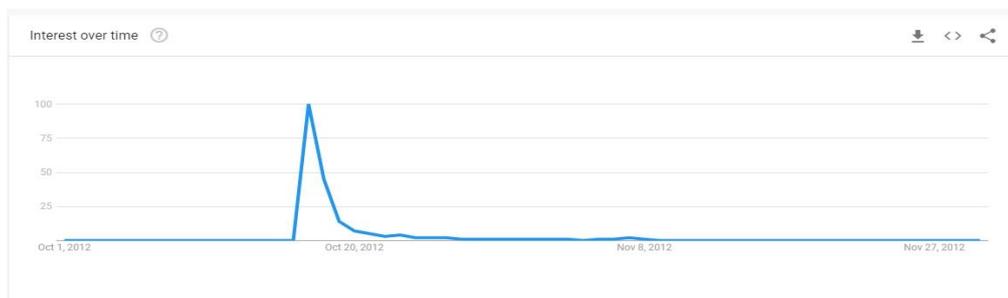
<sup>29</sup> Despite being an appropriate model for memes that react to political content, reactionary memes are also applicable to other memes that are born outside of an explicit political occurrence. An example would be the 'Interrupting Kanye' meme, spawned after rapper Kanye West interrupted singer Taylor Swift's acceptance speech for Best Female Video at the 2009 MTV Music Video Awards. These Google search results similarly rose at a skyrocketing rate right after the incident, only to decrease at a rapid speed. This trajectory in trend (very high levels of success, succeeded by rapid lack of interest) is not a characteristic of political content alone, but may also be seen in other memes that respond to cultural incidents. It is difficult to sustain these memes for long, as the incident that originated the meme loses relevance and newsworthiness over time; accelerated by the immediacy and rapid pace of online communication, as well as the overwhelming access to constant information and ever growing number of similar incidents.

<sup>30</sup> Note that posts on ICHC are not time stamped, dates were extracted either by oldest comment on the post – which are dated – or by analysing the publishing date information on the page's source code.

On the other hand, the Cheezburger network has featured LOLcats since its inception to the present day, spanning years of variations of this meme; a testament to the malleability of the LOLcat, which is not heavily connoted to a single moment in time and thus allows for a wider reusability. There is also the possibility that some memes (particularly older memes like LOLcats) may be so ingrained in online meme culture that they travel through and are explained in other channels (e.g. forums, emails, word of mouth) and therefore do not require as much Google research. On the other hand, overnight memes might need explanation and context, which is reflected in the incredible peaks these experience in Google Trends.



**Fig 2.** 'LOLcats' search trends



**Fig. 3:** 'Binders of women' search trends

Thus whilst reactionary memes might feature differing use patterns, the fact that both reactionary and non-reactionary memes coexist in meme spaces like ICHC demonstrate our need for both kinds of expression. In this sense, memes are as susceptible to changes of context and taste that affects humour more generally (see Kuipers 2006). Much like other forms of popular culture, they are sensitive to the social and political atmosphere that surrounds them, often reflecting the lived or perceived reality of the times. This political lampooning is not unlike the tradition of satire present throughout the history of political cartoons, spawning back centuries (Freedman 2009: 56; Navasky 2013: 49), with the

exception that it is not confined within the walls of the newspaper industry. It is the accessibility allowed regarding this form of engagement with political criticism that bestows memes with a wide-ranging democratic property not quite yet fully achieved by previous offline mechanisms of political critique.

Political memes are also a good illustration of the battle that is cultural literacy; whose inherently contradictory struggle is played out in the Swayze-Binders meme pictured above: by appropriating other cultural references the meme becomes, through a complex process, at the same time both more accessible and less accessible. On one hand, it 'lowers' the usually elevated bar to participate in political critique as the forum for political engagement is extended to anyone that makes or shares a political meme. This process might occur unconsciously, as the majority of my interviewees stated they had never created a political meme, when first queried. However, upon further discussion it became apparent that many of them had indeed created and engaged with political memes; because the process was so easy and the medium so light hearted, they initially did not see what they were doing as 'political' meme activity, despite some of it being overtly political in the nature of their content<sup>31</sup>. These were not seen as political because they did not address capital P politics, but instead engaged with the politics of the everyday. This reaction is unsurprising, as the politics of the everyday is often not seen as overt political engagement. Thus, even though this accessibility to political engagement might not be overtly perceived by those that engage with it, it might still be present in internet memes.

On the other hand, in order to understand the significance of the Swayze-Binders meme, one must not only have some political knowledge (i.e. understand what the Binder reference is) but also a significant amount of cultural literacy: in this case one that extends beyond a working knowledge of memes and reaches into 1980's filmic pop culture. This places the politic meme in a contradictory dyad, which is further complicated by the ways in which these circulate through different spaces – as we've seen in chapter 4, the change in space(s) where the meme circulates brings with it changes in meme significance itself, as different contexts lend different meanings to the meme. Despite this contradiction, it becomes evident that memes are appreciated for their meaning(s) over their visual appearance. Throughout my interviews, emphasis was not put on the visual aspects of a

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<sup>31</sup> e.g. memes about David Cameron and Scottish Independence

meme alone, but instead on the potential shared meaning that lies within it (e.g. a meme's catchphrase, inflection). This layering of meaning can range from what can be considered a relatively simple form that requires a low literacy level to a complexly layered meme with multiple messages.

The 'Binders' meme is just one in a sea of many that have since rose to fame within the Political sphere: it seems that reactionary memes have become a staple of US Politics and it is difficult to imagine a current presidential race without them – from 'Mitt Romney Hates Big Bird' in 2012, to 'Bernie or Hillary?' in 2016 and the multiple Donald Trump memes. The 'Binders' meme should, thus, not be seen as a singular episode but instead as an accepted and normalised form of political critique in contemporary civic life; reactionary memes used in Political contexts inform our global conversation of Political events in these very tumultuous times of civil unrest, ensuring an instant way of reacting *with* the world instead of simply reacting *at* the world.

### **Is Ted Cruz the Zodiac Killer?**

Since Obama's first election there has been a palpable change to the role that social media and memes play during the presidential race. US Politics have played out very much through the use of memes, which seems to have a growing influence with every election. During the race to the 2016 US Presidential, the number memes has been too high to keep track, evidencing that online memes are effectively becoming a natural part of the public discussion regarding politics. Among the varied examples of political memes that have risen during the 2016 elections, there is one that demands focus due to its nuanced difference: The Ted Cruz Zodiac Killer meme.

In 2013, Twitter user @RedPillAmerica tweeted that US Republican senator Ted Cruz was the elusive Zodiac Killer responsible for the string of unsolved murders committed between the 1960's and 1970's. This tweet showed no evidence for the outrageous allegation nor was there a follow up on it; it was evidently not meant to be taken seriously<sup>32</sup>. The claim itself was not given importance, and although a user tweeted the same accusation a year after, it wasn't really picked up until early 2016 (Know Your Meme). This was a crucial time for the accusation to take off: the idea gained traction and was revived during Cruz's 2016 bid for

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<sup>32</sup> This conspiracy theory is false since Cruz was not born yet when the first Zodiac murders took place

US presidency; more and more versions of memes regarding the 'Cruz Zodiac Killer' conspiracy were created. Regardless of the impossibility of the rumour it spread nonetheless, not so much due to its veracity, but as a critique on Cruz himself. Cruz is notoriously unpopular among his political peers and has been called 'creepy' in a number of instances (Boggioni 2016; Levingston 2016), culminating in an article published by the New Republic magazine called 'Everybody Hates Ted' which consists of a compilation of negative comments that have been made on Ted Cruz by other politicians, news outlets and celebrities (Shephard & Chang 2016). This well documented dislike of Ted Cruz and his sinister connotation by both his fellow politicians and the wider public has undoubtedly contributed to the spread of the Zodiac Killer association.

The 'Cruz Zodiac Killer' meme illustrates the impact and meaning political memes can have in the offline world. Activist Tim Faust and artist Rory Blank took the opportunity of the rise of this meme to create t-shirts depicting Ted Cruz as the Zodiac Killer, whose revenue went towards the West Fund, a non-profit organisation that helps women fund abortions in Texas. Above and beyond initial expectations, the t-shirts were able to raise thirty thousand dollars for the West Fund, ensuring that many women in El Paso (one of the lowest income areas in the US) could now afford the costly procedure of having an abortion (Bess 2016). Adding to the meaning of this gesture is the fact that Ted Cruz is an outspoken anti-abortion defender, meaning that this meme has actively and explicitly worked against his agenda; going beyond the age old comical lampooning of a politician and actively working towards combating said politician's legislative pursuits.

The circulation of this internet meme in offline spheres has a palpable political impact, not only in the sense of opening up a public debate but in the sense of a measurable effect, where a considerably large amount of money has been raised for a social and political cause, translating into real impact on people's lives. This phenomenon was only possible due to a carefully linked relationship between the online and the offline use of memes: as we have seen with the 'Binders of Women' example above, the creation and circulation of internet memes online is already a layered political act in itself - not only does it fulfil the political characteristic of DIY empowerment but it explicitly expresses political engagement through grassroots critique of Politics – but by adding the offline element (i.e. selling the Ted Cruz t-shirts and reverting the funds to help impoverished women to afford abortions) the political

impact of the meme is elevated further. Here the physical materialisation of context transforms political critique into measurable social impact; the Ted Cruz meme demonstrates that what is often labelled 'slacktivism' can indeed harbour the potential for the very real change that activism strives for. Thus what we are acknowledging here are other ways that memes can be used in the offline sphere with political intent, within and beyond capital P politics. The Guardian published a piece where it raised the question whether memes had a part in costing Cruz the election all together (Alexander 2016); here we must be wary of reducing complex political outcomes to the circulation of memes, however the existence of the piece at all points towards the impact that memes have had not only in the political landscape but also in the reporting of politics itself.

### **Offline political protests**

Seeing as online memes can be used online with explicit political intentions, it is unsurprising that the same logic follows meme use offline. Preliminary research has demonstrated that this occurs (much like the case with online memes) on a global level. One of the most fascinating findings in my ethnographic research was the discovery of pictures taken at protests featuring memes on homemade posters. These billboards and signs of online memes could be found in protests from a variety of locations: from Russia, to Canada, to Egypt<sup>33</sup> and featured messages that varied from exposing political corruption to outrage at unemployment figures.

Signs are used in protests to make discontent more visible. The point is to convey stances or feelings towards an issue in particular, whilst making sure that this is visible enough by the media and others that are present at the protest (and, preferably, those that are being protested against), proving to be an efficient way of conveying a simple yet effective message through the loud and at times chaotic experience of protests. Considering this role of handmade signs and billboards in protests, it is important for the message to be easily recognisable both by attendees and audiences. Thus, the use of memes in a context where clear communication is key appears, at first, to be potentially counterproductive. Those who use online memes to convey their political views in offline spaces (particularly in protests) incur the risk of having their message lost on the audience at hand, as they are

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<sup>33</sup> See Appendix 4

surrounded by people who do not necessarily engage with or understand memes. Consequently there is a danger of alienation when using memes as visual platforms for political messages in the battleground of physical protesting; there is a possibility of misunderstanding, which could lead to the dilution of the message and its subsequent loss of effectiveness.

On the other hand the use of memes may have the opposite effect and those who feel disenfranchised by politics and activism may find an easier way to relate to the serious topics that are being discussed in such protests. As discussed in the inclusion/exclusion phenomenon that pervades memes<sup>34</sup>, the 'us/them' dichotomy that is present in these interactions may also be a form of further unity across different fracturing topics. Cultural and digital literacy play out in political protests, and based on the dispersion, incidence and online reception, the levels for both are considerably high in protestors around the globe. Once again context is also key in these situations: it is unlikely that, when confronted with the larger picture of a protest, one is not able to make out what the overall message is. Additionally, there are political messages lost in translation at protests regardless of the use of memes in their communication<sup>35</sup>.

I witness these occurrences through the analysis of pictures found online, which record this offline use of the meme. This indicates, once more, that there is a central role played by re-digitisation, where the experience of sharing meaning collectively is extended outwards, towards the offline place, but also beyond it, as it is re-energized and re-validated by being part of the online sphere again. Once more we witness the elasticity of the online and offline barrier in discussions regarding internet and culture, where our existence and experiences bleed into both spheres. This symbiosis illustrates how schisms between offline/real and online/not-real worlds may be unhelpful ways of thinking about our experiences, and how a more fluid approach between these two spheres is necessary for a more accurate portrayal of reality.

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<sup>34</sup> See chapter 3

<sup>35</sup> An example of this is the controversial 2017 Pepsi ad featuring Kendall Jenner, which was criticized for portraying a protest that featured incredibly vague signs proclaiming messages like 'Love' and 'Join the conversation', demonstrating that even at times when the ancient mastery of simple words is used, the message can fail to be clear.

## #occupy

Within the context of political use of memes in an offline context, I would like to consider an unusual kind of online meme, which is embodied through the Occupy movement. The Occupy movement is a complex and multifaceted topic, and its full relation with online spaces is beyond the scope of this thesis; however it does relate to the topic of online memes, which is the aspect I shall be focusing on here. The Occupy movement which swept the US (and later, many other parts of the globe), is a movement that has firm roots in online spaces. The popular #occupywallstreet was coined by Kalle Lasn, one of the founding members of Adbusters<sup>36</sup>. The importance that the internet plays within the Occupy movement is evident not only through Occupy's strong online presence but also by how online interactions inform offline decisions (e.g. their protests are coordinated through social media).

Whilst Occupy's early protests were very much centred in Wall Street, they later on took to the rest of the US; initially through social media, then translating into physical protests all over. Eventually, these began happening in other countries, with the occupy movement flowering in hundreds of other cities (according to *The Guardian* the total amount of Occupy events up to November 2011 was 951); the Occupy movement was present in all continents, including Antarctica (Rogers 2011). It is worth bearing in mind that although these figures give us a false sense of complete global engagement with the movement, the movement did not, in fact, extend to a representative worldwide presence as there were notable absences in the majority of the African and Asian continents. This scarcity is particularly telling as it might be indicative of overlapping data regarding lack of internet access and/or lack of democratic freedom in these areas.

Occupy's reach, although not truly global, is still remarkably ubiquitous. As the movement grew and adapted to differing contexts and causes, its role and definition could be contested. If a meme is a piece of internet culture that engages participants to remix content as it circulates, it becomes plausible to see the Occupy movement itself as an online meme. Although it does not take the common visual form of an online meme<sup>37</sup>, it is an internet concept created by the creative audience, which engage said audience in a collective exercise of meaning making; changing as it spreads. One of the ways to test the validity of the Occupy

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<sup>36</sup> An activist movement that engages frequently in culture jamming

<sup>37</sup> There are other memes bypass this visual existence too – an online meme might be embodied in the form of sound, e.g. the Trololol song, the nyancat song

movement as an online meme is to check if it addresses the properties raised in my working definition (established earlier in this thesis and elsewhere [Esteves & Meikle 2015]): if we consider that memes are 'shared rule-based representations of online interactions that are not only adopted but also adapted by others', the Occupy movement can be considered an online meme. Its origins in the online space and its subsequent dependence on the online sphere in order to grow and thrive place it squarely within the realm of online interactions; these interactions are, in turn, represented by shared rule-based aspects such as the #occupy[city] tag and the 'we are 99%' stories that emerged usually in the form of photographs of people holding up signs and/or pages describing their current unfavourable financial situation, with 'I am the 99%' at the bottom. These tags and stories, as well as their textual and visual representations, were adopted and adapted by others as they circulated. The #occupy tag morphed into many different #occupy[city] variations, the 'we are the 99%' stories changed as they circulated, and thus their visual representations inevitably also underwent transformation, as each person told their own story through visual representations. The 99% movement has previously been claimed as a meme in the literature (Bennett & Segerberg 2013: 22), though I believe a deeper understanding as to why this fits the bill is necessary.

Being an online meme, one of the outcomes of the Occupy movement was its fast spread through online spaces, which brought awareness to the occurrences in the offline spheres relating to the particular cities in question. However, a clear difference was visible in this kind of online meme when compared with others: #occupy was design to manifest itself in the offline, palpable context. Whilst much of it played out online, the point was to gain physical mobilisation in different cities, and thus the offline space was always kept in mind during the evolution of the movement. The Occupy meme then represents an interesting development in the online world of memes; whilst it echoes its predecessors in terms of encouraging active engagement and sharing, it also makes way for a type of interaction that naturally extends into the palpable world, accounting for the realities of current social and civic experience whilst also underlying the importance of a holistic approach between both spaces instead of an outdated and divisive point of view.

Here memes go beyond serving as a way to virtually interact with others in a politically discursive dimension, becoming important symbols for and of political groups. As Shifman

summarises: ‘the personalization of political memes is beneficial not only to the individuals spreading them (...) personalized memes also serve as the rhetoric of political movements.’ (2014: 129). With the case of the ‘99%’ meme, this became a shorthand for the entire Occupy movement behind it; with citizens not only recognising this symbiotic relationship but also congregating around it. Thus the latent political possibilities afforded by online memes (i.e. the empowering politics of participation and meaning making) become explicit, as a political message about social and economic change becomes overt. This manifest political rhetoric was visible in both the physical manifestations of the Occupy movement throughout the world (which saw thousands of people protest in politically or financially influent offline spaces) and in the online spaces where Occupy was organized. In apt poetic form, the Occupy movement spawned memes within itself, one of the most popular examples being the ‘Pepper Spray Cop’ meme.

### **Pepper spray cop meme**

At an Occupy peaceful protest at the University of California Davis in the US, a group of students engaged in an outdoor sit-in on campus regarding the proposed rise in tuition fees. Tension arose between the police and the sitting protesters who refused to leave the area, which culminated in Lt. John Pike pepper spraying said sitting protesters repeatedly in the face. This unfortunate act was recorded by one of the bystanders and rapidly disseminated online. The footage caused outrage due to the excessive and unwarranted intervention by the authorities on what were visibly nonviolent campaigners. Yet as the image circulated it started being remixed, portraying the Pepper Spraying Cop in a variety of contexts, pepper spraying an array of things that did not necessarily relate to the original event. The incident spawned the ‘Casually Pepper Spray Everything Cop’ meme. Some of the altered versions of the meme continued the critique within the original context:



However, as the meme gained traction the context shifted, with many versions straying into the land of the absurd: we began seeing remixes where Officer Pike pepper sprayed anything and everything, from Paul McCartney in the iconic Abbey Road album cover, to defenceless kittens, to God's face in Michelangelo's 'The Creation of Adam'. Whilst at a first glance these might seem like two separate categories of 'Pepper Spraying Cop' memes, it is arguable that even in those far removed from the original intention or context display an underlying critique: Officer Pike will pepper spray *all* the undeserving; even the Lion from The Wizard of Oz is not spared:



Having succeeded in the digital realm, the meme came full circle when it was featured in a physical billboard of a protest, juxtaposed with an image of him pepper spraying the American constitution:



The critique is particularly on point when placed in such juxtaposition: for those who do not recognise the image of Officer Pike without context, the original context is provided, which makes the second image of Officer Pike pepper spraying the Constitution easily readable to all, regardless of their familiarity with the meme. In this rare example of a meme's original context paired in a geographical space with a version that bears a remixed context of the meme in action, those present are all able to extricate the meaning of the meme (and the underlying critique) in question, as a reading of both images provides the relevant context for

the understanding of the visually remixed version of the American constitution. Here, the critique is not only aimed at the excessive force used by police officials in protests, it becomes a critique of the repression and disregard of higher legal structures and rights by government forces<sup>38</sup>.

Critiques against officer Pike and the overuse of force in this situation spilled onto other far removed online spaces. As the meme rose in popularity, there were numerous fake Amazon reviews for the same pepper-spray it is believed Lt. Pike used in the incident, which were underlined by a parodic tone: ““Whenever I need to breezily inflict discipline on unruly citizens, I know I can trust Defense Technology 56895 MK-9 Stream (...) The power of reason is no match for Defense Technology’s superior repression power.” (Gray 2011). The meme began spilling out of its expected circulatory spaces and started to be referenced in the most unexpected of places. The officer Pike meme then gained fuzzy edges, as ironic references to him and the incident began taking different shapes in different spaces.

In a meta-meme twist, the reaction to the incident by Fox News’ political commentator Megyn Kelly’s became a minor meme in itself. In her commentary, Kelly states that ‘[Pepper spray]’s like a derivative of actual pepper. It’s a food product, essentially.’; this downplaying of events was not well received by citizens who thought the excessive use of police force was outrageous, whom began making ironic memes where horrible situations involving severe trespassing of human rights was downplayed, in order to match Kelly’s comment, which in turn highlighted just how out of touch Kelly’s original comment was.



<sup>38</sup> Portrayed here by Officer Pike, who is conveniently stripped from his single identity by being referred to as ‘pepper spraying cop’ and by having a recognisable protest police suit on with a helmet that blocks a substantial amount of his facial features – thus furthering the impersonal association with a higher structure, such as the government

Both these memes work towards Occupy's goal of exposing unfair treatment towards the everyday citizen (i.e. the 99%) by critiquing and ridiculing the violent and ideological attacks on those fighting against social inequality, be it through targeting repressive state apparatuses or ideological state apparatuses (see Althusser 1971). The Occupy meme has shown a single meme can gain large and multifaceted properties, with additional layers being added to the meme as it circulates. These examples demonstrate a global approach that can originate from some memes, as their circulation reaches different outlets; adapting as they go in order to express different kinds of critique. In a noticeable circular movement, the Pepper Spraying Cop meme has been revived years later in order to address the aforementioned Pepsi ad featuring a generic protest that borrows heavily from the iconicity of the Black Lives Matter movement, with Lt. Pike now spraying the peaceful protestors with a can of Pepsi:



It is this kind of cross-referencing that signals the social and civic conversation is ongoing and although the different movements may have different objectives (e.g. Occupy and Black Lives Matter) memes can function as a language that unites the struggles against those in power.

### **Local knitivism**

Often online images inform my knowledge of memes being utilised in protests, yet I have found examples in my own physical spaces. I came across the following piece of craftivism in Leith, Edinburgh; a discovery that took my use of ethnography to a physical level (see below). This refers to the recent implementation of trams in the city of Edinburgh and its extension to the area of Leith, both issues which have been met with some voiced disagreement:



As covered in chapter 1, like online memes, the art of craft has also been used in a similar DIY fashion, allowing amateur art to be an exercise in both creativity and democratic engagement through craftivism (see Gauntlett 2011; Greer 2011). Despite this particular example in Leith not making specific use of memes in its craftivism, there are similarities between this example and the offline use of memes as a form of conversation that mimics online interactions<sup>39</sup>. This piece of DIY craft works as an attempt to enter a public dialogue through alternative means, echoing the offline re-enactment of an online discussion; with the marked difference that this kind of attempt at dialogue is more explicitly political and attempts to engage beyond casual conversation, tackling instead an issue that has impact on its local community. However the similarity between both demonstrates the easiness with which it is possible to engage in public conversation through a DIY medium that can, for the most part, be considered accessible (i.e. knitting). What we can draw from these different uses of memes in offline spheres for political purposes is that despite their offline political use varying widely, they are nonetheless bound by the communal possibilities of engagement in different topics: offline memes can have meaning and gather people that are pro-choice through the United States just as well as they can have meaning and gather people that live in an area of Edinburgh that oppose the implementation of trams. Memes used in offline spaces for political uses can fulfil different kinds of communal purpose.

Craftivism often engages with lower case politics and has been used as an expression of everyday politics for a considerable amount of time. Its roots with feminist politics and activism has been noted (Ratto & Boler 2014: 10), and although the causes adopted by craftivism have expanded outwards the boundary of gender inequality this remains a focal point for much of the craftivist pieces. Being the easily remixed global

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<sup>39</sup> This relationship is to be covered in more detail in chapter 7

medium that they are, it is then no surprise to see memes also make their way into craftivist spaces. Here we can see how the parallels between memes and craftivism come together: both are a highly adaptable and accessible manifestation of DIY and remix culture, which simultaneously can embody an alternative form of communicating and resisting.

### **Connective action**

Social media has entrenched us with ideals of collectivity; besides the sense of connectedness that the 'always-on' lifestyle allows us, digital tools have the potential to bring people together with ease (boyd 2012: 76)<sup>40</sup>. When discussing collective action the term 'connective action' becomes impossible to ignore. There is evidence that suggests the term connective action might describe more aptly the current political activism status quo (Shifman 2014, 128; see Bennett & Segerberg 2013). Considering the amount of connections made between the ideas of collective action and meme use, it becomes important to also highlight the relationship between connective action and memes. As with many of the examples featured here, it is difficult to place connective action under an entirely online or offline section; the point is that it connects both spheres.

Connective action has been studied by a range of scholars, and although it is a complex concept to unpack, there are some characteristics to it that encompass what makes connective action a specific model. Bennett & Segerberg (2013) have written a considerable amount on the topic, as they began to note relevant differences in the way that recent protest and political actions were not only being conducted but also organised and, ultimately, shaped. Using the *Los Indignados* group and the Occupy movement as some of their core examples, the authors noted that although these groups were not entirely ground breaking in terms of their existence, there were unique qualities that differentiated them from previous activist movements. One of these groups' most striking characteristics is their composition of unaffiliated 'ordinary' citizens, meaning that they were not being backed or driven by any political groups, including unions and experienced activist groups (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013: 21; Shifman 2014: 128). The high level of mistrust in any kind of political group or organisation led *Los Indignados* and the Occupy movement to a conscious effort to distance themselves from these groups (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013: 20). The way these

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<sup>40</sup> Though there are issues regarding possible distancing regarding a deeper human interaction that should also be considered (see Turkle 2011).

movements were organised was also novel, as the particular reliance on digital communication through participants' online networks made connective action possible. Here Bennett & Segerberg draw a distinction between the use of digital media in other kinds of collective action, as in the case of connective action 'large-scale personal-level communication [become] organizational structures in their own right.' (2013: 27). Within connective action, communication wise, the forces at work operate on a different kind of flow: much like the lack of necessity to be driven by organised political groups or unions, communication also requires little administrative discipline (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013: 28).

As seen in the previous examples of meme use in protests, connective action might be a useful tool to understand the logic not only of circulation of memes within these particular spheres but also the meaning that they acquire when they do so. We can take the concept of connective action and overlay it with meme interaction: there is more than collective action to memes, at times memes have shown characteristics of connective action, actively acting as vehicles for it. The usefulness of this concept regarding memes has also been emphasised by the literature; as Shifman underlines: 'Bennett and Segerberg's analysis is that *memes serve as pivotal links between the personal and the political.*' (original emphasis) (2014: 129).

The relationship between DIY and the logic of connective action has also been underscored by Ratto & Boler (2014: 1). Looking at the DIY approach taken up in the logic of connective action (not only in terms of organising the protests but also in terms of making up the groups), the similarities between this and the DIY logic that underlies the meme making ethos becomes evident: if connective action is about the ordinary citizen doing it for themselves, whilst attempting to make political engagement at a grassroots level as accessible as possible, what better media to use than their own handmade media (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013: 25).

### **'Tinquiry', maktivism, offline DIY and consumerism**

Throughout this thesis I have argued that internet memes can be placed on a continuum of a much longer pre-existing remix and DIY based culture. In my literature review I addressed parts of the historical uses and instances of remix culture and their embodiment in a variety of spheres, namely the cases of détournement, punk and craft, all of which have roots that expand back decades (and, arguably, centuries). In order to understand the

complex relationship between the physical world and memes, it will also be useful to re-address the relationship of remix culture in current physical instances. Focusing now on the political aspect of the personal (i.e. in this case of the underlying power of making) I will also be exploring other aspects of DIY and activist culture and how their current issues and uses may resonate with internet meme culture.

Here I focus on the empowerment of making and experimenting with the boundaries around our notions of who makes things and why. One of the useful DIY activism concepts I have come across is 't inquiry', i.e. tinkering for the purpose of inquiry, the notion that tinkering with (found) objects can be propelled not by a functional objective but for the sake of inquiry itself (Mann 2014: 29). One of the most striking examples of 't inquiry' that I have come across in the literature is the SeatSale, an invention by Steve Mann that consists of 'a chair that had spikes that only retracted when a credit card was inserted in order to download a "License to Sit"' (Mann 2014: 29). Such an invention might seem useless at worst and unnecessary at best; however there is much to be said about it within the context of remix culture, t inquiry and capitalist critique. Mann ominously states that 'SeatSale envisions a dystopian future where public space has been eroded and all space is controlled' (Mann 2014: 40). On the other hand, one cannot help but think that such a dystopian future is already partially here under the guise of 'defensive architecture'. In order to deter the homeless of sleeping in front of buildings and shops, metal spikes have been implanted on the ground in front of such places (EDA Collective, 2016: 12); and although there is no credit card that can be swiped in order to retract the metal spikes in these cases, the parodic message present in SeatSale becomes a startling reality: public space can be commodified (Mann 2014: 39). There is a link to be made here with the use of memes in commercial spaces<sup>41</sup>. In the case of memes being used for commercial purposes, something that is also thought as public and which common sense dictates it is in itself against the logic of commodification (e.g. memes, sitting) is remixed into a context that inevitably changes its meaning. Metal spikes by themselves might not be everyone's idea of an attractive object, but it can be argued that there is nothing inherently commodified or political about them; however by remixing the context in which they are (i.e. public space) they take on a new meaning economically and politically. The same applies to memes used in commercial contexts: despite their initial context that rejects notions of ownership; they are taken and made into adverts by corporate businesses, which

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<sup>41</sup> Which will be discussed in-depth in chapter 6

are then protected by copyright. Thus, not only can public space be commodified, public tokens of meaning can too.

On the one hand this logic seems to fly in the face of the instances where public space is reclaimed by the public itself. As a reaction to the metal spikes being placed on the ground in public spaces, some have taken to transform these places of aggression into more welcoming spaces: the artists behind 'Space, Not Spikes' have designed and created beds and even small libraries that fit on top of the aforementioned spikes (McKay 2015), radically altering the original purpose of these whilst also sending out a political message that defies the way homelessness is (not) dealt with in big cities. A similar approach was adopted by the city of Copenhagen, whose city architects actively encouraged property owners to make these spaces more welcoming, in order to foment social interaction among local communities (McLaren & Agyeman 2015: 137). Here we can see the subversive remix of a space, which in some ways echoes architectural détournement.

This case of SeatSale resonated with me because of its intersecting issues of remix, tinquiry, commodification and control of public space: all issues that are also relevant to meme culture. Other great examples tackle ways of understanding meme culture and meaning such as Marvin Minsky's 'most useless machine ever' (Mann 2014: 33), whose sole purpose is to activate a switch that turns the machine off. Despite the lack of practical uses for this invention, there is something about the very core of tinquiry that resonates through it: sometimes messing around with things and making them just for fun is reason enough, echoing the ideals of DIY culture and, subsequently, its rejection of a capitalistic drive behind meaning. Once more, these critiques and subsequent ideas are also applicable to memes and their apparent lack of usefulness. As Mann suggests, there is a lack of encouragement in academia when it comes to doing things just for fun, touching upon the importance of play and its place in technology and society (2014: 34); ultimately doing things for fun, such as making memes, can then be framed as a political statement in itself.

In this chapter we have explored how memes colour our current experience with different kinds of politics; from capital P politics to lower case p politics, both of which increasingly inform our roles as citizens in the global village that is the world. Online memes not only found their way onto the physical space we inhabit but also managed to permeate many aspects of our lived experiences. One of the offline contexts where memes can be

found is the political space of the protest. There is evidence that online memes are making their way to offline protest signs throughout the world and have been featured in a variety of different political contexts in a multitude of places.

Here we explored how memes give us an understanding of current relevant political discussions but also how they can be a relatable language of political engagement throughout diverse political issues: a substantial amount of the current global democratic discussion of politics is, in part, taking place in meme form. We have also explored how memes are not necessarily self-contained (particularly in the case of those that refer to ongoing political developments), leading to political memes being created within political memes, as is the case of the Pepper Spraying Cop and #Occupy. Despite being criticised as 'slacktivism', as we have seen political meme making can translate into 'old school' societal change; authors and activists have outlined that although the internet does not substitute earlier forms of activism and protest, it does nonetheless play its part in advancing the activist agenda and bring real political change. Once again, the solution does not seem to lie in separating online presence from offline life, but instead to join these platforms in a continual experience. That being said, memes are used in a multitude of non-political contexts which are also of dramatic societal impact – this is the case of the commercialisation of memes, which will be explored in the next chapter.

## Chapter 6: Commercial use of memes

As memes entered the mainstream their circulation expanded towards commodification: first came meme merchandise followed by more startling uses of internet culture by corporations. These include meme use to attract customer bases through either unrelated product advertisements, or campaigns that attempted to harness the structural logic of memes in order to create new ones that relate to their products. This chapter deals with this complex relationship that has been developing between internet memes and diverse corporate uses, as well as the problematic issues that surround corporate control of memes, and the perceptions regarding matters of corporate authorship of meme culture. While addressing the commercial use of memes, I refrain from separating these into rigidly contained case studies; the use of memes in advertising has an array of differences that at times can be subtle, with some examples being more complex than others. This complements the ethnographic approach of this thesis, reflecting the fluidity of memes and the spaces where they circulate.

Tackling the commercialised aspect of memes brings us to an inherent contradiction: memes are part of the internet's gift economy culture<sup>42</sup>, and reconciling the logic of gift economy with corporate commercialisation is almost paradoxical. However this is an oxymoron that has been able to persist in other notoriously difficult cases, such as the commercialisation of punk culture (see literature review). Popular meme spaces can often be sites where this battle plays out, featuring both original meme content for social and cultural purposes as well as a commercialised outlet that mixes memes with money making.

One such space is the Cheezburger network (IHC). As established in chapter 4, the IHC network is a very popular place for memes; however the evident element of commercialisation within the Cheezburger network cannot be ignored. Advertising features throughout their website, both in the form of sidebar ads and in the form of sponsored posts and videos<sup>43</sup>. The IHC network further monetizes on memes by selling products on their website that portray famous memes (to be expanded further in this chapter). This mercantile

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<sup>42</sup> See chapters 1 and 3

<sup>43</sup> Sponsored posts consist of content that appears to be user generated due to its placement but is instead promoting a corporation; a form of advertising that when clicked/interacted with translates into monetary compensation for the blogger that hosts the content. Despite being sponsored, these posts attempt to escape the recognisable format of advertising in order to reach audiences more directly, since people are more likely to glaze over direct forms of advertising in favour of what appears to be impartial content (Wood 2017).

aspect that permeates the ICHC network plunges memes within a commercial context. Consequently, this shift in framework has repercussions for memes and their circulation.

The issue of the commercialisation of memes expands beyond the Cheezburger Network, and although it is easy to flag this in a large online space that consists mostly of meme making, we must also address other spaces that engage in the same kinds of actions. Another meme rich example is Know Your Meme (KYM), which also features external advertisement on their website, bringing into question the issue of commercialisation and creation of capital through the long hours of free labour that result in content made by the website's users. This process falls under a much wider phenomena, one where 'consumer capitalism has taken every authentic human experience, transformed it into a commodity and then sold it back to us' (Heath & Potter 2005: 7). Here our (free) culture is being sold back to us, which despite not being a novelty (e.g. pop art, punk), still does not fail to feel like a strained and uncomfortable process. As one of my interviewees J.C. puts it regarding this process: 'a meme can then become marketed and becomes essentially a commodity' and goes on to compare the commercialisation of the hippie movement with what is happening to memes, denoting that this cultural process does not go unnoticed by meme makers.

However, the issue of commercial appropriation is not as black and white when it comes to user end perspective; the context in which commercial appropriation takes place is relevant to its public perception. Having outlined the tensions present within the mix of commercialisation and internet memes, we can move onto more particular examples of how this plays out. As briefly outlined, we can be split meme commercialisation into two broad groups: the selling of physical objects that use the likeness of a meme (i.e. meme merchandise) or the re-appropriation of an online meme for advertising purposes of a product or service unrelated to memes.

### **Meme Merchandise**

Memes can materialise commercially in a myriad of ways: a quick internet search can reveal a whole array of meme merchandise, from non-official Grumpy Cat Nipple Pasties to official Grumpy Cat Coffee Drinks, to knitted Nyan Cats. These are divided between official products that are professionally made in a large scale and tend to be sold on large online

platforms, such as ICHC; and unofficial products that are crafted by non-professional individuals which are sold on very small scale and can be found in websites like Etsy.

It is not uncommon for subcultures to adopt particular capitalist items as a form of cultural currency; many consist largely of this shared experience of buying into a fandom through the purchase of particular items (see Chapter 7). Examples have been seen specifically with remix ancestors of the meme: influential punk shop *Sex* sold clothing with Situationist International slogans written on them<sup>44</sup> (Leblanc 1999: 37). These clothes were bought by those wishing to partake in the punk subculture; as a way of self-expression as well as a form of cultural communication (Way 2014: 69), where fashions acts as a message codifier that unites those who speak the same language of signs (Kolker 2009: 23).

Whilst we must not be too hasty to declare empowerment through purchase of status symbols and the commodification of culture – a reminder embodied by Adorno’s comparison of Paris’ nineteenth century eruption of cultural commodification with the concept of Hell (Gunster 2004: 17) – we must also recognise that this kind of engagement is not merely frivolous consumption alone; there is a sense of community felt through the purchase of merchandise for what can be minimal profit (particularly handmade items made by other meme enthusiasts). Merchandise has been a way for fans to not only support franchises they like but also works as a way of engaging with the world of the story itself (e.g. the Harry Potter franchise). It is no coincidence that Harry Potter thrives in terms of merchandise as well as fan input and creative user generated content: these are two processes that help bring the Harry Potter world to life. Although intangible media stories may be central in our forms of storytelling and cultural communication, we still show an undisputed desire to anchor these evanescent universes onto our very own palpable realities. Internet memes, much like Harry Potter’s world of magic, are imagined signifiers that float around in a world we cannot touch, and merchandise is one of the trajectories that allows for such tangibility, turning the connective pieces of culture that drift through internet waves into physical reincarnations.

This is visible in the case of D.R., a moderator for a Reddit Dogecoin group, who owns a wide range of Doge meme clothing. In the words of D.R. himself: ‘in the real world, I’ve all but transformed myself into a walking, talking Dogecoin advert’, which is partially done through his reliance on merchandise in order to pass this message across to others as many

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<sup>44</sup> e.g. ‘Be reasonable: Demand the Impossible’

ways as possible, including strangers within his vicinity. Here it becomes difficult to draw a hard line between D.R.'s engagement with capitalist powers and his engagement with a culture that has significance to him, as he makes use of the first in order to advance the second. Picking up again on the similarities between the use and meaning of merchandise in Harry Potter and the equivalent process in memes, I too think that 'When narrative texts and images become such a pervasive part of the cultural environment, they also become part of the identity of the people who read and consume the images and narratives' (Heilman 2009: 2). Heilman's conclusion on the relationship between Harry Potter's intangible story and the process of building our identity can be applicable to those who buy meme merchandise too: these are not entirely separate processes. Perhaps this enmeshment of memes with commercial powers is met with less resistance due to the perception that beyond profit making goals there are other processes at play – namely fandom at practice. This particularity regarding meme merchandise has been noted by Shifman who states that 'this move from cyberspace to physical artifacts in the "real world" represents Internet users' urge to deepen their shared subversive experience' (2014: 148).

However, this relationship between commodification and meaningful cultural investment will always have its conflicts. The translation of memes into merchandise also brings forth other dichotomised issues: similar to the contradictory relationship between punk culture and its commercialisation, the tussle between cultural exploration and commercial exploitation become apparent with the introduction of meme merchandise. According to Thompson 'no punk product is so shocking that it shuts down the possibility of its own commodification' (2004: 102); the same can be said of internet memes, none is too underground to escape the clutches of commodification. This may leave an unsavoury taste for those who feel this kind of commercial capitalisation corrodes, cheapens or dilutes the once upheld meaning of these cultural pieces. Such dissonance was evident when Gucci used memes to promote their new line of watches: there is something discordant when a high-end multi-million dollar company uses memes created by and aimed at the enthusiasts of internet culture, particularly because these are not crowds that overlap seamlessly (Syfret 2017). This dissonance did not go unnoticed by the internet; reactions did vary: some found it entertaining whilst others felt that Gucci was exploiting their 'sacred memes' (Syfret 2017). However the overall consensus seems to be summed up by Mashable's widely shared piece: 'Gucci posted a load of weird memes and the internet is cringing hard' (Thompson 2017).

Nevertheless there seems to be, gauging from my interviews and online comments spaces that sell meme merchandise, an overall acceptance of this commercialised form of memes: these objects are, among other capitalist goals, representations of the fandom of memes, a physical embodiment of an esteemed internet culture.

### **Memes? In *my* advertising? It's more likely than you think**

The second type of meme materialisation in the commercial atmosphere is through the use of memes in advertising for unrelated products; here memes are employed in order to engage their target audience to buy something else. Offline examples show a different scope when it comes to online memes and how far advertisers can push these references; whilst offline use of online memes in advertising seems to feature more easily recognisable memes<sup>45</sup>, the online use of memes for advertisement seems to delve into slightly more obscure references<sup>46</sup>; however some memes were able to cross both boundaries for advertising purposes<sup>47</sup>.

Memes' place in everyday culture has attracted the interest of advertising agencies. These ads place particular emphasis on appearing to be in tune with cool new trends, making use of the cultural currency that memes have been able to accumulate throughout their global circulation. Thus the underlying fear of commercial grip on the anti-commercial spirit of internet memes is not without its reasons, after all 'being able to create or harness a meme allows an advertiser to ride participatory culture' (Green & Jenkins 2011: 115). The very easiness and openness of internet memes are what, in this instance, makes them vulnerable to being appropriated by the free market, which is a departure from their original intention and which is consequently not necessarily accepted by the large group of meme makers.

To facilitate matters for corporative use of internet memes, the latter often play fast and loose with authorship, meaning companies cannibalise on these for free, giving nothing in return to meme culture. Although these dynamics rely on a gift economy, there is still a form of interchange that goes on within this relationship: when people share memes they are advocating for and contributing towards internet culture, engaging with the cultural ethos

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<sup>45</sup> e.g. Virgin's ad featuring Success Kid, DueDil's publication of a Doge ad in The Guardian

<sup>46</sup> e.g. Smartwater's use of Keenan Cahill's lip-synch and dancing babies meme

<sup>47</sup> e.g. Microsoft's Windows Live Photo Gallery advert starring a Double Rainbow and a recreation of its awe stricken reaction by the original Double Rainbow Guy himself

instead of attempting to profit from it. Thus corporate use of memes is problematic, as it is threatening to the entire culture in itself: we may see a shift towards authorship due to this phenomenon, which would inevitably change the way memes are made and shared. Contrary to what my initial research led to believe, and possibly due to commercial appropriation of memes by companies, the issue of authorship is not so trivial. In chapters 3-4 I note memes seldom have an identifiable author and that meme authors would almost never attach authorship to their memes<sup>48</sup>. J.C. stated the issue of authorship in memes depends on contexts, that he was happy to forego authorship in the name of comedy but wasn't so keen on going unrecognised if one of his memes were to be claimed by another party.

Here I return to the example of the Success Kid meme<sup>49</sup>. Being so popular, it has been employed by companies in order to sell their products: from local fresh food billboards in Glasgow to corporate giants like Virgin Media. Concern regarding the appropriate handling of memes and authorship was raised in N.M.'s interview. Talking about a Success Kid billboard ad for fresh fruit in Glasgow he'd stumbled upon, he added that he was happy to recognise a piece of internet culture he enjoys in the streets he navigates in daily life. Simultaneously, he felt that this corporate appropriation of something he called 'our memes' was destructive and negative. For N.M. the pre-commercialisation of internet culture is something that holds tremendous meaning. In his own words:

'Corporate entities have perverted the internet for their own ends. When I started using the internet there were only 250 domain names registered, I come from the pre-commercialisation of the internet, I look back at those days very fondly'.

This sentiment was echoed by J.C., whom equated the death of a meme with its mainstream use by corporate media, specifically the use of Courage Wolf by Cartoon Network subsidiary Adult Swim, adding that 'when something is adopted by mainstream culture, it's no longer yours, it doesn't belong to the internet [anymore]'. Through these reactions encountered in the interviews I could establish that, contrary to meme merchandise, meme adverts were a more complex issue that stepped on meaningful territory.

When it comes to using memes in ads, it is important to strike the correct balance: too much mutation might be criticised as not understanding it, too little might be seen as

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<sup>48</sup> Although the curatorial work of KYM might be an indicator of how this is not as straightforward as it seems

<sup>49</sup> See chapter 3

derivative. As with memes used in other contexts, there is a disregard for memes that are unoriginal and repetitive; some mutation must happen for it to continue to be funny. This criticism is echoed by David Waterhouse, Head of Unruly Media<sup>50</sup>, who has cautioned brands on the misuse of online memes for advertising purposes. Waterhouse points out lack of development of recognisable memes in an innovative manner as one of the pitfalls to avoid, as this lends a sense of artificiality (Waterhouse 2012); he goes on to use the example of Microsoft's Windows Live Photo Gallery ad that featured 'Double Rainbow' guy, which was condemned by many online users that interpreted the ad as being 'overly corporate, opportunistic and not in the spirit of the original video'. This criticism is corroborated by the YouTube comments section of the original post of the ad at the time of writing: of the 1659 comments, 237 are critical of the ad in some way. Common critiques explicitly attacked the re-appropriation of the meme by Microsoft, stating that the meme was now officially dead and no longer funny; this anger at times turning towards Double Rainbow Guy himself, with accusations of him 'selling out'. Waterhouse's critique of 'appearing inauthentic' was also present, with many viewers lamenting the evident lack of authentic emotion and surprise which made the original video so compelling. It might not seem like a very large number when considering the total number of comments, but we must bear in mind that many comments were not explicitly positive or negative, many of them were debating the quality of the product rather than addressing the ad itself; and yet the negative comments still account for a seventh of all comments on this post. However, it is clear many viewers enjoyed this commercial re-appropriation and saw it as an example of good marketing on behalf of Microsoft and praising the company for 'paying attention to the internet'.

Appropriation of memes for advertising can never have an 'authentic' quality, as the point is ultimately to sell a brand or product, not to further internet culture. However, as Waterhouse mentioned, this might make memes 'appear inauthentic', which can be interpreted as a question of perception, with the issue being the failure to *appear* authentic, as opposed to their current inauthentic *appearance*. Waterhouse (2012) states the ultimate achievement is for campaigners to create a completely new meme themselves, which will then be circulated and replicated by consumers. The Dos Equis beer campaign achieved this with 'The Most Interesting Man in the World' character. In their ads this character said 'I don't always drink beer, but when I do I prefer Dos Equis'. The formula of the phrase ('I don't

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<sup>50</sup> Which claims to be the 'leading global platform for social video advertising'

always X, but when I do Y') was picked up by the internet, and paired with an image of The Most Interesting Man in the World as portrayed by Dos Equis, thus birthing 'The Most Interesting Man in the World/Dos Equis' meme. The current use of the meme is far removed from its original association, as it is used to describe a variety of situations. It is arguably one of the most recognisable online memes and one of the few to enjoy a positive response despite its commercial origin. Thus, in an interesting reversal of roles, it is also possible to say that online culture also appropriates from commercial spheres in order to use its raw material for online meme creation. Here we note that the shift in who has the power to appropriate drives the popularity of memes that are connected to corporative use. There is also reason to believe that, as predicted by Waterhouse, the popularity of the meme paid off in terms of commercial results (e.g. brand awareness), but whether we can establish that this success was due to the meme that spawned (i.e. any type of causality) is unlikely.

### **Offline Commercialisation**

In the following section I will analyse different approaches to memes' re-appropriation for commercial purposes within offline contexts. The first example will comprise of the Virgin Media use of Success Kid. The second example will address Keyboard Cat's use in a cinema ad for EE. The third example analyses an entirely different approach, where a meme is created by the candy conglomerate Maynards for advertising, which draws on pre-existing memes. Here we can begin to see a different perspective regarding memes that are used in order to advertise for themselves and memes that are used in order to advertise for something else.

### **Virgin media ad**

One of the most direct uses of online memes in offline advertising is the Success Kid ad by Virgin Media, which featured in physical billboards and leaflets in the UK. The Success Kid meme<sup>51</sup> consists of a meme that aims to portray something that has been successful; it is often used to illustrate situations when an action or occurrence has a positive outcome. These can range from mundane little victories to once in a lifetime triumphs:<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Also known as the 'I Hate Sandcastles' meme

<sup>52</sup> Whilst the original version of the meme features a toddler with a visible beach scenario behind him, the meme evolved into a macro meme that resembled the Advice Animals style, i.e. with a colour wheel background (in this case in blue and purple), and accompanying top and bottom captions in Impact font



Contrary to memes like LOLcats, Advice Animals and Macro memes do not have a language of their own. However, they do have a syntactically specific logic that is followed: the first sentence is usually composed of contextual information, setting up a scenario where we might be 'against the odds'; the second sentence is usually where the 'success' lies, working as a punch line where the explanation of the successful context takes place. The successful outcomes described are many times unexpected, adding to the sense of accomplishment. Other rules include using first person short sentences, with the 'I' usually absent. There is a possibility that the erasure of the 'I' is done in order to make the message more relatable to the reader; when the reader reads the meme to themselves, it sounds like their own passing thought. This meme evolved around a social ethos that gives the illusion of being a private thought that nevertheless is relatable to many.

Turning to the Virgin ad, there are a lot of processes occurring simultaneously. Despite using Success Kid, Virgin Media edited the original image in order to make it more agreeable with its brand's iconography. Whilst the original Success Kid wears a green and white shirt, the one featured in the advertisement dons a red and white shirt due to the brand's use of white and red for their logo colours. By doing so Success Kid becomes visually closer to the Virgin Media brand, creating a connotative proximity between both and strengthening the association between meme and brand. The image of Success Kid has been flipped in the Virgin Media advert in order to flow more seamlessly with the word placement on the billboards. The sand-covered hand (which relates to the less known title for this meme: 'I Hate Sandcastles') is replaced by a clean hand. This is likely due to the confusion sand would cause in this context: without the background of the beach or without a certain degree of knowledge about this meme, the sand no longer makes sense and distracts from Virgin Media's own message.



The ad's text does not use the meme's original font, the original placement is not respected either as the text lies to the side of the image. In terms of syntax and grammar, the rules of the original meme are also not followed: the child pictured appears to be called 'Tim', anchoring the message to a specific character. This is an attempt to provide backstory to the message; a common trait in advertising, which must establish a believable fictionalised background in a very short amount of time or with a reduced amount of cues available (Osborne 2013: 5). The phrasing is also different, as the construction of the sentences is much more fluid and complete in the advertisement than it is in the meme: the second part of the sentence could be said to follow the meme's grammatical and syntactical structure, yet the first part does not. The same underlying message would have been correctly translated to the Success Kid meme as 'Parents got Virgin/HD channels for free'. This is significantly shorter than the message featured in the advertisement, and provides considerably less context as the elaboration of backstories is not necessary in memes, where much is understood through inference or allusions that are mostly not explicitly explained. These textual changes are done by Virgin Media in order to fit the advertising purpose more efficiently; audiences that are not familiar with the meme could find the advertisement lacking proper use of syntax and grammar otherwise, which could result in alienation. Here we find one of the first roadblocks when it comes to using memes for advertising purposes, as they both follow opposite rules in terms of storytelling: whilst advertising must be as inclusive and clear as possible, memes obey their own logic of inclusion and exclusion whilst at times purposefully lacking direct clarity.

Differences between the context of this offline ad and the communal online context of Success Kid must be considered. When the online meme is embodied in the offline world, there is a shift in both framework and audience; with this change of context there cannot be an expectation of knowledge regarding online culture to the extent that there is in the online sphere. In the offline reality of the world a very large number of people might not be familiar

with memes. Additionally, advertisement rooted in a physical place will reach an entirely different audience than advertisements featuring in online spaces. Whilst the former is subject to be exposed to a variety of people that belong to the most varied demographics (as the constant factor is the place), the latter is able to be tailored to a more specific audience, as it is able to be featured in spaces where the majority of viewers will be the intended demographics. Due to these properties, this advert in particular might be rendered less effective when removed from its online dwelling. On the other hand, the advert becomes arguably more visible in its offline circulation, as it is not lost in the overloading sea of online information. Additionally, it may gain some traction online through the process of re-digitisation, although whether this re-digitisation happens within a positive light for the ad is something to be considered.

The issue of audience inclusion is taken into consideration by Virgin Media, who must compromise the underlying logic and visuals of the original Success Kid meme in order to serve their corporate needs of reaching wider audiences. On the other hand, the group that Virgin Media is originally attempting to reach<sup>53</sup> might reject this re-appropriation. M.P. referenced this use of Success Kid by Virgin Media, referring to the process of a 'company to leech off of an existing meme [as] both lazy and desperate'. M.P. was not entirely against corporate use of internet memes in advertisements; his biggest gripe however was the lack of effort evident in these examples, where pieces of cultural importance were being copied badly. The threat of distortion that this process enacts is the biggest issue that meme culture has with the appropriation of memes by corporations, rather than simply the mix of memes and commercialism.

When the Success Kid advertisements came out, a large number of people contacted Success Kid's mother Laney Griner to inform her of the use of the picture by Virgin Media, fearing Ms. Griner was unaware of this re-appropriation. According to KYM, Ms. Griner had been paid for the picture to be used by Virgin Media. A similar reaction was felt by one of my interviewees, N.M., who raised the same concern upon seeing the use of online culture in a commercial context (in this case the use of Success Kid on a billboard in Glasgow to promote produce). He alluded to the issues of the disregard of authorship that surrounded this use of the meme: due to the low quality of the image and the fact that it was being used by a small

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<sup>53</sup> i.e. those who are familiar with internet culture, and presumably to whom media products are of interest

company, it seemed likely that the image had been lifted from the internet instead of being the result of negotiations between the owners of the image and the company using it. As N.M. puts it: 'It doesn't work like that; there's a person behind that meme'; reminding us once again of the very real people that exist beyond the memes that picture them<sup>54</sup>.

N.M.'s concern raises questions not only of authorship but also of intellectual property and ownership, which are contentious issues that permeate current debates about online media and which spill into internet memes. Whilst some scholars argue that 'intellectual property offers no gain, only loss to peer production' (Vaidhyanathan 2012: 28) meme makers also take into account the degradation that might occur from this free usage by those who just want to capitalise on internet culture. N.M.'s comment also points towards a more literal implication: that memes often portray people and that having your image widely circulating the globe with an inferred meaning attached to it can have deep and unforeseen consequences. It appears the public are quite protective of the meme and its misuse, extending their policing eyes beyond memes' structural rules and casting them on the aspect of circulation and its consequences.

### **Keyboard Cat for EE**

Keyboard Cat is a classic internet meme; it is a dated video of an orange cat dressed in a blue gown that is being physically 'manipulated' to appear to be playing a keyboard. Countless remixed versions have been made<sup>55</sup>, however, remakes of the meme itself were not the sole transformative approaches. The original video was posted online in 2007, but according to Know Your Meme it only became mimetic in 2009. The sudden 'discovery' of the video was related to the context in which it was used: YouTube blogger Brad O'Farrell created a remix of the video. O'Farrell's version spliced the Keyboard Cat video into another video of someone falling down an escalator; the insertion of Keyboard Cat into created a comical juxtaposed commentary, where it appeared that Keyboard Cat was effectively 'playing off' the man who had fallen down the escalator<sup>56</sup>. It became common for the meme to be used in this context in online interactions. Users would post the original video with the accompanying text 'Play him off, keyboard cat', which is the digital equivalent of asking someone to leave the

<sup>54</sup> See Ms. Crowter's case in chapter 4, who paid a heavy price for being the unwilling face of a meme

<sup>55</sup> These include remakes from celebrities such as Kevin Spacey and the band Green Day

<sup>56</sup> Not unlike the short piano songs played when vaudeville performers were being subtly cued to leave the stage due to a poor performance (Cohen & Kenny 2016: 99).

online stage. The humour of the video is elevated when used as a reaction to something bad or embarrassing. To augment this effect, other users began mimicking O'Farrell; editing videos they thought merited such a reaction by adding keyboard cat's video at the end. Demand for this type of use was so high that a website began catering to those who wished to partake in the phenomenon, allowing fans of the meme to create quick automated versions of their own spliced videos (Bobsworth Industries 2017).

Turning to the use of Keyboard Cat by EE, the advert consists of a black and white video and features a soldier in a war-like bunker, writing a postcard at candlelight whilst sad, string section music plays. It fades out, fading back in again to a woman during what is implied to be the 1940s, who reads the same postcard with tears in her eyes. She is addressing someone off camera named 'Jack', as she questions the uncertain future of her war-trapped love interest, asking 'play something Jack (...) to ease the pain'. At this point, the sad string section music stops and the camera cuts to a cat similar to Fatso, dressed in a tuxedo, playing the Keyboard Cat song on his keyboard, which is aptly placed on top of a grand piano that would not be out of place in such surroundings. Subsequently, the starlet smiles, and the nightclub becomes alive with people dancing to Keyboard Cat's song, visibly satisfied. The ad then cuts to its intended message of advertising for EE's product, and shows the original Keyboard Cat video being played on a mobile phone.

This ad plays in cinemas before films and has not extended to other media outlets. Thus it is anchored to the physical spaces of cinema theatres; whilst this translates into multiple spaces, there is still some geographical stagnation. In terms of re-digitisation, the origin comes from the company itself as they feature the ad on their official YouTube account; to date there are no uploads (i.e. re-digitisations) of the video by unique YouTube users, only by sponsored YouTube channel UKTV adverts.

This ad is composed of the base of many good memes: the use of intertextuality, which uses layered meaning to give it a more complex nature. The first kind of intertextuality is the reference to online culture (specifically Keyboard Cat) in an unrelated offline commercial space. These two territories are woven together resulting in a message that enmeshes online culture (i.e. free memes that we can engage with anywhere on our personal devices) with old media's form of consumption (i.e. corporate ownership of the infrastructure, paid for and geographically targeted). This ad also reflects a reversal of the

intertextual appropriation done by online memes. It is not uncommon for memes to borrow and remix references or visuals from non-online sources, these can range from films stills<sup>57</sup> to current affairs that spawn new memes faster than we can keep track of<sup>58</sup>. Keyboard Cat is the original source of material for the ad, which is then mined and refined for meaning.

There is a nod to older texts as well, as certain cinematic and stylistic conventions are used to convey the historical time the ad refers to. The use of black and white film echoes early cinema, the stylistic choices of costume and make-up make the portrayed era immediately recognisable: it is set in the 1940s. The love story between a soldier at war and a singing starlet that mourns for him alludes that this love story occurs during WWII via these familiar tropes<sup>59</sup>. There is another intertextual media reference in the ad; although not directly addressed (perhaps because it would make the intertextual reference too specific, which could then be lost on the audience at hand) there is also a nod towards the film 'Casablanca' and its iconic piano scene. As the Starlet begs 'Jack' to 'play something', it is impossible not to mirror this to the iconic scene in 'Casablanca' when Ilsa asks Sam to 'play it', referring to the song that evokes her love affair with Rick. Furthermore, 'Casablanca' takes place in the 1940s and it too deals with a troubled love affair during WWII.

Taking these aspects into consideration, it is possible to understand how the ad works in relation to the meme. EE attempts to engage with Keyboard Cat through the two abovementioned ways: by remaking their own version and by remixing it into a different context. When the video cuts to the cat playing it features a different cat wearing a tuxedo in lieu of the recognisable light blue shirt. This change of clothing is not unlike the one that occurs in Virgin Media's Success Kid's ad, yet here it is not done in order to reinforce branding consistency through colour but it is instead done to fit with the context in which the ad takes place (i.e. a 1940s music club). The setting is also significantly different from the original, as it is made to fit the 1940s club aesthetic to match the context of the story. Thus, a remake of the original is what is shown, whilst alluding to the original video nonetheless. Simultaneously, the ad is also engaging in the popularised act of splicing Keyboard Cat into other non-related videos with different contexts. Although the splicing is not as radical in the remixes found with the original video, the contextual shift provided by the act of splicing is

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<sup>57</sup> Such as the famous still of Gene Wilder in the 1971 version of 'Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory', which became the 'Condescending Wonka' meme

<sup>58</sup> See chapter 5

<sup>59</sup> Note: here we can witness quite clearly the use of the aforementioned backstory tool used in advertising

still present, as the scene where the cat starts mimicking Keyboard Cat is meant as a response to what the starlet says, working as a commentary on the prior scene.

Despite some divergence there is a vague attempt at demonstrating consistency and understanding of the workings of the original meme. It also becomes evident that whilst EE's ad makes for entertaining advertising, it fails to use Keyboard Cat in its intended manner. Whilst the cat replicating Fatso is playing as a form of response to the video up to that part, it is responding to a tragic love story; this is hardly considered equal to the typical fails that Keyboard Cat is usually used as response to, a discordant response furthered by the reaction of the starlet and the patrons at the club, who smile and dance at the song. Also, the starlet requests Keyboard Cat to play piano for her to which he obliges, making this request difficult to be seen on the same level as the undesired and unrequested reaction Keyboard Cat represents. One does not request to be 'played off' by Keyboard Cat any more than vaudeville acts requested to be thrown off stage. A segment of the original Keyboard Cat video is shown at the end, but as with the Virgin Media ad, this is likely done in order to reinforce their message; in this case, it ties up the video segment we saw with the reassurance that you can easily watch online memes on your phone.

YouTube user 'B8DRU' made a similar video, where s/he references the *Casablanca* piano scene explicitly by editing it in order to cut from Ilse's request for Sam to 'play it again' to a black and white rendition of the original Keyboard cat playing it. B8DRU uploaded this video in September 2009, whilst the EE ad was released in June 2014. Although there is no way to confirm whether EE got the idea from this video or not, it becomes evident that the circulation of memes and their ideas is fluid. As memes are commonly displayed in public online spaces it becomes difficult to ascertain to what extent corporations are not only capitalising but also directly cannibalising online cultural remix. As seen with the Virgin Media ad, it is this potential for direct copy of ideas that is greeted with more resistance than the actual use of memes by corporate media; yet corporations seem to remain oblivious to these mistakes. EE's use of Keyboard Cat shows again that corporations need to invest more time becoming truly familiar with these memes and their contexts in order to avoid considerable resistance from the audience as well as accusations of inane profiteering.

## Maynards Sour Granny Smith

Having seen the similarities and differences of the corporate use of memes in print and video, we turn to our last example which encapsulates an entirely different approach to the use of memes by corporations. Despite having placed all other instances of meme commercialisation into two broad examples, the following example will challenge the aforementioned clear cut arguments. Whilst researching the use of online memes in offline spaces, I came across a particular kind of meme use unlike any example featured here. In 2012, the Canadian franchise of the Maynards sweets company launched a new winegum flavour: sour Granny Smith apple. The candy was named 'Granny Smith' and its packaging featured an elderly lady knitting whilst sitting on a couch<sup>60</sup>. Advertisements featured the Granny Smith character pulling a sour face as a reference to the sour taste of the candy in question:



Maynards Canada employed advertisement agency 'The Hive' to take over advertising duties for the new Granny Smith flavour, and part of their campaign consisted of creating a meme for this product. After creating the Granny Smith meme, The Hive plastered posters on street walls in areas of Toronto featuring Granny Smith's 'sour' face, with a knitted colour wheel background in different shades of green, which is also accompanied by top and bottom captions in Impact font. The captions all follow an underlying logic that is reinforced by the image of Granny's sour face: they initially describe normal or even nice attitudes (e.g. 'Walks by roses'), followed by the second caption which denotes a 'sour' attitude (e.g. 'Plugs nose').

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<sup>60</sup> This is a play on the words 'Granny Smith', who is supposed to represent the sour flavour by embodying the elderly woman on the packet



Essential for its understanding are also the factors of repetition and variation: as these are seen outside of an internet context, it becomes vital that a quick understanding of the meme is achieved without resorting to an online platform; the meme should be readable and understandable in a fully offline context. In order to achieve this, The Hive has multiple variations of this meme plastered in clusters throughout the city; this aids a quick understanding of the desired context through the simple act of repetition. By placing these posters together with some repeated elements – the visuals and the underlying ‘sour’ message – the inference becomes visible from poster to poster. At the same time, by altering each caption in every poster there is variation, which allows the viewer to understand what the intended message is by recognizing the same traits being carried into different posters. This logic of repetition and variation is also used in memes found online, which aids to their understanding and their invitation to engagement. The process shown here embodies the maxim about memes being something you do: the more you engage with them, the more you understand their context and how they can be used. However, it is arguable that repetition and variation are more important in an offline context, especially if the aim is for the meme to be instantly understood due to the lack of a supporting search engine or history to provide context.

Here a company re-appropriates memes in a different form for their commercial message; they created a meme themselves and released it into the existing meme pool. Yet despite being invented by The Hive, the Granny Smith meme owes its existence to the well-established Advice Animals memes. The colour wheel background in the Granny Smith meme is very recognisable and alludes to the Advice Animals memes which use other variations of the same background. The same is true for the use of Impact font and arrangement of the

captions, which is used in most captioned memes. This is not coincidental, as it is this similarity that makes the Granny Smith meme appear seamlessly among so many other Advice Animal memes that came before it. Thus, although The Hive created a new meme, it is being made within the context of existing Advice Animal memes. The Hive hopes viewers and consumers alike recognize this similarity in order to engage with the Granny Smith meme (and subsequently purchase the product). Essentially, although Sour Granny Smith is an original meme that has not been lifted from online culture, it is profiting off the similarity of familiar Advice Animals memes that existed before it.

As part of their campaign, Maynards dedicated a section on their webpage to Granny Smith, recognizing their intention of making her into a meme. They encouraged users to engage with the Granny Smith meme by allowing them to create their own captions to her image in a hopeful effort to spread it, and thus advertise for it through free user-generated content. This feature is no longer available and although some users might have engaged with the Granny Smith meme generator, I have found no evidence in my online search of any user/consumer-generated Sour Granny Smith memes. This is possibly because users would have needed to upload these somewhere beyond the Maynards website in order for them to be visible online, an unlikely action for a meme with an incredibly small impact. It is also unsurprising to see a total discontinuation of this meme, as the marketing stunt in question was released in 2012 and has subsequently lost traction. Despite some exceptions, memes usually have a very short life span and thus suit this type of marketing strategy where a company wants to create hype around the launch of a new product.

There is reason to believe that the Sour Granny Smith meme was not popular at all, despite being created by a company that has much greater financial power than most individual meme makers. Looking through meme-centric spaces, we can observe that the meme had little to no impact online. Searching ICHC, we can find 1313 posts labelled 'Granny Smith' and 6 posts labelled 'Maynards', out of all of these not a single one relates to or mentions the Granny Smith meme created for Maynards. The lack of a Know Your Meme entry also points towards the lack of acknowledgement of this meme among users. In 9gag there are 8 posts that come up when searching 'Granny Apple' and 4 when searching 'Maynards'; from the first set one relates to the taste of the product, but makes no mention of the Granny Smith meme, all others are unrelated. In the second set, only one post features

the packet of the Granny Smith winegums, zooming in on the elderly lady's expression, but also fails to reference the meme. Additionally, none of these posts had comments.

Reddit demonstrates a larger amount of awareness with three Granny Smith memes coming up in my search (found under 'Granny Smith' and 'Maynards Granny'). All three are re-digitisations of the meme, embodied by a picture of the meme posters in a physical location. Two of them evoke no comments; the remaining post however arouses reactions. The image itself was posted to /r/cringe, which already gives us some context of the user perception towards this meme. DeliriousZeus posted the image with the title 'Maynard's Candy tries to start a meme with poorly concocted image macros.' (DeliriousZeus, 2013). The post received 51 comments, which featured a mix of emotions split almost in half: 12 comments were somewhat positive; whilst 10 were considered negative (all remaining comments were neutral or unrelated). However, the negative responses were very vocal, whilst the majority of the positive responses were shorter and less expressive; we should take into account not only what is being said but also how these opinions are being vocalised, as 'the perception that one's social group holds a clear opinion can silence communication that seems to counter that majority opinion, even if the perception is incorrect' (David, Cappella & Fishbein 2006: 125). This denotes a perceived pressure in certain online spaces to react a certain way, which was flagged up by the user Yoshiary that clearly expressed approval of the meme:

'I actually love this. They were posted all over Toronto and they're refreshing compared to the regular stuff that's up. EDIT: Its cool to be downvoted for having a different opinion and contributing to the conversation.'

Despite the incredibly mixed reactions, there is an invisible group pressure that condemns those who speak out in support of commercial use of memes. Although beyond this thesis, we may borrow psychological studies in order to better understand this phenomenon; particularly Asch's experiments on social conformity within groups due to peer pressure (see Asch 1951). Recent replications of Asch's experiments in online environments have produced mixed results, however due to our unexpected socio-emotional investment and personification online (i.e. our use of real identities to a degree) 'conformity may actually be more prevalent in online groups rather than offline groups' (Forsyth 2010: 189). A substantial

amount of the comments were also critical of memes in general, which might play a part in how memes are perceived anywhere, not just in an advertising context.

Although the ‘Granny Smith’ meme was created in order to fit with the new Granny Smith apple flavour being released, the choice of name might have hindered the establishment of the meme as it shares the name with an already existing My Little Pony Character<sup>61</sup>. This unfortunate choice of name points towards some underlying lack of organic understanding of meme culture: due to the extensive knowledge of internet enthusiasts that make memes, it is highly unlikely they would name a new meme after an existing one. This blunder betrays the lack of authenticity of the meme, exposing to a degree the contrived relationship between the uses of memes by corporate powers.

Because so many reactions to the Granny Smith meme have been deleted by the page hosts, it is valuable to consider why this has been the case, and what this means for the meme as an overall experiment. Time has proven it was not a successful meme, it practically did not propagate, and there is no evidence of engagement and remix. When we take the central aspects of what makes a meme and apply it to Maynard’s Granny Smith meme, we can see that it does not classify as a success. In short, despite the financial backing and resources at Maynard’s disposal, their meme lacked organic quality and did not flourish.

In conclusion, the Granny Smith meme created by Maynards is different from the other cases of re-appropriation of memes by corporations since here Maynards created a meme and attempted to popularize it instead of using an existing meme for their message. Despite their Granny Smith meme owing a lot of its design and underlying concept to the already existing Advice Animals format of memes<sup>62</sup>, the Sour Granny Apple meme did not exist previously and thus this constitutes a different approach from direct appropriation for commercial purposes. Here, Maynards attempts to engage in the creation of meaning instead of re-circulating existing meaning; arguably, at the same, Maynards is redefining meaning making in memes by contributing with their own bit of meaning to the existing cultural pool of the internet: their meme might have failed to prosper, but corporate powers are

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<sup>61</sup> This is of relevance because My Little Pony has gained a phenomenal increase in online popularity in recent years due to its surprising adoption by adult males called ‘bronies’; the fandom among bronies is very much played out in online spaces and has become a part of online culture in its own right, spawning its very own lengthy Know Your Meme entry. Coincidentally, one of the My Little Pony characters is called Granny Smith, which, in turn, is what primarily comes up within these meme related contexts when the term is searched.

<sup>62</sup> With at least one of the public comments encountered being an accusation of plagiarism from the ‘Scumbag Steve’ meme

nevertheless stretching into the workings and the making of internet culture. This is evidence of the permissiveness of meme making: anyone can be a part of it, even corporations. At the same time this is problematic as it questions the role of memes as products of meaning making for users around the world, since this meaning might be fabricated by corporations in order to advertise products instead of a commentary on or a reflection of our current zeitgeist. However the lack of popularity of the Sour Granny Apple meme does point towards an attempt to save the ethos of online memes as tools used as a form of communication among end users; no matter how Maynards attempts to jump on this wagon of meaning making activity, users attempt to recapture these meaning making activity for themselves, denying Maynards the privilege to do so successfully.

This chapter has shown how the contentious relationship between corporate interests and cultural groups arises when online memes are used for commercial purposes. However it is not that straightforward, as the commercialisation of online culture has also been met with what can be considered acceptance, a mixture of feelings also visible in some of the interviews. The ambivalence towards commercial appropriation of memes may also be seen regarding meme merchandise: although there may be some negative views of the commercial use of memes, when this phenomenon became embodied in merchandise that represented memes directly that negativity does not seem to be felt as intensely; there is a different perception of these commercial applications of memes. In the first instance people are buying the objects because they literally represent the memes they are so fond of, the meme *is* the endgame in this scenario; whilst the second instance is a case of memes being the means to an end. This shift in motivations behind the use of memes has considerable impact on audiences, since it transpires that it is not so much the act of using of memes by corporations that colours the opinion of meme fans, but it is the way this is done and for what purpose that seems to bear weight on the levels of acceptance. This too was raised in the interviews, as this appropriation is relevant not only in terms of circulation but also in terms of impact when it comes to meaning making. As a piece of digital media circulates through different spheres, people's relationship towards it will also alter accordingly. The commodification of memes may not be intrinsic (or even new, when we consider historical cycles of remix cultures and commerce), yet it is unavoidable within our capitalist context. The tension between rejection and acceptance of corporate meme use depends on context and on whether the meme is being used to sell an unrelated product or just to sell itself.

In this chapter I also noted how commercial appropriation of memes brings forth issues of authorship, and how these are also intimately related to the perception of audiences regarding corporate meme use. From the accusations of Maynards' Granny Smith meme being just another version of the already existing Scumbag Steve meme to the way my interviewees reacted to the remastering of an existing meme by Virgin Media, these alterations reverberated with meme audiences, who expressed concern about issues of authorship as well as issues of meme integrity. Taking these changes into consideration, the use of the Success Kid meme in the Virgin Media ad becomes a case of manipulated re-appropriation, as the meme is lifted from an online social context and placed in an offline commercial context, whilst still remaining entirely recognisable. However, by the time the meme is featured on billboards it has undergone noticeable changes: contextual and visual changes, which are the result a desire to associate the meme with the brand.

Personal views on commercial appropriation on a broader scale (i.e. beyond the realm of memes) also come into play, shaping outcomes and discernment: some people were excited to see brands make use of a language that is familiar to their everyday experience; whilst some brands (i.e. Gucci meme ads) are ridiculed for the exact same reason. Whilst there is no clear cut outlook when it comes to the reactions towards commercial appropriation of memes, it is apparent that internet users uphold memes as part of their culture, prompting this variety of reactions. Regardless of whether people are for or against the corporative use of memes, this is indicative of yet another cultural currency that is being re-appropriated by commercial entities as disposable marketing exploits, raising its own sets of issues that are too large to be explored here. However there are meme uses that lay beyond both commercial and overtly political spheres; these remaining uses fall largely under (sub)cultural uses, which will be addressed in the following chapter.

## Chapter 7: (Sub)cultural Uses

After covering personal communication, politics and commerce it became apparent that there were multiple other meme uses that did not fit under such umbrella. However they remained substantial instances of meme use that merited analysis; just as our experiences cannot be neatly partitioned into three categories, something as elastic as memes cannot be contained so adroitly. The assortment of remaining meme uses falls under 'culture': similar interactions noted in chapters 5 and 6 but on a larger, more sociologically grouped scale. Moving past immediate personal relationships, here I look at wider ways of interaction with society through memes in social offline spaces and artistic contexts. I also illustrate these meme processes in practical terms through their role in the Lolita fashion subculture.

As noted throughout previous chapters, online memes gain particular meanings and accrue different uses when they circulate in the offline sphere. When a piece of online culture that encourages digital transmission and circulation is used in the physical world we must question why this is done, as well as what does it mean to those who do it and to those who witness it. As the literature review implies, changes in contextual properties will impact the message even if this message is copied verbatim. Thus, with the transference of an online token of communication to a physical context, inevitable changes will occur, and despite online and offline spheres not being sharply separate, there are interesting changes that can be noted when contexts change.

### **Personal use IRL**

Being such a significant part of the online experience of my interviewees, internet memes are also present in their offline lives. However there are marked differences in terms of internet use in their personal offline sphere; whilst a meme appreciator can assume the audience will share their understanding and appreciation of memes when posting to a website such as ICHC or Reddit, the same cannot be said in offline spheres. The internet allows for an organisation of space and clusters that simply is not possible in our natural offline interactions. Although our friends might have similar interests, it is unlikely they will overlap as neatly as they do with users of specific forums or particular online spaces. Despite this barrier, my interviewees still found ways of incorporating online memes into their offline relationships. In these contexts memes were embodied in an array of ways: some printed out

memes and posted them in physical spaces whilst others wore meme clothing. This could result in a disembodiment of the meme as certain properties would be detached; at times offline translations of memes did not take their visual properties with them, being embodied solely through the voicing of texts adjacent to memes<sup>63</sup>. Whilst this has been noted in online practices too, particularly in spaces with limited textual form (e.g. comments), it is a practice that bodes well offline, as the tools that facilitate meme making in the digital sphere are not equally available in the palpable world, for which meme making requires a bit more effort.

Throughout my ethnography I have noted re-digitisation of online memes which consists of the following process: an online meme is recognised in an offline space, the meme in this context is photographed which is then uploaded online in meme-centric spaces, sharing the 'IRL finding' with others that might find it funny or relevant. This allows the communal aspect of the meme to be re-ignited, even if the offline context does not allow great possibilities for it. This is a re-capture of digital qualities that are lost in the offline context of online meme use; by engaging in this practice, memes that are fixed and bounded in some form in the offline place *regain* a level of fluidity in their digitised reincarnation, allowing for bigger and wider possibilities of interaction. This indicates an attempt to digitise offline spaces, which can be placed within a wider current trend of digitisation of physical places or bounded palpable objects, with the purpose of increased online interaction<sup>64</sup>. These offline meme findings are often celebrated.

Whilst online spaces allow for a wider and broader form of meme interaction, offline spaces may also hold that ability, albeit in a smaller scale. Some online posts that re-digitise memes that have been found in the offline world demonstrate that sometimes there are 'conversations' occurring through memes in offline spaces, much like meme-centric interactions that take place online. I have witnessed this myself: a bulletin board of the university I work at featured a printed out meme, with another overlapping printed out meme in response in a defiant act of rebuttal, to which either the first party or a third party continued the 'conversation' by also replying in print-out meme form.

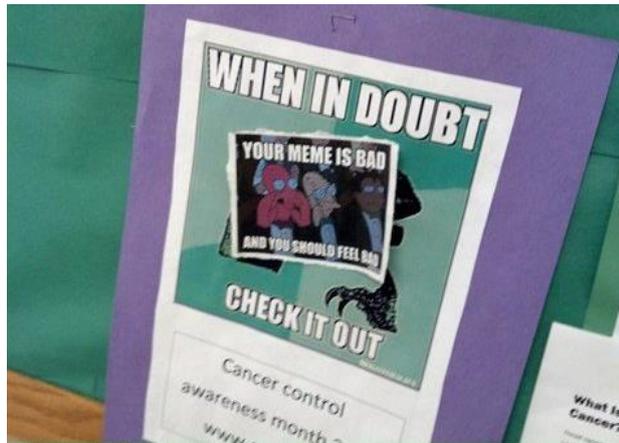
Because I was not able to capture photographic evidence during the short time this meme battle was posted, I decided to search the internet for similar occurrences. I found a

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<sup>63</sup> e.g. the Doge meme would not be visually embodied with the familiar image of a Shiba Inu dog, but through the recognisable Dogespeak that accompanies it

<sup>64</sup> e.g. QR codes, the Internet of Things (see Greengard 2015; Bunz & Meikle 2018)

parallel exchange consisting of a physical copy of a misused Philosoraptor meme, to which someone stapled a physical iteration of the Zoidberg's 'You Should Feel Bad' meme on top.



Seeing as both memes are incongruous, we can assume that the person posting the first meme is not the same who posted the second meme: the Philosoraptor meme was not used within its ascribed rules as it is meant to pose a variety of deep philosophical questions and paradoxes, to which the second person replied with a critique used when something is deemed of bad quality or inferior – in this case, the reply was making the misuse of the Philosoraptor meme evident. This offline meme interaction echoes the type of call-and-response common in online interaction. The comeback indicates that despite being moved to the offline sphere, policing of the meme is still important beyond internet boundaries.

It appears this kind of offline meme internet interaction habitually takes place in semi-public spaces<sup>65</sup> such as schools and offices. This informal and comical interaction is a way of maintaining and tending to social ties within the work environment, not unlike the way internet memes can be used to strengthen and maintain weak ties in an online sphere such as Facebook. The importance of the element of play is gaining traction in Western societies on a whole range of levels<sup>66</sup>. This tactic of play has been skilfully adopted by workspaces in order to result in increased productivity (West, Hoff & Carlsson 2016); thus a work environment that allows online memes to be posted on communal office walls as a form of communication might be tapping into this fun-welcoming approach.

<sup>65</sup> By this I signify places that fall within an institution or company of some sort and thus are not accessible to all of the general public, yet they are public in the sense that they are shared communal areas among workers

<sup>66</sup> From making sure play time for children is respected to the emphasis on re-discovering our inner child as adults (e.g. the recent boom in adult colouring books)

On the other hand the more complex uses of memes in these situations should not be overlooked. The examples I have encountered so far have had some confrontational aspect to them: the meme interaction illustrated above demonstrates a level of confrontation that is not common in everyday conversation. This use of offline memes in a work setting can be seen as an acceptable and useful tool to convey disagreement in an environment where this is particularly difficult and where an added amount of tact is required when in comparison with more informal settings. We could say memes have elevated the age old passive-aggressive office tactics to another level; exemplifying once more that although memes have certainly shaped our communication and interaction, they are also a logical addition to the continuum of older social norms and practices.

This interaction is not unlike a physical re-enactment of an online message board or comment section, where styles of reply are short and impactful, may rely on (visual) memes and use humour within internet etiquette rules to make a point. Witnessing this kind of online communicative interaction play out in a physical offline context was enlightening not just in terms of understanding more of offline meme presence, but it also illustrated the fact that online communicative practices are now so ingrained in our daily interactions that we seamlessly transpose them onto various situations regardless of context. This process is seen beyond the use of memes; Castells has written extensively on the synergetic changes that online communicative practices have had in our everyday lives (2000; 2001). These exchanges are visible aspects of the network society at work; its logics go beyond the computer and pervade the most evasive and mundane of human interactions (Castells 2000; 2001).

Despite the association between the offline sphere and physicality, offline uses of memes may forfeit physical personification altogether. One of the most common ways that memes are embodied in an offline context is through vocal references to memes in face-to-face conversation. Akin to the example above, and as demonstrated through some of my interviewees, spoken language itself is being shaped by online communicative practices. Verbal references to memes are the fastest and most accessible way to tap into the shared meaning of memes; after all, in terms of medium it only relies on the ability to speak. Due to its easiness in terms of accessibility, the vocal use of memes allows these to be used frequently as meaning making tools in unmediated societal bonding. Describing his experience of this practice, J.C. designates a kind of social reward involved in the process

through indirect communication: ‘What I get out of it is a knowing wink from my friends, this acknowledgment of an idea. Like telling a joke without actually telling it’. Vocal use of memes in offline interactions acts as a shortcut to maintain and strengthen bonding. This is an interesting example of how the offline presence of memes cannot always be equated with their physicality, as this aspect is neither present nor permanent when it comes to the spoken embodiment of memes.

Lastly, it was surprisingly difficult to find online examples of this particular kind of interaction taking place, despite having witnessed this myself a few times. The lack of online visibility of this offline internet-related interaction is of note in itself; it seems that many feel these interactions are not worthy of being recorded and shared, this is likely because they are very limited in terms of temporal and spatial significance<sup>67</sup>. Furthermore the desired sense of local communality and belonging could be weakened by the sharing of these interactions with ‘outsiders’, echoing the complicated and blurry distinction of inclusion and exclusion that permeates meme culture.

### **Nicolas Cage window**

There is an almost cult-like treatment of Nicolas Cage in online spaces (see KYM’s entry on ‘Internet God: Nic Cage’; Suzanne-Mayer 2014), a status more equated with his perceived persona and less equated with being a revered actor, or as J.C. puts it ‘with the rise of the internet he became a counter cultural icon of awkward’. Nicolas Cage has been the unwilling face of many memes, including ‘Your Argument is Invalid’, ‘Not the Bees!’ and ‘Nicolas Cage as Everyone’. In my methodology I have mentioned that I had stumbled upon some of my interviewees, such as J.C. who was selected after I saw a display of Nicolas Cage memes he put up on his windows. This display consisted of three first floor windows completely covered with the same enlarged Nicolas Cage meme in repetition. This not only grabbed my attention due to the size and oddity of the installation, but I was particularly struck by the fact that all these images were facing the street – and as such were intended for the enjoyment of strangers outside.

J.C. showed me the inner side of the ‘Nic Cage shrine’ which featured the images were double-sided and were also directed at those within the flat. It began as a prank played on

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<sup>67</sup> i.e. they make more sense to those who witness them first hand, as they can be tailored to their dwellings

one of J.C.'s flatmates; Nicolas Cage was picked because he already carried meaning for all three flatmates since they were all immersed in internet culture. Here we can already detect a social aspect to the motivation behind the antic as it is an inside joke within J.C.'s private home life. The scale of the initial installation was smaller and only meant for those within the flat, but as more and more people began commenting on it, tweeting about it or mentioning it in local pubs, J.C. decided to expand the prank. The whole window was covered and the social aspect was multiplied, as the wall of Nicolas Cage faces was not only a scary welcome to those inside the flat, but the decision had been made to plaster the window with Nicolas Cage faces facing the street too. This doubled my attention, as this denotes a desire to extend the joke towards the outside world; it takes the internet in-joke between a few friends to a physical manifestation shared with unknown others. This expanded the intended audience, showing a desire to connect with the public in the physical plain. When queried about this decision J.C. stated:

‘What I wanted to do with the Nicholas Cage posters was to [see if] people would either react to the joke or they wouldn’t get it – separating these two kinds of people (...) It became about whether people understood pop culture and appropriation or not.’

This goal echoes the inclusive/exclusive quality of internet memes previously outlined in chapter 3: on the one hand J.C. wants to share this joke with everyone; on the other hand he is aiming it at those that will understand it. J.C. himself mentions the undercurrent of intertextuality within this meme and how it takes various signifiers and mixes them together whilst pointing towards miscellaneous cultural references<sup>68</sup>. It also reflects the remarkable pliability of memes as the germinal idea was to create a joke with shared meaning among close friends, but picking up on the unforeseen social aspect of the prank led to its augmentation. A meme based joke already shared by millions of strangers around the world was harnessed for a very small group of friends, and subsequently amplified once more for a wide transient audience. This constant mutation and ability to hold different levels of shared meaning among diverse groups of people summarises online memes’ ever changing organic qualities.

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<sup>68</sup> J.C. elaborates on this: ‘It is about the associations of the image, the semantics. It’s about the connotations of the actor, not necessarily the acting itself. You get an intertextual reading.’

## LOLcats Museum

Being one of the most widely recognisable online memes, LOLcats jumped to the offline world in a variety of ways. Their ubiquity has been further immortalised by a museum exhibition in 2013 entirely dedicated to LOLcats assembled by Soapbox & Sons and The Framers Gallery in London named 'LOLCAT – TEH EXHIBISHUN' (Soapbox & Sons 2013). This phenomenon is particularly intriguing due to the inherent contradiction in the adoption of LOLcats in an approved art context; as aforementioned memes are commonly subject to criticism and are routinely refused as content of value. So, whilst LOLcats have a hard time being legitimised, this seems to be countered by the artistic acceptance of LOLcats. It is the utmost form of art legitimisation: featuring art pieces in an established gallery that forges a context in which the featured art work is sanctioned.

As I learned about this exhibition, a diametric opposition echoed in one of the aforementioned preceding influences of online memes: it recalled Marcel Duchamp's Dadaist piece named 'Fountain', which was rejected from an exhibition organised by the Society of Independent Artists in 1917. It was only decades later, after the Dada movement had lived its core years and had effectively died out, that a reproduction of the original featured in a museum, and was subsequently valued (Howarth 2000). Thus, whilst some art in museums might seem shocking at times, by the time art hits a museum's walls it has already been legitimised by the art establishment in some form. Whilst it is not uncommon for ground-breaking ideas to be accepted by art or academic circles first, it is also a hyperbole to contend that LOLcats have been accepted by the art world at large, as is made evident by some of the less than favourable reviews the exhibition received (Peck 2013). Nevertheless, some opinions regarding the mixture of LOLcats and art do not fall in line with this dismissive point of view. The relationship between both is explained in a more positive manner by Mike Rugnetta, whom states: 'People are creating images and sharing them with strangers for the purposes of communicating their personal experiences? That, my friends, is art' (Anderson 2012a). Additionally the contradictory nature of this relationship between online memes and art extends into other aspects as the art world commonly revolves around issues of authorship, whilst memes do not, seeing as anonymity is one of their commonly ascribed properties (Davison 2012: 132; see Leadbeater 2009: 16).

Despite this apparent artistic legitimisation of LOLcats, the official webpage for 'LOLCAT – TEH EXHIBISHUN' states that by 'ignoring the crudely makeshift LOLCAT aesthetic, each of these artists has come up with their unique take on the theme to create a piece of beautiful, amusing and exquisitely crafted LOLCAT art' (Soapbox & Sons 2013). Whilst their own interpretation (and own remake) of LOLcats signals an attempt at creative engagement with internet culture, the artists' refusal to engage with the original amateur LOLcat aesthetic results in a denial of its non-professional value. In other words, whilst LOLcats may be culturally elevated to an artistic status, this can only be done if the 'crude makeshift LOLcat aesthetic' is erased and replaced with a professionalised and carefully crafted alternative. Thus, the essence and ethos of the LOLcat becomes compromised, as it is clear that the intercreative participatory culture that memes ascribe to (which holds perfectionist results as unimportant and places the act of making in a collective context as the goal in itself) is sacrificed in the name of a more polished and professional outcome for the artistic palate. The democratic potential of meme interaction is entirely removed here, as the point is no longer to prioritise creative inclusion but instead to hold a few artists to a more widely acceptable artistic standard. In short, the world might not be ready to take memes seriously, and it appears that the established art world is not entirely ready to take such a step either.

There are other changes that occur with the transposition of LOLcats into the physicality of a museum exhibition: the immediacy that characterises the making of LOLcats is also rendered useless in this context as these artworks evidence an investment of considerable time and effort in their production. The conventions of art exhibitions leave little space for such direct immediacy; and whilst it is possible for artists to complete works in a very short amount of time in an attempt to retain spontaneity the pieces in this particular case reflect hours of carefully thought-out work. This leads to yet another corruption of the meme within this show: despite its appealing title, the pieces featured were for the most part *not* LOLcats or any kind of internet memes for that matter. Many of the works incorporate some aspect of LOLcats through the use of LOLspeak or other known LOLcat references such as a re-imagined version of Lime Cat. However, a substantial amount of the pieces in the exhibition do not incorporate or relate to LOLcats in any way. This is problematic because it effectively compromises the definition of LOLcats; additionally, it demonstrates a lack of understanding regarding LOLcat culture itself. Whilst an attempt to question the boundaries of the LOLcat meme should be appreciated, it is very difficult to justify some of the artwork

presented as being even remotely about LOLcats; some are just about cats in general (Shoulder 2013).

Taking these aspects of the exhibition in consideration, these self-appointed LOLcats have been so ideologically modified that it becomes difficult to negotiate their position. Through this procedure, the essence of the LOLcat becomes compromised, illustrated by an attendee's comment: 'They aren't funny (...) LOLcats are supposed to be funny. That's the point of them' (Shoulder 2013). Nevertheless it is valuable to recognise the importance of this acknowledgement of the cultural weight of LOLcats by the art world; this recognition paired with the embodiment of LOLcats in the palpable sense signal towards a possible legitimisation of online culture that has been difficult to obtain. Whilst not free of problematic issues these tentative steps might serve as reference for bolder ownership of online meme culture in offline established places and social frameworks in the future; one that hopefully does not require an undermining of the workings of online meaning making.

### **Lolita fashion: subcultures and memes**

In my own experience, memes have not only impacted different aspects of culture but they have also left their mark on particular subcultures, where memes have reflected issues and debates surrounding specific spheres of interest. In these instances memes may address cultural intersections that are much more specific and which fall outside of the broad focus of politics and/or consumerism and social commentary. Having analysed how memes manifest and play a part in the political and consumerist spheres in previous chapters, I now turn my attention to specific cultural manifestation of their use. For this purpose I shall concentrate on the analysis of the role played by internet memes in the Lolita fashion subculture, a Japanese-born modern take on Rococo and Victorian inspired clothing. As the definition of culture is known to be broad and far-reaching some of the examples I shall be discussing in relation to Lolita fashion within this section shall also approach different aspects of cultural engagement: from subcultural specificities that are entwined with this particular group to larger cultural issues that transpire into the subculture itself. The well described elasticity of memes shall serve to accommodate, in an illustrative manner, the variety of examples and contexts where diverse culturally related exchanges occur within the global Lolita community. Additionally I will explore some parallels that are visible between meme and Lolita communities.

The example of Lolita fashion has been selected as the subculture of choice for this analysis due to a couple of factors: despite being a palpable fashion in the sense that it centres around physical clothing it is a community that is firmly interconnected to the internet, both in terms of its members having strong online presences but also in terms of being a part of online culture in itself. There is an overlapping of sorts, as some common online playgrounds dedicated to internet cultures and memes such as 4chan are also popular among Lolita fashion wearers. Thus, the synergy between internet culture and Lolita subculture is bound to wield rich insights and information, which in turn can inform both groups. Additionally, it felt fitting to select the Lolita community subculture due to my own personal engagement with it through over a decade; considering the ethnographic nature of my research it appears to be an apt choice, as I can make use of my many years of personal investment, engagement and observation. The selection of this particular interest of mine as a highlighted case study within this thesis made even more sense upon the realisation that the majority of my first contact and understanding of a large part of internet culture came *through* this particular niche fashion and its online interactions. In a sense, Lolita fashion and its strong online existence functioned as a vehicle for much of my understanding of the rest of the internet, including memes. I believe that there is value in the many years I have followed the progression of such an online-centric fashion, particularly since it is a niche fashion that has yielded little academic research.

Before we delve into the ways this particular community utilises memes for its cultural discussions and global communication, it is important to gain an understanding of the basic definitions and workings of it – particularly since we are addressing a very specific case study, one which is undeniably lesser known than some of my other examples. Although at a glance Lolita fashion falls largely under the cluster of internet groups focusing on modern Japanese culture, sharing this space with comparable subgroups such as cosplay, anime and manga, it is important to understand that it is markedly separate from these; on the other hand there are relational ties among these that are relevant in order to fully understand the context within which Lolita groups operate. Although its wearers do not identify as being part of a fandom nor do they consider what they wear as cosplay<sup>69</sup>, there is an often misunderstood overlapping between these different subcultural engagements. Despite featuring heavily in

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<sup>69</sup> originated from 'costume' and 'play', meaning to dress up and act as a particular character, usually fictional (Carlisle 2009: 152)

cosplay, comics and gaming conventions, Lolita fashion is unrelated to all of these activities and does not have any intrinsic attachment to nor is it an extension of either of these (Napier 2007: 164-6; Gagne 2008: 141). Whilst cosplay is about embodying a fictional character (often from a manga, anime or videogame story) by emulating their physical appearance and personality traits – in short to impersonate someone else – Lolita is a fashion, where the wearer is not required to be, seem or act like anyone else but themselves. It is true that while users belonging to these different groups may overlap, this is not necessarily the case; and even so most wearers are adamant to delineate a line between their cosplaying activities and their use of Lolita (Galbraith 2013). Thus, while wearers can be fans of the clothes, the fashion in itself is not a fandom as it does not have a fictional story, gameplay, plot or characters to interact with.

On the other hand, Lolita fashion does share some of the traits that are recognisable in fandoms (Mackie 2009), particularly with regards to a heavy online presence among users, its engagement with DIY, and the strong emphasis on the tracking down, curation and collection of specific pieces, which often lead to fandom-like discussion of such difficult to achieve items<sup>70</sup>. There is also a fervent passion that transpires among many Lolita enthusiasts, and a degree of study and considerable investment of time is notable in the majority of users. The curatorial aspect of the fashion (both physical and digital) is very important within the community; it is also not uncommon for users to have carefully organised folders and/or carefully assembled posts of pictures of their belongings as well as their desired pieces, which can be seen through LiveJournal posts in the main EGL (Elegant Gothic Lolita) community<sup>71</sup>.

The pinnacle of curatorial efforts within Lolita fashion can be seen via the Lolibrary, which is a digital archive of an astounding amount of pieces, organised by either garment type, brand, colour, year of release, particular features (e.g. corset lacing, lining) as well as tagged keyword searches (Lolibrary 2018). Although unrelated communities, one cannot help but note the parallels between this cataloguing effort and the one present in KYM described earlier; both present the same need for a curatorial drive of their culture and communities that is open for public access. Although the scale of Lolibrary is not as large as KYM, the same impact placed on appropriate categorisation for the benefit of the community at large is

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<sup>70</sup> e.g. common discussions regarding users' 'Dream Dress', which are the ultimate pined for item that sits at the top of a Lolita's wardrobe wish list

<sup>71</sup> Arguably the most active and historically relevant Western Lolita fashion community

present. Furthermore, both websites are open to anyone and do not require a user account in order to access the desired information. Thus, despite the work from and for the relevant communities in both these examples, it appears that the need to preserve this kind of information is aimed outside the immediate obvious public (i.e. Lolitas or meme enthusiasts), acting also as an informative guide for those that are new to either of the spheres.

The us/them divide which can be found throughout the meme framework both online and offline also marks its presence here, as no matter how widespread and diverse the Lolita community is, there are common points of shared experiences and sense of identity that unites those who are attuned to Lolita fashion and its concrete realities and experiences (i.e. 'us') to those that are outside of it (i.e. 'them'). This reliance on negative identity politics (i.e. a definition that relies on what it is not [Ingram 2013: 49]) has been noted in the literature (Gagne 2008). As described earlier, this sense of us/them helps to fortify the sense of community and belonging by delineating what lies outside the group. Perhaps part of why Lolita fashion and meme culture are such a good fit relies on this similarity of self-perception and sense of the opposed other that is present in both cases.

In addition to these similarities, Lolita online spaces share certain linguistic and social traits with other broader internet culture territories<sup>72</sup>. Lolitas have developed their own coded language in order to bond and communicate more effectively with each other (Kawamura 2006: 793). Much like the case with meme enthusiasts, the use of coded language in Lolita is one of the central aspects that inevitably fuels the sense of us/them that permeates the community, i.e. understanding the coded language feeds into the sense of belonging. This is not a new phenomenon in cultural groups, as coded language has been known to fulfil such criteria for other (sub)cultural groups in the past, aiding to the construction and maintenance of their sense of identity (and subsequently their sense of us/them) (Palmiotto & Unnithan 2011: 150; Cutler 2014; Bignold 2015: 152).

Although the expansion of Lolita fashion has provided wearers with relatively accessible outlets for their clothing needs, its humble beginnings were steeped in DIY culture, particularly homemade dressmaking (Mackie 2009). Early Japanese wearers were often photographed with handmade or altered clothes and accessories, whilst early Western

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<sup>72</sup> Although not directly central to my topic of research, there are interesting things happening around Lolita subculture and language that I believe cast light on this community's workings; particularly since I am focusing on one of their aspects of communication (i.e. memes)

wearers were driven to DIY by the sheer lack of access to the Japanese brands themselves. Even when branded clothes became widely available it was not uncommon to see wearers sporting intricate matching handmade accessories, which usually served to compliment outfits to the utmost detail, or for the purposes of 'twinning'<sup>73</sup>. Successful twinning relies on attention to detail, and the more intricate and complementary the outfits, the better the result; thus crafting uniquely matching accessories is one of the ways to achieve this perfect symmetry. These forays into unique handmade pieces also echo memes' DIY origins listed in the literature review.

Similar to meme logics, Lolita fashion is heavily centred on online interaction. Most of the clothing is purchased online, which steeps Lolita fashion in the mesh of digital communication, so central to multiple facets of its functioning. When accounting for the minutiae that goes into twinning in Lolita, the attention to symmetry stems not only from these duplicate craft accessories but also from the dependence on the internet, i.e. many posts within communities seek matching pairs of particular items for twinning purposes (particularly if not as easily made at home). Adding to this argument of internet interdependency is the centrality that online photography sharing and posting occupies: a significant part of the engagement with the fashion entails posting pictures of outfits and social meetings so the community at large can partake in manifestations of the fashion by individual users. Due to the nature of these interactions, the collective rollercoaster of emotions experienced by Lolitas is not unlike the one experienced by invested fans<sup>74</sup>; it reverberates with the recent online fan phenomena that Stein denominates as 'feels culture', succinctly described as 'an intimate collective (...) of shared emotional authorship' or 'the public celebration of emotion' (Stein 2015: 156). The Lolita community has its own ups and downs: ranging from new thematic print designs from the major brands that are closely followed and meticulously collected by thousands, to the inevitable change in trends that will dictate the current popular style – and even topics that seem far removed, such as changes in laws regarding customs, the fluctuation of major currencies and its impact on online markets.

Brand products are often the topic of memes, as these are for the most part very present in the shared experience of Lolitas around the world. Keeping in practice with true

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<sup>73</sup> The act of wearing identical matching outfits in pairs (or multiple people), commonly seen in Lolita fashion

<sup>74</sup> See the relationship between affect and fandom in Duffett (2013)

remix culture, Lolita memes often make use of previously established internet memes in order to make their point:



It is not uncommon for these familiar meme images to be altered further in order to be immediately associated with Lolita related topics: an example is the addition of a Lolita bow or dress to the person or character in the meme, which instantly denotes that the experience described in the meme is often lived by a Lolita fashion follower. This additional remixing truly hones the meme into the realm of inclusivity whilst also taking re-appropriation a step further:



One of the most divisive topics the Lolita community is the subject of knock-offs (known as replicas within the communities). Despite being more attainable now than when I began my forays into it, Lolita fashion is still far from accessible when compared to most attire. Not only are the clothes more expensive, they are made in limited numbers and in small sizes only. With the exception of a handful of shops outside of Japan, the majority must be bought online either directly from the websites or through second hand selling platforms among users. The impact of the replica debate among the Lolita community was felt through

various forms of communication, from long online discussions to the creation of entirely new platforms that supported and/or banned either side of the replica ideology. With this topic in mind, as well as keeping in touch with the relevant political conversations going on in the US and its approaching 2012 elections, one Lolita posted this image:



This is a nod to the much talked about GOP debates that were taking place at the time and which sparked a multitude of memes, tying it in with the ongoing talks surrounding replicas that are also centrepieces of conversation within these spheres. These memes are very much self-contained within the Lolita community, as they would lack relevance to those that do not engage with the fashion. Thus, to me, part of the interest in looking at how memes work as a conversational tool within this cultural group in particular stems from the contradictory insider/outsider interaction that can be seen at play here: whilst Lolita memes are not within the same small range as, for example, memes shared by a classroom or a university (which are bound by the same sense of geography and experience) they are not large enough to be comparable with memes that serve as comment for global events which are shared among millions.

One of the most heavily layered memes that I came across in my groundwork was also both Lolita related and political:



This tailored version of the iconic colour wheel background encapsulates a tri-part message composed by specific references to current political events (i.e. Republican politician Rick Santorum's conservative policies regarding banning internet pornography), current musical fads (the brief viral phenomenon that was Japanese artist Kyary Pamyu Pamyu's surreal music video for 'Pon Pon Pon') and relevant Lolita allusions to known low quality Chinese knock off brand Milanoo; requiring an incredibly precise combination of the understanding of these three separate mentions simultaneously (i.e. a high level of current cultural literacy). This kind of multi-layering is also present in my previous example of LOLtheorists, although these cover different aspects of cultural experience and knowledge. However the need for extensive knowledge of disparate topics unites both types of memes, and thus it is useful to keep these similarities in mind whilst thinking about this Lolita meme in particular, as the underlying logics retain a helpful likeness.

These two examples show that, concurrent with recent declamations for its widening, cultural literacy comes in many shapes (Lankshear & McLaren 1993: 14; 1994: 5; Hirsch Jr., Kett & Trefil 2002: xi) and although it can range from what is upheld as high culture to what is perceived as low culture, the mechanism is the same in both; rendering the distinctions of high and low culture irrelevant in this interchangeable exercise of cultural mastery (see Inglis 2005). Here we see the mix of the social, subcultural and political in one single meme, blurring boundaries and mixing contexts in a way that is comparable to our current lives and identities: we are complex, multifaceted human beings with multiple interests, thus it makes sense that we have refined our ways of describing the complexities of such a layered cultural existence via an adapted form of simple yet polygonal communication (i.e. multi-layered memes) to meet our current experiences and communicative needs in a dynamic world.

As we can see with these examples, despite the small and niche-like aspect of Lolita fashion there is the possibility to both widen and narrow the sphere of relevance of Lolita related memes. Lolita related memes can gain added layers of discourse and meaning by addressing other non-Lolita specific topics whilst intertwining these with references that are still relevant to the Lolita user base. Besides the replica debate, the online Lolita community has other divisive issues discussed among it. These can take intricate forms, similar to the complex combinations described earlier in LOLtheorists:



This meme demonstrates the intersection between the subcultural and political (i.e. the politics of the everyday, feminism in particular), as well as how political issues permeate subcultural groups and discussions.

The topics of Lolita and feminism have crossed paths a few times during my own experience as both a feminist and a Lolita. Whilst the clothing appears to follow the feminised gender standards that our patriarchal culture has instilled for women, there are arguments that Lolita fashion stands as a rejection of the forced sexualisation of women in a patriarchal world. Its origins are partly rooted as a cultural and political response to particular events at the time of its rise in popularity in Japan. Lolita is a staple of 'Harajuku fashion', which is a popular area within the hip district of Shibuya in central Tokyo that, with the economic prosperity and notable modern cultural shifts of the 1990s gave rise to a variety of changes among the youth in Japanese metropolitan areas. As a departure from their parents' instilled lessons of conformity and business driven lifestyle, the youth of Tokyo began finding ways of expressing themselves and rebelling against such norms and expectations through eccentric clothing. Because Japan has a six day school week (where uniforms are often compulsory) teenagers were only allowed to wear their preferred outfits on Sunday, which made it even more of a precious commodity of choice and self-expression. Thus, the combination of economic prosperity and a desire for self-expression in a culture where conformity is a strong pillar led to Sunday gatherings in trendy Harajuku where young people would find ever growing ways of pushing the boundaries of fashion and individualism.

One of the big waves of Harajuku fashion to grow in the 1990s was Kogal fashion, which consists of a look influenced by the Californian valley girl aesthetic, a trend that clashed

head on with traditional Japanese beauty values. Whilst the latter value pale skin, a modest appearance and a demure presence, Kogal fashion centres on very dark fake tans topped with contrasting garish neon-white eyeshadow and lipstick, peroxide platinum hair often dyed bright colours; clothing of choice often consists of very short dresses and high heels - the idea is to be as loud and brash as possible, which unmistakably runs counter to traditional ideas of idealised Japanese female beauty and behaviour. Unsatisfied with both the strict traditional Japanese ideals of beauty and the newfound oversexualised Kogal appearance (and often being represented as a backlash towards Kogal [Gagne 2008; Galbraith 2013]); Lolitas presented a third alternative that was both rebellious and borrowing heavily from the antiquated, conforming to neither of the options.

Thus it has been argued that the Lolita aesthetic was born out of a refusal to fit gender norms and patriarchal expectations of attractiveness (Gagne 2008; Winge 2008: 50) – whether these are revolving around the pervasive sexualisation of young girls or whether these address age-old gendered rules about women’s role in society. By holding on to the childlike imaginary allowed in Lolita fashion, one is defying the anticipated reproductive and sensualised roles of young women (Talmadge 2008; Galbraith 2013; Robinson 2014), particularly in a society like Japan where marriage and motherhood are still held as pinnacles of female objectives by rigid social norms (Talmadge 2008). This seemingly contradictory phenomenon has played out in other countercultural arenas in similar ways: at around the same time, third wave feminists and queer women began reclaiming tokens of femininity, which had been partly poisoned by the anti-patriarchal warriors before them who had worked hard to distance themselves of what they perceived as feminine symbols of oppression (Stasia 2012: 186). Just like third wave queer feminists reclaimed the power of the femme identity, Lolitas too returned to apparently conservative symbols in order to dissent. Here hyperfemininity is used as transgression, not unlike its transformative and defiant role in drag culture (Lengel 2004: 67-8, 74). The idea that Lolita is ‘in ur feminism ruining ur discourse’ engages with ideas that the simplistic argument of Lolita being inherently counter to feminist principles are not accurate at all, that in reality the relationship between feminism and Lolita is more complex than its apparent superficial rejection. Looking at the historical roots of Lolita fashion, issues of gender and the questioning of its normative expectations have always been present, as one of the main figureheads of the fashion is Mana, the male

guitarist of the Japanese band Malice Mizer who began spouting the Lolita look early on and who would go on to act as one of the central figures in the fashion (Winge 2008: 50).

That being said it is important to bear in mind there is no consensus regarding the relationship between Lolita fashion and feminism among its wearers; although we can argue for Lolita fashion's early links to rebellion and a feminist stance against expected gender roles, this was not central to the development of the fashion itself (unlike other subcultures such as punk) and a lot of the feminist rhetoric behind Lolita fashion is currently either invisible or denied, as individuals began adopting the fashion regardless of their socio-political views. This meme speaks not only to how malleable memes are but also to how wide ranging and eclectic cultural groups can be; whilst it is tempting to fall into the narrowness of tunnel vision when focusing on a particular subculture, we must remind ourselves that internet users and communities are dynamic and organic, their composition can be complex and are rarely one-dimensional. The use of this particular meme demonstrates exactly that: Lolitas are not solely people with self-contained and unidimensional interests, they are human beings with all the complexity that comes with it, they exist in particular political and cultural climates, with varying sets of beliefs which inevitably transpire to and through their interaction in Lolita spaces and places.

This chapter has approached a variety of 'other' meme uses: from particular offline-centric interactions, to the relationship between art and memes, and the use of memes in the specific subculture of Lolita fashion. As with previous chapters, this chapter looked at a variety of ways memes are used, from personal bonding among friends to political uses, focusing particularly on questions of meaning within these uses and contexts. What we can ascertain from this chapter is the complexity that memes possess when they enter offline aspects of social interaction, and how they can become meaning making tools that gain added layers of intricacy when we consider their use in multiple offline contexts. As with the case of the use of memes in online spaces, in terms of meaning it becomes apparent that we cannot pigeonhole memes as having a single kind of use; as we've seen in this chapter the variables of context play a part in the resulting message of meme use in offline interactions between strangers, whether that is done through a meme installation or a piecemeal printed out meme conversation. In this case, it is not only the use of memes in offline spaces that births this meaning, but it also the act of transferring online memes to an offline space that charges

them with additional meaning, as such a change of context inevitably influences the meaning itself. I have also noted that the use of memes in particular contexts can have dual meanings or roles: memes that are used in the workplace can function as a way of creating cohesiveness among employees yet they can also be used as anonymous voices of passive-aggressive rebellion. Regardless of the intentions or outcomes, memes have found a way to become intrinsic to much of online communication, thus it seems instinctive that the same has occurred with offline interactions.

In this chapter we have also addressed the use of memes in museums and art galleries, and how this interaction can cause friction among what is perceived to be 'high culture' and 'low culture'. Featuring pieces of culture that are commonly dismissed upon sanctioned walls of an art establishment echoes previous artistic forays, and although the results are now considerably less shocking they still remain divisive: critiques included the failure to see memes as culturally relevant as well as the art establishment's lack of success in truly representing and understanding meme culture. Despite all the efforts made, the art exhibitions ultimately demonstrated a failure to connect with the underlying ethos of memes, bringing into question whether memes have been featured in museums at all.

Lastly I addressed how social subcultures are also impacted and have impact on the world of online memes; the Lolita community has shown not only that this is true but also that subcultures are yet another sphere that makes use of online memes for bonding and communicative purposes, partaking too in the inclusive/exclusive divide that has been noted in other forms of online meme interaction. The complex points of view regarding issues that concern a particular cultural group can be expressed in the public battlefield that is meme making and sharing, regardless of whether these issues address Lolita fashion-specific themes or broader socio-cultural implications that inevitably impact on the fashion and its wearers. In this section I touched upon the ways in which Lolita fashion is permeated by surrounding political realities, both in terms of capital P politics (e.g. US political climate) and politics of the everyday (e.g. feminism, language, and formation of cultural identity). Although my thesis does deal with both kinds of political engagement to a degree I believe that there is much more research that can be done within this scope, particularly regarding the relationship of this subculture and the politics of the everyday; however these fall outside the range of my own focus and thus are presented in a limited manner.

Having regarded memes from a variety of angles, I find it fitting to look at such a phenomenon from a more concentrated point-of-view. The memes analysed in these last three chapters were varied; their purpose in each chapter was to illustrate online memes at work within particular contexts (e.g. politics, commerce, culture). In addition to this interpretation of meme use, I believe the opposite should also be provided – that is, to look at a single meme and its trajectory through a variety of spaces and contexts. It is this task that I undertake in the following chapter, where I use the Doge meme as a case study.

## Chapter 8: DOGE

Having established that online memes are not only widely dispersed but also incredibly difficult to reduce to a single category due to their volume and variations, a manageable approach would include the use of a case study focusing on a single meme and its variations. Although this cannot account for all existing memes, their trajectory and meaning; it still allows us to gather some immersive understanding of how some aspects of meme culture function, as well as providing us with theoretical aspects in practice.

I selected the Doge meme as my case study for this chapter for mainly two motives. The Doge meme experienced great popularity at the start of this project; following the trajectory of a famous meme is beneficial for research purposes, thus I tracked the Doge meme as it unfolded. Its popularity let me assess various incarnations of the meme, as it appears in different spaces online. This sense of timing is crucial when it comes to tracking memes in their varying contexts, seeing as mimetic online content is transient and ever changing. This sort of 'superfluous' content may be lost either by being deleted, moved or untagged<sup>75</sup> and the changing nature of the context where the meme is inserted ultimately impacts the overall significance of the meme itself. Secondly, the Doge meme is a particularly versatile meme, which is travelling through a myriad of different contexts both online and offline; it is leaving its mark on a variety of different environments, mutating and adapting as it circulates. These characteristics have made Doge a very appealing case study, an idea which myself and Graham Meikle began outlining in our publication elsewhere (Esteves & Meikle 2015). This flexibility is a desirable trait in a meme regarding this project, as trailing a single type of meme through different situations will give a comprehensive picture that will be all the more cohesive. It is also a testament to the very mutability and adaptability of the meme.

### Origins

The origins of the Doge meme cannot be summed up to a single viral moment; it underwent considerable mutation in order for it to become the recognisable meme it is today. While it is hard to pinpoint a single source for the Doge meme<sup>76</sup>, its history consists of multiple events coming together; however its popularity rose considerably in 2012-2013 as it

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<sup>75</sup> Making it virtually untraceable under the overwhelming amount of content that replaces it when the meme goes out of fashion

<sup>76</sup> As demonstrated by its Know Your Meme page

cemented its connotation with the iconic image of a Shiba Inu dog, accompanied by its particular use of Dogespeak in colourful Comic Sans font:



When the Doge meme was established<sup>77</sup> as being composed by this recognisable picture, the origin of the meme as we know it could be traced to a clearer source<sup>78</sup>. This incongruity (i.e. multiple sources through time continuously representing the same dogs) is a remarkable contradiction regarding the meme's starting point, demonstrating early on its compelling ability to be sculpted. Keeping with current user-generated online culture, Doge makes extensive use of intertextuality and mashup, using pre-existing content and setting it in differing contexts in order to create new statements, allowing for multiple entry points<sup>79</sup>.

By following the multiple origins of the Doge meme, it becomes apparent that circulation is a factor of great impact when it comes to the shaping of online memes. In the case of Doge, different aspects of the meme were added over time and from different sources: starting with the misspelling of 'dog', to the image of the Shiba Inu, to the logic of Dogespeak, effectively putting the meme through a process of collective creative negotiation until the 'rules' of Doge were finally established. However this stabilisation is not permanent, since memes are adapted to different contexts as they circulate. Despite being widely agreed upon that the Doge meme consists of a Shiba Inu dog, with superimposed brightly coloured

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<sup>77</sup> Doge meme enthusiasts are divided regarding the pronunciation of the word 'Doge', with some proponents claiming it is read 'doje' whilst others defend that it sounds like 'dogue' (McNally 2013; Wickman 2013). This debate demonstrates the room for flexibility that online memes provide; being a textual and visual meme (and thus lacking an audio component) creates a gap of information regarding the appropriate name of the meme. This is thus filled in by the online users, who will have contradicting views on its ambiguous pronunciation. Ultimately, this discussion of the vocalisation of the word 'Doge' personifies the collective process that is behind the creation of the meme – even if a meme has a single point of origin as it circulates and becomes the object of negotiation of users worldwide, it will inevitably undergo changes as well as different interpretations.

<sup>78</sup> The Doge meme can be traced with such precision, that the main real life dogs pictured have been tracked down to two single dogs: Kabosu in Japan and Suki in the U.S. (KYM)

<sup>79</sup> See chapter 3

Comic Sans sentences in Dogespeak, this does not mean the meme cannot reincarnate with one of these separate characteristics in lieu of the rest. With widespread circulation and incredible popularity, Doge achieves instant recognition to those who are in on it; much like the case with LOLcat speak and its particular rules<sup>80</sup>, Dogespeak's rules have also become so distinguishable that they are able to exist without the adjacent Shiba Inu dog image. Dogespeak is not just random broken English and it is possible to do it wrong, it is essential that these texts follow the determined pattern in the example above. Other formats of the meme may materialise through textual and audio forms, as well as visual forms that do not depict the Shiba Inu. As the Doge meme circulates it is able to be understood even in minimalist form; the meme has survived dissection of text from image and still retain its original inference (see Esteves & Meikle 2015).

This possible separation of text and image in the Doge meme has proved liberating in plural ways. By reducing the Doge meme to simple text form, the meme becomes even more accessible, becoming available to anyone who has a basic understanding of computers. This has impacted the circulation of the meme, as easy access leads to easier and faster prospects for dissemination. The meme may travel further and faster as the possibility for its instant creation through text encourages the engagement of more people and makes it easier to travel to more spaces, particularly in spaces where engagement is reduced to text (e.g. comment sections and newspaper websites). There is a strong resonance between Doge's interchangeability and Lev Manovich's (2001) concept of modularity<sup>81</sup> which describes new media objects as being formed by many singular pieces, which can then be combined and remixed into a myriad of outcomes for the creation of new compositions.

Furthermore, by significantly lowering the amount of work and investment through breaking the meme into the smallest unit possible, Doge also exhibits what could be described as democratic properties. By requiring a very low level of technical knowledge to engage with the Doge meme, it can be used by a growing number of people, perhaps pointing towards a developing desire to become inclusive (a dynamic described thoroughly in chapter 3). These properties of circulation are likely to have impacted on the meme's popularity. Despite the utopian promises of inclusivity hinted at by this meme in particular, it is worth

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<sup>80</sup> e.g. 'I can haz cheezburger' is correct while 'I could had cheesburger' or any other variants would be inappropriate

<sup>81</sup> See Manovich's (2001) five principles of new media

noting that there is still a level of cultural literacy required in order to engage with and understand Doge. Although widely used, it cannot be assumed that the level of cultural literacy required is so low as to accommodate everyone who does have access to the basic technological tools required. This becomes evident in the comment section of some Doge-related posts, where the joke is lost and/or users do not understand the use of Dogespeak<sup>82</sup>. It is among this contradictory message that the Doge meme finds itself: whilst incredibly widespread, lack of understanding of the meme leads to a shunning out, effectively returning to the issue of meme exclusivity (see chapter 3).

Being a more recent meme, especially comparing with the ubiquitous LOLcat, there seems to be more effort in preserving its history, something that has become more common in newer memes. This curatorial carefulness hints towards an awareness of the importance that memes play in our current experiences. As online culture becomes an ever-growing part of mass popular culture, more eyes are able to keep tabs on this meme, allowing a stricter policing and curation to take place. It is also possible that the growing attention allotted to memes has translated into a newfound appreciation and respect for online culture. Doge's growing popularity has, in turn, translated into a variety of different reactions; no matter how diverse these responses are all have the unifying factor of underlining the prominence that Doge has assumed in our current debates about culture, language, meaning and the internet.

The Doge meme is so overpowering that it can incorporate other mimetic objects within it, sweeping up other memes and standing as a testament to its remixability. An example is the Flappy Doge app, which is a spin-off version of the viral yet short lived 2013 smartphone game Flappy Bird. The Flappy Doge app featured the easily recognisable Shiba Inu Doge instead of the default bird in the game; the message that appeared when a player lost in the Doge version of the game was also altered: instead of the familiar 'Game Over' that appears in the original game, it says 'Much Over', furthering the Doge meme beyond imagery alone. The Flappy Doge app is a concrete example of the remixing that occurs between memes. The 'Dogefication' of the Flappy Bird app demonstrates how the concept of the mashup may be furthered by mixing up modular bits and pieces of separate memes.

As the Doge meme grows in popularity there appears to be too a growing group of people who dislike the meme. The intensity of this aversion to Doge has been felt beyond

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<sup>82</sup> e.g. see comment section for Hern's 2014 article

insults left in the comment section of Doge posts: an online petition on the popular website change.org was delivered to the United States Congress and the Illinois State House asking for the doge meme to be made illegal ‘in all forms’ (Banks 2014). Although it is clear this gesture is symbolic, the 3018 signatures gathered point towards a less than all accepting crowd when it comes to the Doge meme. This is perhaps one of the markers of just how saturated Doge has become, but it also points towards a lack of universality when it comes to memes: some people simply do not enjoy them or find them relevant or funny. In these cases, it seems like the Doge meme has no meaning for these people, as they stand outside of the dispersed community of Doge appreciators. As this petition points out, the further memes circulate, the more relevant these issues of boundaries and meme integrity become.

Intense mainstreaming of memes can also lead to other forms of backlash from those heavily invested in internet culture, who then try and distance themselves from such widespread co-option (see chapter 3). Although some internet enthusiasts may have rejected Doge for this rationale (see Hern 2014), there is reason to believe this is not such a straightforward case. Doge has shown some resistance to this mechanism, maintaining its relevance for *both* mainstream meme-casual audiences and heavily invested internet culture dwellers. Due to its sheer elasticity and relevance, it has demonstrated that it can circulate among largely varying circles, and that for many (including my interviewees) Doge’s overuse did not destroy its meaning making properties for those that have heavily invested in it; instead it survived the flash fame of many of its antecedents and remains pertinent to both kinds of users. In order for this to happen, devoted meme fans resorted to re-co-opting the Doge meme instead of its outright rejection, with meme aficionados having “‘weaponized” Doge memes last year as a way to weed out “normie” followers’ (Hathaway 2016). Here we can draw parallels between these processes and the continually paradoxical practices that circumscribe *détournement* and recuperation outlined in this thesis’ literature review.

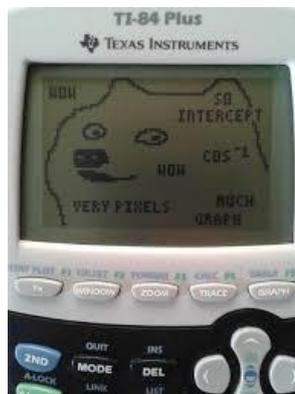
### **Doge @ Reddit**

Following Doge’s trail I found numerous spaces where its circulation overlaps with many of the same meme-centric spaces outlined in chapter 4. Throughout my ethnography it became apparent that for some online spaces Doge held a heavier meaning than for others. One of these spaces, corroborated by both my interviews and my own ethnographic work, is

the social network Reddit<sup>83</sup>. Reddit allows users to comment on submitted posts, which is where a better grasp of the reactions to the posted memes can be gathered.

Reddit plays an important role regarding the Doge meme in particular; there is evidence that Reddit was one of the first places where a Doge post was posted under the now famous 'LMBO LOOK @ THIS FUKKIN DOGE' title in 2010 (KYM). Both J.C. and N.M. (arguably the two most internet-invested interviewees among all participants) named Reddit as a central hub for their meme sources and internet interaction in general. There are entire subreddits<sup>84</sup> dedicated to the Doge meme, underlining Doge's relationship with Reddit. These are divided into niche topics that are Doge-related, such as /r/doge, /r/dogemarket and /r/dogeducation<sup>85</sup>. Within these subreddits Doge enthusiasts can gather and mutually enjoy Doge-related memes that users post and create themselves. The comment section usually works as a continuation of the meme post, particularly if the post is successful and garners a high number of upvotes, in the sense that users respond mostly in Doge language to express their reaction to the original content posted.

One of the biggest Doge-related subreddits is the /r/SuperShibe, where redditors post images of Shiba Inus, sometimes with accompanying Doge captions in iconic font and colours. There is also encouragement to post 'irlshibes', or pictures of instances where the Doge meme appears in physical life. The frequency of these posts signals towards the importance of documenting internet culture in non-internet spaces and places. To further this complexity, these pieces of evidence of an online object in an offline setting are then posted in an online space, as to share these escaped bits of the internet with fellow appreciators:



<sup>83</sup> Reddit is based on a voting system: content posted by redditors is either voted up or down, the higher the number of votes (or upvotes) the more visibility it will have

<sup>84</sup> i.e. spaces dedicated to particular topics within Reddit

<sup>85</sup> A considerable amount of these subreddits are dedicated to Dogecoins, a topic which shall be explored in a more in-depth fashion further ahead.

This phenomena furthers legitimises the difficulty in separating the online from the offline world, and even questions whether this is desirable: looking through examples posted in /r/SuperShibe it seemingly is not, as there is a sense of pleasure in finding these pieces of the internet in a tangible world (see Nicolas Cage installation in chapter 7). This joy, however, does not extend to all uses of online memes in the palpable world, which was evidenced by the reactions of online memes being used in commercial offline spheres (see chapter 6).

### **Dogecoin**

Approximately coinciding with the popularity of the Doge meme in 2013 was the meteoric rise of cryptocurrency, in particular Bitcoin and its value (KYM). This timing meant that Bitcoin was not immune to the impact of the Doge meme. Bitcoin brought with it a long string of other cryptocurrency spin-offs: there are currently 1453 different cryptocurrencies listed in the Cryptocurrency Market Capitalizations website (CoinMarketCap 2018), among these is the Dogecoin which is based on the Doge meme. Although both are cryptocurrencies, Bitcoins dominate the market in terms of value, notoriety and impact; on the other hand, worth less than a penny, a Dogecoin's value is almost imperceptible. Nonetheless Dogecoin is arguably one of the most recognisable cryptocurrencies after the Bitcoin, as shown by the amount of mainstream media that has covered it.

Much like Bitcoin, none of the Dogecoin creators were able to estimate the popularity that the currency would experience; the Dogecoin was never created with intent to be a financial competitor to the bigger value cryptocurrencies but was instead meant to be a fun and inconsequential cryptocurrency that paid homage to a popular meme (Chaparro 2018). Despite its lack of high monetary value, Dogecoin's prosperity might be perceived as one of a more cultural nature as opposed to profit making; four of my interviewees mined Dogecoins in particular and none of their motivations were financial, they instead felt Dogecoin had a more communal and social meaning to them above all else. For N.M., J.C., D.R. and M.P. Dogecoins are above all else about paying homage to a popular meme they are fond of, as well as being engaged in a community that has meaningful value to them.

There are a few other incentives that have contributed towards Dogecoin's appeal: the popular internet culture properties attached to this specific type of currency, paired with its considerate lack of monetary value, make it a particularly attractive cryptocurrency for

those who are quite sceptic about these in general, as the stakes with Dogecoin are low<sup>86</sup>. Dogecoins offers a simpler and more inviting approach to cryptocurrency (Kirby 2014), along with a notably warmer and more user-friendly community than more mainstream cryptocurrencies (Reutzel 2017). However Dogecoins may not prove to be Bitcoin's more legitimised counterpart, as there have been confirmed cases of Dogecoins being obtained through illegal hacking of third party computers (Greenberg 2014; Goodman 2016: 372).

Before I delve into the social and cultural impacts of Dogecoin I will address that despite Dogecoin's little monetary value, it is *still* worth money which should not be entirely ignored as this might serve as the motivation for some. Recently Dogecoin has shown rising trends that defy the ups and downs of other crypto currencies (Chaparro 2018). That being said I do not believe this is the dominant motivation behind Dogecoin and its miners, not only because of information gathered in my interviews but also due to the *uses* that Dogecoin is put to. Throughout my online ethnography I encountered an association between Dogecoins and their use for charity and philanthropic purposes; this is supported by evidence in the literature that argues its altruism was instilled early into the core of Dogecoin (Vigna & Casey 2015: 90). This is not exclusively what they are used for, but this relation between Dogecoins and gift-giving is more than apparent. There are a few examples I would like to address regarding this relationship; these can be split into two types of 'giving' behaviour:

- a) 'Tipping' good comments with Dogecoins in Reddit
- b) Charitable donations

These actions are effectively transforming the gift economy to a more literal rendition where people are exchanging near worthless money for moneyless actions; it is upon these acts of tipping and charitable donations that I intend to expand, as well as relate to its social and cultural impact on the aforementioned online gift economy and Doge communities.

### **Tipping in Reddit**

Dogecoin is quite popular within Reddit communities; here the introduction of the Dogecoin has had an impact not only in terms of economy, but it has also changed online

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<sup>86</sup> Although other factors must be taken into account such as the daunting and seemingly complex aura surrounding the Bitcoin, as well as the controversy attached to it regarding illicit and criminal use and its incredibly high value (Marx, J. 2017)

dynamics of interaction. Redditors invested in Dogecoin currency began ‘tipping’ each other via the platform; this involves sending Dogecoins to other users as a form of recognition for their contributions, which could range from helpful insights to funny comments (Cawrey 2014). The culture of tipping Dogecoins is so prevalent in some sections of Reddit that an automated tipping system for Dogecoins has been created in order to tip more seamlessly.<sup>87</sup>

There is an agreed upon code of ethics regarding appropriate conduct for Dogecoins and tipping, which is roughly outlined in the Reddit post titled ‘Doge Commandments’ (doge\_messiah 2013). These reflect the Dogecoin community’s principles of helping each other, particularly encouraging the tipping of those with a lower amount of Dogecoins, as well as a sense of friendly community opposing greed, theft and jealousy of those with higher amounts of Dogecoins. The values ingrained within these commandments reflect how the sense of community and amiability are put before monetary and financial desires, further cementing my understanding that those invested in Dogecoins do not do so for profitability. One of my interviewees, /r/Dogecoin’s moderator M.P., makes a point of differentiating Dogecoins from other cryptocurrencies:

‘It’s very important, VERY important, for all altcoins to distinguish themselves somehow from bitcoin. We do it with the community (...) and the culture of tipping and welcoming newbies’

M.P.’s underlying of this point shows how Dogecoin community’s principles are based on unconventional priorities when compared to larger cryptocurrencies’ philosophies of profit.

It is not uncommon for Doge-related groups such as the Dogecoin subreddit to feature giveaway posts. These consist in users announcing that they will be tipping large amounts of Dogecoins to other Reddit users. Receiving these gifted Dogecoins may be based on a number of different factors: some users hold Doge themed drawing contests and award Dogecoins to a handful of the best drawings; others ask for redditors to post jokes, the funniest or most original are then rewarded with Dogecoins by the original poster; whilst others have absolutely no criteria and just give them away to those who comment on the post. Despite their difference in conditions and levels of engagement demanded in order to win Dogecoins all of these have at their core the Doge tenets of charity, friendliness and help; indeed it is not uncommon for posters to receive tips just for entering these competitions. Behind these

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<sup>87</sup> The system rests upon an automated bot that is summoned with a written order, which details how many Dogecoins are to be tipped to the particular individual to whom the tipper is replying (Cawrey 2014).

apparent random acts of kindness (or 'random acts of Doge', as some users describe them) lies an intrinsic message of giving and sharing Dogecoins with strangers whilst also carrying with it a positively charitable attitude. Here we observe Doge appreciators entering a very real economy of gift giving, as Dogecoins with legitimate monetary value (albeit small) are being exchanged among them; as stated by my interviewees this is not about the money that is being exchanged but instead it is about the act of rewarding other community members for their contributions, ranging from creating an original piece of art to the simple act of participation.

Some givers make explicit that the receiver of the gifted Dogecoins should share them with others, thus continuing the cycle of tipping Dogecoin. Here the emphasis on circulation is also visible with Dogecoins, with real encouragement for it to come into contact with as many people as possible. Although there might be some economic reasons behind this desire for popularity, seeing as the value of the Dogecoin is very low, we inevitably turn to alternative reasons for this aspiration of visibility. As with the original Doge meme, the reasons might be related to inclusion of more people on this cultural bandwagon. Instinctively, questions regarding the nature of the motivation behind these actions arise. Whilst there have been similar inquests into the motivation behind personal investment of time and knowledge from Wikipedians into the creation of pages that will benefit a mass of strangers (see Kuznetsov 2006; Forte & Bruckman 2008; Mushiba, Gallert & Winschiers-Theophilus 2016: 5), it is unlikely there is a definite answer to account for all individual motivations. However we may uncover some motivations behind redditors who gift strangers with Dogecoins through analysis of context and interaction. There is an explicit call to spread the coin to further the initial charitable action but there is also a call to gift coins to others to popularise the Dogecoin among as many people as possible. This is encouraged primarily under the Dogecoin slogan 'To the moon!', further emphasised by the Dogecoin' community banner containing a moon and an upward moving rocket, which urges users to increase the popularity of the Dogecoin to astronomical levels; it is also used as an encouraging call to each other within the community, promoting the aforementioned sense of unity among Doge enthusiasts.

Essentially, strangers are sending other strangers money to convey their agreement and appreciation over certain comments. Although very small amounts of money, it is nevertheless a very interesting shift in online interactions; it is even more intriguing if we

consider the current online environment, where content is expected to be for free and where it is hard enough to make people part with cents for a professionally produced song from a major recording artist (Gardner 2005: 173-4). When questioned about whether he'd rather pay the Apple Store 99 cents to download a song by an experienced musician or whether he'd rather tip that money to a fellow redditor, M.P. placed a higher value on the latter, stating 'I wouldn't pay for music, I'd listen to it for free with ads'. This change points towards something that could be quite significant: it is possible that people are willing to pay for things they personally find relevant and *meaningful*, even though general consensus might dictate that this is irrelevant content that does not warrant monetary compensation. In this case, online popular culture might be closer to the heart (and wallet) than something mass produced by a professional corporation; people might feel more connected with content and entertainment that comes from online users like them than with wealthy artists that make ready-made music for the masses. This is not to say that mass made entertainment is not appealing – it is clear it still sells at an immense rate – but that we need to rethink what counts as meaningful and worthy for online users.<sup>88</sup>

### **Dogecoins for charity**

With time the core values of Reddit's Dogecoin community expanded outwardly, impacting those that are not necessarily Shibe aficionados. An impressive feat of the community happened at the height of Doge's fame in 2014, making headlines in mainstream media: as the Sochi Olympics of 2014 were going to take place it became known by Dogecoin redditors that although the Jamaican bobsleigh team had qualified they lacked the funds to compete. Thus the community held a Dogecoin fundraiser to meet the Jamaican's team costs of participating in the games, raising \$25,000 in a short amount of time and fully sponsoring the team's participation (Vigna & Casey 2015: 90). The community also helped Indian luger Shiva Keshavan's, and ended up raising over \$6,000 for him to participate in the Sochi games (Mudigonda 2014). Indeed it was after these milestones that D.R. became invested in the Dogecoin community, eventually becoming a moderator for Reddit's Dogecoin community:

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<sup>88</sup> Note: I want to clarify that people are not sending money in order to *access* these comments (as can be the case with mainstream newspapers' editorial pieces); they are simply rewarding the poster in question, as they already have access to the comment from the start.

'It wasn't until I heard about Dogecoin's contributions to the Sochi Olympics, sponsoring the Jamaican Bobsled and Indian Luge teams, that I visited /r/Dogecoin for the first time (...) I made the jump and have been immersed ever since' (D.R.)

Considering this type of charitable social and economic environment that permeates the use of Dogecoins, it is no surprise that its creators went on to establish the 'Dogecoin Foundation' where a handful of charities, projects and sponsored initiatives are featured. The Foundation aims to 'facilitate the continuing prosperity of Dogecoin through promotional and charitable endeavors (sic) expand the community ideals of camaraderie and playful discovery and to empower people the world over' (The Dogecoin Foundation 2014-2015). Thus, the Dogecoin Foundation seems to achieve a two-fold goal where charities receive an additional stream of donations by opening up their causes to the Dogecoin community and to make Dogecoin not only more visible to outside communities but associated with charitable actions. Here, users are encouraged to send their Dogecoins for one of the listed causes, usually announced on /r/Dogecoin. By exploring the Dogecoin Foundation we witness not only the astonishing power of attaching an idea (i.e. giving to charity) to an existing popular meme but also an apparent underlying charitable nature that has become noticeable in Dogecoins. Although only a few projects and charities are featured on the Dogecoin Foundation's page, these have enjoyed a very fruitful stint. Successful sponsored initiatives include raising \$30,000 in Dogecoins for the *Doge4Kids* project, providing disabled children with service dogs (Sojourner 2017) and the *Doge4water* initiative which raised \$32,000 in Dogecoin towards providing clean drinking water for desolate areas of Kenya (Vigna & Casey 2015: 91). In the latter's fundraising website there is a surreal sign of the times, as the *Doge4water's* mission statement and goals are topped by bright large comic sans short sentences in Dogespeak e.g. 'such community', 'wow', 'very crypto' (Doge4water 2014).

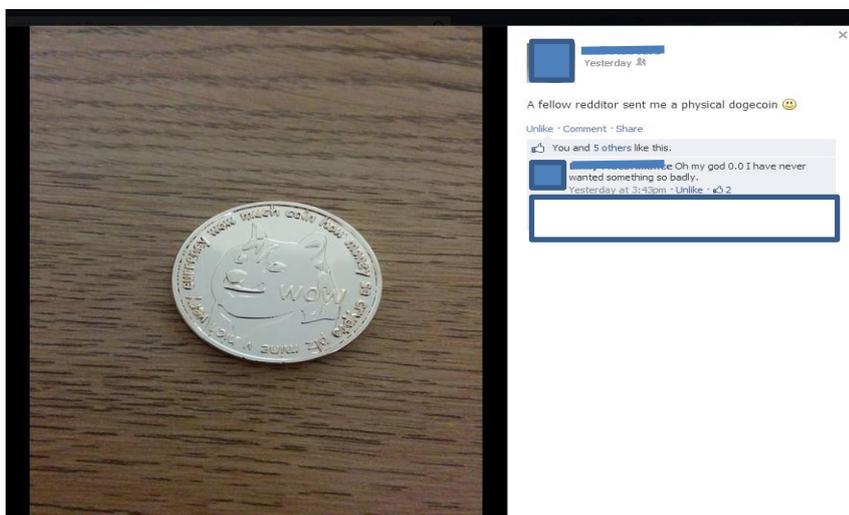
There are other more mundane cases where Dogecoins are being used for philanthropic actions. Though the Foundation itself does not seem active as of late, there are still altruistic actions being made through Dogecoins that are visible through /r/Dogecoin: from local food bank donations to furnishing socks for the homeless, the spirit of giving is still a core value of the Dogecoin ethos. The many smaller charitable actions that are funded entirely through Dogecoins may not result in as much projection and press as the Dogecoin Foundation's big undertakings, however they still have a very real and direct impact on local

communities. Charitable actions are not exclusive to Dogecoins or online currencies; on the other hand the philosophy of giving that is so present among the Dogecoin tenets echoes the aforementioned online gift economy, as well as the culture of sharing, a sense of community surrounding niche internet culture, and the popularity of online crowdsourcing.

### Dogecoins IRL

Despite being a cryptocurrency that is rooted in the virtual context, Dogecoins have also made the leap to palpable offline reality. The presence of Dogecoins outside the online sphere is becoming increasingly felt with some physical high street shops accepting Dogecoins as a form of payment. This crossover of the Dogecoin not only signals a representation of memes in the offline sphere, but it also indicates the legitimisation of online meme currency in corporate offline spaces. We have explored in previous chapters how the corporate world is encroaching on the virtual space, and although the use of Dogecoins in physical shops is certainly an extension of that example, it can also be perceived as a curious reversal, where virtual space finds its way into a corporate place.

Additionally there is a supplementary dimension of physicality that can be added to Dogecoins, which is the existence of *actual* metal Dogecoins that are minted, akin to coins found in any established currency worldwide. One of my interviewees, N.M. is the first person I have come across who owns a physical reproduction of a Dogecoin, in currency-like form. The coin in question was minted by a fellow redditor and Doge enthusiast who also happened to be a metalworker with access to a forge.



Although there is no mint creating physical Dogecoins and the physical object itself is not inherently worth any actual money, this particular Dogecoin was worth money since a valid code was engraved on the back of the coin, ascribing it with a real value of 100 Dogecoins. This is not such an alien concept: 'regular' money is in itself inherently worthless; its worth comes from the ascribed value we have agreed upon for it. On the other hand we cannot separate the value from the object in physical money: we can't make a £10 note be worth any more or less than it does at that given point in economic history. Because Dogecoins are not entwined with either physical representations of monetary value nor are they restricted to the monetary guidelines of a 'regular' coin-based economy the rules in this context change. One of the most radical and innovative aspects of cryptocurrency is its rejection of these physical and legal constraints, thus it is worth questioning why someone would purposefully override these and anchor it to a physical object; it's not as if Dogecoins would be worth issuing anyway because they would all have unique codes and values, thus they couldn't even be made en masse like regular coins.

Despite the Dogecoin forger being in Australia and N.M. in Scotland, the online relationship between these two strangers gained physicality with the creation and delivery of a physical Dogecoin. N.M. and the forger were not virtual friends not had any prior knowledge of each other; they simply belonged to the same subreddit. This action goes beyond the charitable deed of online tipping, seeing as material costs and overseas postage costs are also a factor; this makes it all the most uncanny, N.M. himself commented that 'that coin weighs a ton, I can't imagine how expensive it was to send it'. Adding to this paradoxical logic is the fact that the coin sent was worth 100 Dogecoins, which at any given time is worth less than £1. This counteractive feat goes to show that the act of anchoring something integrally and organically virtual onto a physical object is a deliberate act that requires motivation, engagement and demonstrates that there is an inherent meaning in the act itself.

On the other hand it is also possible that this is not such a radical departure from how we deal with the issues of internet and (dis)embodiment. As mentioned in chapter 1, much of the early literature on the internet focused on its relation to the body and/or self-presentation in online spaces. Some of the early popular rhetoric underlined the 'bodiless' possibilities offered by the internet: with communication taking place in an intangible space, social markers that have historically lead to discrimination in society could now be erased,

leading ultimately to a potentially equal platform of ideas and discussion for all regardless of race, sex, gender or social status (Turkle 1995; Shields 1996; Goggin & Newell 2003: 111; Wertheim 2004: 220). Of course this was not the case and inequalities present in society mirrored themselves online both in terms of who could access this technology (physically and culturally) and in terms of who got to monopolise these ideas and discussions (Norris 2001; Ratto & Boler 2014: 12). Not only was this utopian ideal of a bodiless interaction impossible, it was not necessarily desired. Despite the internet's text communication that characterised its early days (which could lend to anyone adopting and experimenting with various identities) in reality this was not the case, as the majority of internet users were mostly true to themselves online (see Kirkpatrick 2010: 198; Baym 2010: 152). There is a parallel between this process and the anchoring of a virtual bond with a physical object, as observed with N.M.'s metal Dogecoin and the part it plays in making online meaning and interactions tangible.

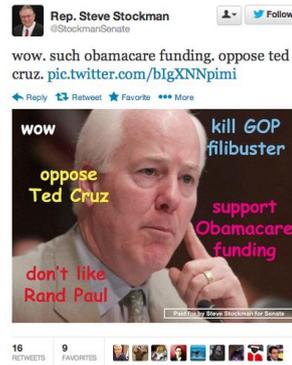
### 'Official' uses - Politics

Chapter 5 outlined how memes can be used for political causes. As the Doge meme began gaining notoriety it became a matter of time until it also became co-opted by political and governmental powers. In 2014 the Washington State Department of Traffic tweeted out a warning regarding road construction through the use of Doge:



Although this did not spread on a very large scale<sup>89</sup>, the little feedback it got was positive, including its Twitter comment responses. However a few months prior to this, Rep. Steve Stockman from the US Republican party had similarly tweeted a Doge meme:

<sup>89</sup> The post was retweeted 166 times and liked 100 times (Official Washington State DoT, 2014)

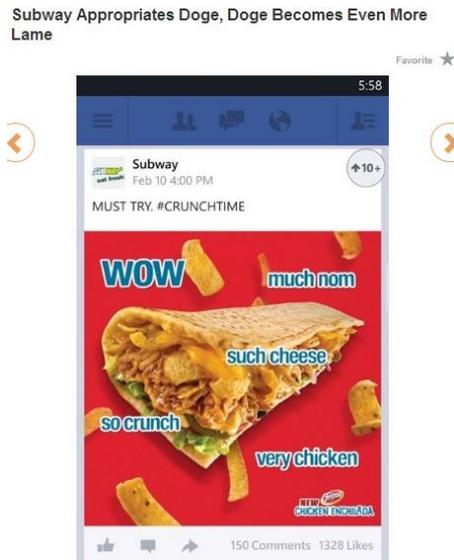


This, in turn, was not received warmly by both those that felt this was a desperate attempt to use the Doge meme for political leverage as well as those that were not impressed with the misuse of Doge speak (McMurry 2013). Authors went as far as openly declaring this the ‘Death of Doge’, stating that ‘regardless of your ideals, the moment you attached such a thing of purity [i.e. memes] toward furthering such an agenda, you kill it’ (McHugh 2013).

With these examples we can see a few processes that I have touched upon earlier in this thesis in action: Doge exemplifies meme malleability and pervasiveness, however it has become apparent that these traits, when stretched to saturation, may backfire and reflect negatively on those using them. This is particularly true when being disseminated by a public figure, which carries added weight and visibility. This tweet deliberately ties the Doge meme with capital P Political ideology and agenda, which is another reason for its intensive critique when compared to the governmental use of Doge by the Washington State DOT. Lastly, the misuse of Doge speak transpired Stockman’s lack of true understanding of the meme he used, further indicating his ‘jumping on the bandwagon’ as opposed to being a legitimate Doge fan.

### **‘Official’ uses - Commercial circulation**

Beyond the political realm, the Doge meme also illustrates other types of circulation; namely the commercial uses of memes outlined in Chapter 6. In my ethnography I encountered a Subway ad featuring one of their sandwiches alongside Dogespeak:

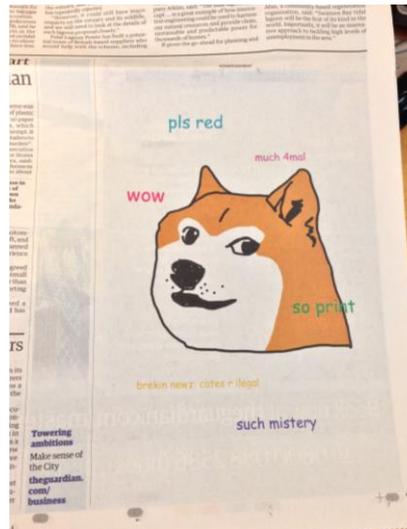


Similarly to the use of Doge by politicians, when appropriated by Subway for commercial aims the response veered negatively, as denoted by its entry in ICHC (2014) pictured above. Those who identify with internet culture do not take lightly at its usurping by ‘outside’ forces such as these. Although chapter 6 demonstrated some sense of distrust when memes are used for advertising it also showed this is not a blanket reaction. Other factors influence the rejection or acceptance of commercialised meme use such as *correct* use and understanding, as well as whether the company is genuinely attempting to interact with meme fans.

Taking a closer look shows some complexity: the ICHC post has 536 downvotes and 147 upvotes, which shows most ICHC users reacted with the same kind of negativity that the post portrays. However the above screenshot of the original post (taken from Subway’s Facebook account) shows us that it garnered at least over 1300 likes. Nevertheless, this opposition points to something *else* I have been able to distinguish in this thesis: meme fans have hierarchies and Facebook lies very low among them. Through my interviewees I have denoted that meme-specific spaces hold a much higher value on the meaning of memes, rather than just a passing semi-understanding of them (common in spaces that are not meme-centric), justifying why users of meme-centric spaces become more defensive about the commercial appropriation of memes.

### Doge IRL

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of February 2014, physical copies of *The Guardian* newspaper featured a Doge meme in their financial section:



At a glance, the meme seemed wildly misplaced, and although it reads ‘advertisement’ in small print, no company logo or additional information was provided, which made its status of advertisement seem confusing. The ad was placed by the business data company DueDil (DueDil Team 2014), which was not apparent at first as there are no identifiable sources or logos in the ad. This bizarre use of Doge led curiosity to arise, causing questions surrounding this ad to pop up in the online (and, in my own experience of that day, offline) sphere (Bryan 2014; City A.M. 2014, Huffington Post UK 2014).

On the same day it was revealed that the company had won the ad space worth £50,000 in a competition held by *The Guardian* and decided to run the meme instead of using the space as a direct form of advertisement. In an online article published by *The Guardian* later that day, DueDil explained they did not feel the need for additional advertising (Hern 2014a). An official post on the company’s blog also stated that motivations behind this unconventional move included doing it ‘for the lulz’ (DueDil Team 2014). The ad itself follows the rules of the Doge meme correctly, demonstrating DueDil’s familiarity with Doge and internet culture. Unlike the previous example of LOLcats being used in a removed artistic context in the offline world<sup>90</sup>, here the use of the Doge meme follows the ascribed internet rules that birthed it: even though both examples portray popular online memes dwelling in unexpected offline settings, DueDil’s approach is more faithful than the LOLcat exhibition, as it respects the meme’s intrinsic rules of style and language. On the other hand, this does not mean that the resulting relationship between Doge and its newfound residence among *The Guardian’s* financial pages are not without friction.

<sup>90</sup> See chapter 7

Here it is crucial to stress the importance of taking into account the context in which a meme circulates. Whilst there are already radical shifts of context at play when an online meme makes the leap into the palpable world, additional issues must be considered when this circulation involves established mass media products and, overlapping this context, commercial spaces; particularly when we consider the original contexts in which online memes tend to circulate and be birthed. In short, this particular use of an online meme in an offline space is of a contradictory nature, as the offline space in question is a palpable mainstream media newspaper. Automatically, tensions might arise from the noticeably different places and cultures that comprise online meme spaces and offline journalism. The former is a digital object and a product of online culture that is held to almost no standards of quality and can be created by a very large amount of people, the latter is an old form of established media that is still structured around the logic of gatekeeping, where select professionals create content (Leadbeater 2009: xvii; Shirky 2010: 46 – see chapter 1). This clash questions the expected roles and boundaries of both types of media: the role of the online meme as a democratic tool for the purposes of social engagement may be contested, as it demonstrates the ability to be re-appropriated for commercial reasons, not unlike its punk predecessors (Leblanc 1999: 53; Ensminger 2011: 19 – see chapter 1). Furthermore, newspapers<sup>91</sup> have a credibility that relies on centuries of news making; the credibility and cultural value that *The Guardian* enjoys is far from being available to online memes.

Turning to the contradictory qualities between costless memes and highly commercialised spaces, there is an intrinsic irony in the act of placing a free Doge image which can be featured virtually anywhere, and decide to publish it in a space valued at £50,000; in our capitalistic culture, this raises questions of the value of Doge itself. By placing the Doge meme in this context, a tension arises between the free qualities of online memes<sup>92</sup> and the social and professional constraints of mainstream mass media, which in the case of *The Guardian* newspaper is neither *libre* nor *gratis*.

Embedding online culture in a traditional media context such as a physical copy of an established newspaper might give way to fears of this meme's over-domestication, (as seen in chapter 6). On the other hand, the possibility of subversion lies within reach, as we can

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<sup>91</sup> Particularly those that are not of the tabloid variety such as *The Guardian*

<sup>92</sup> Here 'free' reflects both the *libre* (free of charge) and *gratis* (free of non-monetary access restrictions such as copyright) meanings outlined by the open access movement (Suber 2012: 66)

simultaneously put into question the gatekeeping role of mainstream media, as even with its filtering of content it became the stage for what many might consider superfluous online 'noise'. The elastic properties of the meme have led to a fluidity of both mediums in this example, as the meme demonstrates it is adaptable enough to fit into a context that on the surface would reject it, as well as presenting a cultural negotiation within the established space of journalism. Ultimately, one of the oldest forms of mass media is housing one of the youngest products of internet culture, which might be bound by the former's rules, but it might also be transposing some of its properties into this bounded space.

The result of the ad is interesting to note, as both mediums vary immensely and thus the way we interact with them may be radically different. There is a crucial aspect of interactivity that is lost when the meme appears in printed form – there is no possibility of altering it and re-circulating it in the same circuit (i.e. through the newspaper itself or any other already printed newspaper). Whilst there is the possibility of showing people within physical proximity the ad, thus allowing for some form of interaction, there is inevitably a social component that is lost by the denial of the possibility of hyperlinking such content. Here I stress the importance of the hyperlink as the foundation of online interaction (O'Reilly 2012: 37), as it permits an unprecedented form of outward interaction. This wide ranging social component can only be regained by re-digitising the meme; this is an urge that a few readers of this particular physical copy of *The Guardian* felt, as pictures of the Doge meme featuring in the paper began surfacing online. It is not uncommon for this process of re-digitisation to happen; as we have seen in earlier chapters.

As aforementioned in chapter 7, unlike the LOLcat pieces featured in the museum, the Doge advert did not explicitly link to any company or author, which follows in line with online memes' relationship towards a rejection of clear authorship (Davison 2012: 132; see also Leadbeater 2009: 16). However it is important to note that the lack of clear authorship in the ad can also be seen as an effective gimmick – readers became intrigued and searched for answers online, which were promptly given through *The Guardian's* post published on the same day. The timing of the article is also crucial, as it was slightly after the meteoric rise of the Doge meme and right in the middle of Dogecoin's most successful period. This allowed the ad to be relevant to a considerably larger audience than if it had been printed in Doge's early days; as online spaces were already saturated with Doge memes by then, more people were familiar with the meme by the time of *The Guardian's* publication.

Despite being an instance of an online meme being used for advertising purposes, this use of Doge differs from previous examples of these explorations in the sense that its message did not reflect or directly relate to the company at hand. DueDil could have used the accompanying Dogespeak text in order to reference itself in a straightforward form of appropriation. This case is slightly more complex, as the meme is being appropriated by a corporation, yet its message does *not* reflect this re-appropriative act nor does it reflect a commercial intent. For this reason I focused on the change of medium in this example instead of taking a purely commercial appropriation point-of-view, as I found this distinctive characteristic displayed the at odds interaction played out between such different mediums and cultural signposts. This example also demonstrates how these differing vehicles are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and have both shown a certain degree of adaptation.

As we have seen throughout this chapter, Doge has been one of the most successful internet memes to date; this has been particularly confirmed by its elasticity, circulation and popularity. In addition to its fervent fan base, Doge's playfulness, disregard for grammar and remixability have led to countless Doge spin-offs. From an internet meme the Dogecoin cryptocurrency was born, and with it came not only a strong sense of community that defied online delineations but also a strong ethos of charity and generosity that would defy current monetary values held by our capitalist and 'self'-driven society – although charitable actions are present in daily life, the act of tipping strangers for funny observations is not. The aspiration to connect with others through visual symbols is not new; however it indicates that online culture and communication follow these social patterns, as a connection is attempted within and beyond the online sphere. Following the general frameworks outlined in previous chapters, I have applied these to Doge with careful examination of how this case study echoes the research I have undergone hitherto. The Doge meme is present across the board of our commercial, political and cultural experiences, though these instances are not all received (and perceived) with the same acceptance. This has not only elucidated many of the processes described in earlier chapters but has also resulted in the showcasing of how fully bounded the Doge case study is. With this comprehensive analysis of a meme in practice complete, I now turn to the conclusive thoughts and findings of this thesis.

## Conclusion

A few years ago it would have been unlikely that a comprehensive study of internet memes would be feasible or relevant; yet the place held by internet memes in our everyday experience has changed dramatically and with it our communicative and cultural practices. LOLcats and Doges have earned their place in our friendships, library signs, adverts, t-shirts and even our political views; and although it is not the first time a piece of the more popular side of culture pervades these spaces it is the first time we see it occurring at this rate, speed and scale. Memes might not be the first thing to come to mind when we think of the digital revolution but they are nonetheless a relevant and remarkable product of our current technological and socio-political climate. While meme making might seem like an oversimplified way of creating inane jokes, in reality there are impressive processes going on: starting with its low-entry point into participatory culture which lends a potential democratic quality due to its inclusive nature, to the inherently political act of mass DIY or DIWO, to the ability to cross geographical, linguistic and cultural barriers and remain relevant to all whilst still being able to maintain local and immediate applicability. Throughout my research I have delineated different types of memes, as memes fulfil different purposes and thus respond in varied ways to circulation. These differences are particularly visible among explicitly capital P political memes, which are often reactionary i.e. a meme that is born as reaction to a particular incident, working as social and cultural commentary to a particular situation.

Being a central part of nowadays' internet culture, online memes owe a large part of their existence to the development of user-friendly computer technology, the cementation of the internet as the 'network of networks' and the boom of participatory interactions that have permeated the online ethos since the occurrence of the Web 2.0 moment. It is this reliance on the internet's architecture that has permitted such phenomena to be created and shared at such a large scale and speed. Their mutability, speed of transmission, and global reach paired with their considerably low technological literacy demands have ensured internet memes' popularity, evidenced by their sheer mass when we look at content featured in prominent websites; this spread occurs beyond meme-specific spaces and includes more general forms of social media. The circulation of memes deeply shapes their existence and even their boundaries and meaning, as they are not impermeable to context and adapt accordingly. Whilst various websites are dedicated to memes (e.g. ICHC, KYM, 9gag, etc.)

where they all have their particular logics of circulation, meaning and interaction; memes remain an elusive form that is mostly used interchangeably through all kinds of spaces. In short, the user does not revolve around the meme but the meme adapts to users' needs and changing contexts. It is this dynamic that makes memes so useful to our communication, since they are born and changed to meet our wide range of expressive needs – particularly online, where communicative cues that permeate face-to-face communication may be lacking. Although memes have elevated our creative and communicative abilities, this also means that some may be appropriated for unsavoury uses such as bullying, oppression and hate speech.

One question that inevitably arose within my thesis, regardless of intentionality, was if and how technological determinism played a role in the relationship between memes and communication. On one hand, our ability to make memes relies heavily on technology and internet culture (which, arguably, could not exist without computers and networked infrastructures); on the other hand memes are tools that we manipulate and mutate (to the point where computers and infrastructures are no longer absolutely essential for meme circulation) in order to meet our expressive needs. We can thus conclude that the answer lies somewhere along the lines of a symbiotic relationship, where one feeds into the other.

Meme making and sharing have become an entrenched part of our current cultural experience, which has spread not only through a myriad of topics and contexts but also through different geographic and virtual spaces. Yet memes have become so much more than just the product of technological improvements, earning their place in our archives of cultural relevance beyond the internet's domain. Meme circulation has expanded outside internet borders, with memes finding their way onto physical incarnations in the offline world through drawings to merchandise, to voiced iterations. In addition to demonstrating how prevalent memes have become, this jump into palpable existence further complicates the outdated perception of the separation of online space and offline place. Our current experience of the internet goes beyond the restricted world of the computer or mobile phone, becoming adjacent to a growing number of elements (i.e. the internet of things), some of which are not necessarily pieces of technology. This translation into a physical aspect may be due to the sheer ubiquity of digital technologies, but it is also due to an online culture whose fluidity is permeating offline life. The way each interviewee uses memes in both their online and their offline lives is intrinsically related to questions of meaning, both personal and public.

Here we come to one of the central roles of a meme: to make *meaning*. Meaning is a central aspect of the human experience, and whilst it is wise not to get lost in claims of memes being crucial to our communication, it is a fact that meaning is a central aspect of memes, which in turn are widely used in our communication around the world. Following this train of thought we can see the potential importance of memes, as they represent a massively used form of global meaning making on a daily basis. In addition to the outlined characteristics, memes are also media objects that allow for layers of meaning to be added to them in modular form, which fine tunes their intended impact and audience with precision. From a broad shared experience (i.e. the annoyance of getting our socks wet) to very specific relational interactions (i.e. expressing an opinion on a detailed aspect of research between two academics) to somewhere in the middle (i.e. making a meme about a specific university); memes allow for different levels of interaction and inter-relation among the few and the many. This matters as it means that the same tool that is used to strengthen our immediate relationships is also used for a broader relational interaction with strangers around the world, using collective meaning making as a communicative device that can adapt to different social contexts. Due to the adaptability of memes the message communicated can range from an innocuous joke to the express of serious political or social dissent – this power is evidenced by Russia’s recent censorship of memes, among other reactions and uses detailed in chapter 5.

Although memes can be used as cultural currency that is understood by all those whom engage with them, a meme’s meaning and cultural value varies depending on context, and even the nature of the relationship between whom the meme is being exchanged. At the end of every chapter in this thesis – whether it’s the use of internet memes in everyday relations, or among politics, or corporate uses – it becomes apparent that although memes can be used in a myriad of contexts, they all ultimately relate to questions of meaning. Memes are used in political contexts to try and make meaning of the confusing political backdrop that persists; meme merchandise offers fans a way of engaging in communal meaning making, a way of literally bearing the shirt that makes you part of a larger community. It is meaning that envelops all online memes and their uses. These meme uses describe an emerging form of global communication that is instant, reactive and reflective of the current zeitgeist. At a time when global communication is more important than ever, memes offer immediate reactionary conversations among millions of people the world over.

Timing is also important when it comes to a meme's meaning, whether that's the timely creation of a meme that reacts to current events or the original posting of a meme's iteration for the first time. Memes have a complicated relationship with repetition: they need some of it in order to be recognisable when they mutate and circulate, yet they cannot have too much of it otherwise they become tiresome and unappealing. My research reflects the importance of keeping meme content fresh and how too much circulation and repetition can have a negative impact. Additionally, the comedic value of memes also reaches obsolescence at differing points for different people. Memes that are repeated continuously are devalued, as there is only so much repetition that a meme can withstand before becoming a nuisance. Thus memes are full of contradictions that inhabit their existence simultaneously. Internet memes have proved that although they may be quickly replaced with the new meme of the week, they are nonetheless a permanent fixture: no matter how many memes are born daily, we can count on their continuous pour into our lives, colouring our personal relationships and online interactions. Memes should no longer be seen as a novelty, but should be perceived with the cemented statute they deserve – after all, it's been over twenty years since the quintessential 'Dancing Baby' internet meme was born, and memes show no sign of slowing down after two decades.

Meme meaning is very susceptible to personal uses, cementing one's personal meaning on a visible, public arena. When there was a direct lack of offline outlet for internet culture and its particular interactions, identifiers were used in order to address the wider public, in hopes of possible recognition: one of my interviewees occasionally wears t-shirts with the Doge meme in hopes of signalling their appreciation to other Doge enthusiasts in their immediate reality, another interviewee printed out memes and posted them on their window which led to passers-by commenting on them. By engaging in such acts, there is an attempt to open up a forum of communication between them and other meme enthusiasts; a forum that goes beyond the online delimitations of the internet.

Clothing as a medium for an internet meme adds the factor of mobility into this equation – whilst wearing a t-shirt is in no way comparable with the transmission ability of the internet (it does not have the same range, speed of transmission or endless duplicability), it is nonetheless an offline way of circulating a meme. As the wearer moves through different spaces, the meme is seen by different people, who may or may not recognise and interact

accordingly. Here a difference becomes apparent through the alteration of context: whilst online memes may be aggregated in online spaces where it is not unusual to find them, no one has control over where a meme t-shirt circulates - and it is unlikely it will circulate in meme-specific spaces offline. Thus, in this context, the wearer might expose the meme to different audiences that did not search nor expect memes in this context in the first place. Here the meaning making exercise that surrounds memes does not converge into a space, but instead it diverges into an array of random spaces; meaning is not concentrated in an expected place but instead appears in multiple unexpected places. I believe that this change in the rules of circulation brings with it a change in the meaning attached to it: when someone recognises and reacts to a meme in an online space where memes tend to circulate, the impact of said recognition is not equivalent as when a meme is spotted and reacted to in an offline context. This is particularly noticeable by the elevated reaction of my respondents to their interaction with offline memes versus their encounter of memes in online space.

Throughout this thesis I have aimed to look at memes' place within historic remix culture as well as their contribution towards the recent phenomena of online participatory culture in particular. Ultimately, internet memes are yet another contribution to our already existing remix continuum, which is populated by many other forms such as Dada art, détournement, punk and many other movements and creative expressions. It is not surprising to find that memes are also another example of collective making, following in the footsteps of DIY and craft cultures. The extension of this ethos into online memes can be seen in the central part that sharing undertakes in meme culture: if a meme doesn't spread, it's dead. Much like older forms of craft, collectivity is inbuilt into the very act of making memes, as they encourage participation, circulation, interaction and communication.

Inevitably weaving through these ideas, issues surrounding democratic engagement and participation arise, even when the meme does not address politics explicitly. The shift in power from media content makers to media consumers has irrevocably changed media-audience relationships through the access to newer forms of media making. A significant amount of time that was allocated to media consumption is now being allotted to media creation by active audiences, inevitably politicising the existence of memes as a product of this change in balance. Through my research I have found a link between memes and democracy, as they rely on accessibility as well as resulting in some form of independence

from established media corporations. Although the internet has facilitated and democratised the ability to engage in remixing, we must be aware that political and corporate powers are still very real and can also play the meme game into their advantage. Furthermore, it appears that many people who engage in what can be considered an explicit (and implicit) political act of meme making do not consider it as such due to their own perceptions of what politics is.

Here we are faced with an ambiguous answer when queried about the political nature of memes – on the one hand there is an undeniable relationship between political aspects (whether these relate to Politics or politics of the everyday), on the other we must exercise caution when casting an all-or-nothing label of progressive politics and/or democratic advancement upon these acts. The actors themselves seem to distance their acts from politics, and considering the ethnographic method employed within this thesis, it is important to give users a voice and resist the temptation to label their actions regardless of their perception. In short, memes may have political properties but the relationship between them is more complex and nuanced than it may seem at first.

Memes and capital P Politics have found ways to mesh, though their relationship is also not as straightforward as initially thought. Whilst there are many overt meme uses for political purposes (and, as seen through this thesis, whilst the making and dissemination of memes in itself can be seen as political, regardless of their explicit message) there seems to be a resistance when it comes to labelling memes as political. Aside from their indirect political contributions, memes have also been increasingly present in overtly political debates, taking the form of current political commentary of choice, as well as literally becoming the face of political movements through their use in physical posters at protests in different parts of the globe. Memes' direct intervention with political issues holds one of the most important uses memes have nowadays: their role as the voice of the oppressed. Whilst memes are often weaponised against those who use them – often accompanied by accusations of apathy, indifference and lack of intelligence – here we see the embodiment of the polar opposite, as memes become reclaimed weapons thrown back at established powers. This appropriation is fitting, as it deepens memes' already existing relationship with the remix process.

Memes used in commercial contexts can generally be split into two broad categories: meme merchandise and memes used in adverts for unrelated products. Although the reaction to these is not diametrically opposite, it seems that the type of category used affects user's

reactions to it. Whilst meme merchandise is generally received positively, meme use in unrelated adverts gives way to more dissenting opinions by meme fans. As with previous cultural appropriations of popular culture by corporative interests – and considering the political implications detailed above – this relationship is not without tension. Whilst some meme use in adverts might receive applause by meme enthusiasts there is a very visible critique of this decision by many, who mainly voice fears of corporate use invading meaningful internet territory at best and at worst accuse these parties of perverting the meaning making process described above. These tensions and fears between democratic popular culture and commercial interests are not new, but an additional issue seems to be the misuse or misunderstanding of memes by corporations that use them in their adverts. This action in particular is met with harsh criticism by meme enthusiasts, and may make the company in question less palatable to those who feel insulted by its meme misappropriation.

Commercial meme use can also take form in companies' attempts to create original memes themselves. Here, again, we witness a contentious relationship between what was born as a piece of culture that is meant to be shared freely and which is liberated from the constraints of authorship and a product subject to copyright and controlled use that mimics the same piece of culture for monetary gain. The creation of the 'Sour Granny' meme by Maynard's confectionary company in order to advertise its new product is a rare example of this. Despite being produced by a creative advertising team it did not quite take off as a popular meme, and not only was it met with mixed reactions, it mostly met with no reactions as its impact was minimal. Still, the act of meme creation by a corporation raises questions of authenticity and appropriation that might be worrying for the future of memes as possible tools for democratic meaning making. With this example we must consider the implications that corporate meme creation might have, which may very well undermine the entire ethos of meme making and sharing.

In addition to the political and commercial arenas, memes have also pervaded the cultural spaces that we inhabit, both intangibly and physically. As exemplified in chapter 7, memes have made their way onto window collages as well as established art museums. The latter context is not without its frictions: the LOLcat exhibition demonstrated a misappropriation of memes by the art elite, showing not only a disregard for the actual point and logic of memes, but also demonstrating how the strain between established 'high' culture

and craft 'low' culture is still very present in the battlefield that is the remixed form. Chapter 7 also looked into how memes can impact a micro-culture, by demonstrating the various ways memes are used in the Lolita fashion subculture. This microcosm has strict rules and yet demonstrated an ability to adapt memes for its own purpose, whether by using memes to comment on shared community experiences or to use them for more intersectional goals (e.g. Lolita and Politics). Issues of identity and the aforementioned debate of inclusion/exclusion that permeates meme culture have also played out here, though on a visibly smaller scale.

Although initially memes seem equally scattered throughout the online world, the ethnography I have conducted has revealed that memes travel at different speeds and circulate at different paces. This has been demonstrated by my case study in chapter 8: certain memes – such as the Doge meme – have more presence and relevance in certain online spaces than others. This is due to various factors, one of which is the strong online Doge community in places like Reddit, whose content then spills onto mainstream media, as well as the cementation of Doge's popularity through the creation of its own cryptocurrency named Dogecoin. Although not economically viable, Dogecoins are culturally rich, and that is reason enough for their continued sustenance among Doge supporters. Dogecoin's lack of monetary value has opened up possibilities for its use, as it is this low financial worth that has pushed the purpose of Dogecoins towards more charitable functions. Whether it is through the tipping of Dogecoins online to reward culturally valuable content and comments (considered as such by redditors, not necessarily by capitalist standards of worth) or the multiple charitable actions propelled by Dogecoins (e.g. Sochi Olympics fundraiser, Doge4water initiative), Dogecoins seem to have become the currency of modern charity.

Memes come in all shapes and sizes and can be found virtually anywhere in modern communication and interaction. The circulation of memes deeply shapes their aspect, meaning and place in society. There are multiple factors to take into consideration when thinking about meaning making: all my interviewees have different experiences of memes and online culture, and thus the meaning they extract from memes and their interaction with these will naturally vary. In order to overcome this, more research into online memes needs to take place; however, some common points can be found across these different experiences, which can inform our understanding of such rich pieces of culture that colour our experiences as creative and communicative human beings.

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## Appendixes

Appendix 1:

### **Interview questions**

In what ways do you use memes; how are they a part of your life?

Why do you engage/communicate with them; what do they mean to you?

What makes you share a meme?

What makes you create a meme (from an existing template)?

Do you use memes for social, political and/or cultural purposes (e.g. use them in personal interactions, make memes that are politically related – these can include memes about politicians, equality, ecology, etc.)? Please provide examples.

Memes are everywhere and it seems like everyone is in on them. However, there is an element of in-joking to them, as they follow a set of rules. Taking this into consideration, do you find meme culture is inclusive or exclusive?

One of the central aspects of memes is their malleability; they can be appropriated for very different purposes and messages – from politicians using them in their tweets to memes being used in ads. What are the implications of this – if any – for meme culture (or, more broadly, internet culture)?

Do you ever transpose memes into the ‘real’ world – i.e. do you use them offline? If so, how?

Why would you bring them into the ‘real world’?

What is your reaction when you see memes being used in the ‘real world’?

Finally, please feel free to add anything you’d like me to know about meme culture that you think is relevant.

## Appendix 2:



just-shower-thoughts

memes are inside jokes for strangers with bad social skills so they can connect with another human easily with no effort

## Appendix 3:



VIA 9GAG.COM

**PLASTIC SURGERY**  
You can't hide it forever.

Remember this meme? Well the true story behind this picture is not what you think.



VIA 9GAG.COM

This is the model, who is in the picture. She poses for advertisements for several companies. The famous picture was for an paper advertisement for a photo studio. The faces of the children are photoshopped to hide their identity, due to the law.

Due to widespread of this meme, she lost her successful career because agencies refused to provide her oppurtunities due to her negative popularity. This has affected her family too.



So meme makers, please be careful of what you publish, as false information can destroy a person's life. Afterall memes are supposed to make people happy and not have negative impact on anyone.

Appendix 4:



