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Presentation Reflection: Memes

The media has always influenced the behaviors of individuals. Our use of social media has allowed us to present ourselves in any way we want. The online communities we are a part of within social media restricts what we can and can not post. Individuals have begun communicating through memes to give others a visual representation of what they mean. Memes have an influence on how we behave and think, impacting our digital culture. There is no way for anyone to avoid coming across a meme if they have a social media account. This is because it has become an important part of how we interact with one another. It has allowed for companies to market and politicians to spread ideas. However, it can be detrimental to groups or individuals featured in a meme. Thereby, although memes allow for us to communicate in a different way with those a part of our online community, it can have damaging effects.

Social media makes it easier for information to be spread. It helps us build relationships and create online communities; allowing us to interact with others by following, mentioning/tagging, and messaging them (Ferrara, Flammini, Jafari Asbagh and Menczer 2014). Memes are changing the way we communicate (Wareham 2017) and consist of ideas, behaviors, or styles that coincide with internet culture (Lankshear and Knobel 2006). This “cultural information” is passed down from person to person and ultimately shapes the way we act and think (Lankshear and Knobel 2006). How we communicate online has normalized internet memes over time (Wareham 2017). Our perspective of the world is shaped by memes (Duvelle 2017; Shifman 2017) and help people interact with others that relate to them (Rubec 2016). Internet memes can include but are not limited to jokes, rumors, videos or websites (Shifman

2013). The reasons we use memes when we interact with others is because it adds meaning to what we are trying to say (Wareham 2017). Memes depict what we are trying to say or what we are feeling better than regular texts because it comes with a visual representation of what we actually mean (Wareham 2017). Thereby, although memes are used on a micro level, it helps shape society on a macro level (Shifman 2017).

Internet memes are divided into three categories to describe memetic transformation, which consists of spreadable media, emergent meme and meme (Bowers and Wiggins 2014). No one can own a meme because they are meant to be recycled (Rubec 2016). The word meme, coined by Richard Dawkins, is described as the “small cultural units of transmission, analogous to genes, which are spread from person to person by copying or imitating information” (Shifman 2013:363). Therefore, the memes that go around are usually an imitation (Adamic, Adar and Simmons 2011) or a “remix” (Bowers and wiggins 2014) of the original meme. Memes are appropriated and used in different ways repeatedly (Rubec 2016) because although people enjoy memes, they also find amusement in creating their own versions (Shifman 2013). This is because the nature of memes are seen as “mentalist-driven, behavior-driven, and inclusive” (Shifman 2013:366).

The templates of memes are the “signature of the meme” (Coscia 2014:2), such as the photo being used or a hashtag. This signature allows people to learn the ways memes should be used (Coscia 2014). Individuals tend to share the videos they like (Carlson, Hempelmann, Mazambani and Reysen 2015) and have an emotional reaction to (Guadagno, Okdie, and Rempala 2013; Nissenbaum and Shifman 2015), ultimately choosing which one becomes popular. Sharing similar memes we see within our online communities creates a cluster.

However, not for long because memes are continuously being replaced by new ones. To add on, people also tend to share memes that depict their community in a positive way (Carlson, Hempelmann, Mazambani and Reysen 2015). This is why individuals are more prone to share a meme that makes them angry if the source does not come from someone in their own social circle (Guadagno, Okdie, and Rempala 2013). Memes that are inconsistent with norms found in online communities will end up being ignored (Carlson, Hempelmann, Mazambani and Reysen 2015). On the other hand, memes that do end up being successful are scattered throughout all social media sites (Coscia 2014). Interestingly enough, memes shared by low status individuals tend to spread quicker than memes shared by high status individuals (Carlson, Hempelmann, Mazambani and Reysen 2015).

We share memes that are deemed appropriate because we want to be able to relate to the content so that we can feel apart of the culture (Morrish 2017). Those who decide to make a meme have been socially constructed to do things a certain way, making their recreation of a meme a combination of imitation and creativity (Shifman 2011). They follow certain “rules”, such as adding a caption that goes with the image (Shifman 2014). Memes that are similar to other ones do not become as successful as original ones (Coscia 2014) because they start becoming redundant. Thus, unique memes have a higher chance of becoming popular (Coscias 2014) than those that were remade. Furthermore, the language within a meme must also be easy to comprehend because if not, many will not share it (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2015; Carlson, Hempelmann, Mazambani and Reysen 2015), which reduces its visibility and its chances of becoming successful. Nonetheless, the meaning of a meme can be changed by individuals using them in different situations (Rubec 2016).

The way we view the historical images around us has changed over time due to memes. The way a meme is formatted can change the meaning of an original meme and its target audience due to how appropriated it is (Boudana, Cohen and Frosh 2017). New phrases within memes become known when older phrases are not being used as much (Adamic, Adar and Simmons 2011). This can cause photos to lose their real meanings since people are changing the context behind memes everytime they remake it (Boudana, Cohen and Frosh 2017). The more people use a meme, the more it decreases in length when it is remade (Adamic, Adar and Simmons 2011). This is because shorter memes tend to be more popular and circulate for a longer period of time (Adamic, Adar and Simmons 2011) since they do not require much thinking. Thereby, memes that are more clear cut and to the point have a major influence on how individuals interact with them.

The memes we share are developed through cultural and societal expectations (Shifman 2011). Individuals who create successful memes are shown respect and given status within their online community due to understanding and meeting the cultural expectations around them (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2015). Videos that are shared online often lack representation of minorities (Gal, Kampf, and Shifman 2015). This causes individuals to remake videos in a way that relates to them (Gal, Kampf, and Shifman 2015). Youtube is a platform that shares videos; including memes. Memes remain popular longer than youtube videos because individuals are able to interact with one another (Bowers and Wiggins 2014). Youtube pays close attention to the “habits, choices and responses” their users make to place them into specific categories (Shifman 2011). This gives individuals access to memes they might find interest in. The same

applies for internet memes given that people are characterized based on the memes they post (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2015).

The same expectations given to memes can be found on other platforms, such as Instagram. On Instagram, individuals are expected to look a certain a certain way in their photos to meet the ideals of being an Instagram user. Instagram users usually makes sure to post photos that appeals to the wants of their followers in order to gain as much likes as possible. Having many likes gives them validation and assures them that they are indeed attractive. The ideas within our digital cultures makes us believe we have no choice but to meet the expectations within our online communities. Individuals also gain social validation by sharing memes that their online social circle would approve of (Guadagno, Okdie, and Rempala 2013) in fear of being excluded (Ferrara, Flammini, Jafari Asbagh and Menczer 2014; Gal, Kampf, and Shifman 2015) or rejected (Ferrara, Flammini, Jafari Asbagh and Menczer 2014). Thus, online communities share memes that align with what those around them find acceptable (Carlson, Hempelmann, Mazambani and Reysen 2015; Gal, Kampf, and Shifman 2015).

Only sharing the things those around us want us to share suppresses our individuality. As we try to meet the expectations of others to not face rejection from our online communities, we are conforming to the ways they want us to act. By doing this, we start to lose ourselves and become what those around us want us to become. Thus, conforming to the norms within digital culture strips us from our individualism by pressuring us to only share ideas that those within our community would approve of.

Online trolling allows individuals who have been excluded from their online communities to comfortably share their beliefs (Burroughs 2013; Duvelle 2017) with an online

social circle that supports their ideas. Trolling also gives individuals the opportunity to affiliate themselves with ideas they deny agreeing with in the real world (Burroughs 2013). 4chan is an online website that allows individuals to be racist, homophobic, misogynistic and more. Incel is another site made up of men who can not find a romantic or sexual partner even though they want one. They describe this as incelism and believe they should have the right to rape women since they can not get partners any other way. A profile indicating one's identity is not needed for sites like these since their sense of community comes from having common attitudes and beliefs (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2015).

Our social culture is also influenced by memes. Companies such as Gucci use memes to advertise their clothing. Brands use certain marketing techniques to appeal to their target audience (Racoma 2018). They know that original and catchy memes will have a higher chance of becoming popular and use that to their advantage (Racoma 2018). The technical advancements within digital culture create a space for political communication as well (Burroughs 2013). Politicians use memes to campaign in order to engage millennials (Burroughs 2013) because without them, teens and young adults would be oblivious to current news and politics (Gubbay 2018). Individuals love content that does not expect much from them and memes give people that by not requiring too much thinking (Duvelle 2017).

Politicians use memes to influence how young adults think (Roose 2017). Memes spread quickly, cost little to nothing to make (Duvelle 2017) and are amusing (Duvelle 2017; Gubbay 2018). Thus, memes allow politicians to spread their ideas with a large amount of people without wasting a ton of money or time (Roose 2017). This economy driven logic entails how individuals do not find value in information (Shifman 2011). What is most important to individuals is how

much attention a meme receives (Shifman 2011). Social media allows individuals to spread their political beliefs freely through links, photos with captions or short videos (Roose 2017). To add on, individuals sharing these memes to support a certain idea can influence the ideas of others (Rivers and Ross 2017). For instance, the memes for the 2016 presidential candidates either depicted the candidates in a positive or negative way (Gubbay 2018; Rivers and Ross 2017) and people shared them depending on how much they aligned with their own personal beliefs. Therefore, politicians and companies use social media as a way to engage young adults.

Memes give individuals the chance to have a visual representation of the changes they want on a civil and political level (Hristova 2014) and helps shed light on current social matters (Morrish 2017). They also mock those in power who allow such issues to exist within our society (Boudana, Cohen and Frosh 2017). The ideas within our social systems do not change because those in power reinforce their discriminatory ideologies through the media (Hristova 2014). Occupy movements such as the “We are the 99%” has the goal of ending the inequalities within our social and economic structures (Hristova 2014). Political memes provided by the “We are the 99%” bring awareness to social issues such as the ways the rich take advantage of the poor (Hristova 2014). The occupy movement started with the hashtag #OccupyWallstreet, with the intent to bring a stop to the greed and corruption happening among the wealthy (the 1%) (Hristova 2014). Therefore, occupy movements not only educates individuals on the injustices within society (Hristova 2014) but also provides a platform for the voiceless.

Although memes can be funny, they can also be detrimental to the wellbeing of the person featured in the meme. Since individuals are not being censored online, they are able to post whatever they want (Gal, Kampf, and Shifman 2015) because they know there would be no

real consequences for their actions (Rivers and Ross 2017). Memes can change something serious into something amusing or sardonic, depending on if the person appropriating it is “politically oriented” or “pop-culture oriented” (Boudana, Cohen and Frosh 2017:1225) and perpetuates stereotypes (Shifman 2014). This is why individuals should not use memes unless they understand the context behind it because they may be using it in the wrong way (Rubec 2016). If a meme is popular enough, the person featured in it will start to receive mainstream attention on shows, magazines and etc (Lankshear and Knobel 2006).

Although some embrace the fame they receive from being the face of a meme, it can give others unwanted attention (Lankshear and Knobel 2006). For instance, a boy named Alex got famous at his job, target, after a picture of him with the caption “YOIOOOOO” (Larkin 2018:1) turned into the trend #alexfromtarget. Alex received death threats, experienced abuse from people online and had private information about his family such as “bank details, phone records, and social security numbers” (Larkin 2018:1) leaked online. Eventually, his family felt like they had no other choice but to go to the police. Memes can also affect famous individuals.

Wentworth Miller was made fun of for his weight gain. The creator of the meme used a promo picture from when he was on the show Prison Break next to a recent photo of him (Larkin 2018). The caption stated, “when you break out of prison and you find out about McDonald’s Monopoly” (Larkin 2018:1). During this time, Miller was suicidal and was very hurt by the meme. He stated that “it hurt to breathe” (Larkin 2018:1) after he saw it. Nonetheless, he used this experienced to talk about his struggles and to encourage those facing similar struggles to seek help. Thereby, having someone be the face of a meme without their permission can have negative effects on one's life and perception of self (Garsd 2015).



Memes also allow us to learn about what is going on in our society. They keep us up to date with current news and inform millennials on political information they would not hear about otherwise. Memes are usually designed in a way to amuse the audience because they have a reputation for being funny. However, individuals finding humour within all the memes they come across can take away the seriousness within important issues (Gubbay 2018). The way individuals interpret a meme may cause problems (Gubbay 2018) because they may not be taking into consideration the context of the photo and the real meaning behind it (Thompson 2016). This can cause a meme to be remade into something offensive and can cause individuals featured in a meme to start being treated negatively by those around them (Thompson 2016). Hence, if we continue to act in this way, the internet would become a place for individuals to be made fun of and rejected without anyone getting in trouble for it. We must be considerate about what we create and share online to avoid unintentionally hurting someone else (Thompson 2016). The internet should be a safe space for everyone but by allowing these online behaviors to exist, we are reinforcing them.

To avoid digital culture turning into something negative, there must be steps taken to stop the current culture we have online. Countries such as Europe and Argentina have created the “the right to be forgotten” act, which gives people the right to have their image deindexed from search engines (Garsd 2018:1). This ultimately hides the image and makes it extremely hard for anyone to find it. Another solution can be to make people aware of their actions by having a popup message appear when certain code words are used in a post. This message can inform individuals that what they are about to post may be offensive. This can make individuals think about the impact they might have on someone else and ultimately change their minds about

sharing their post. One final solution can be to give individuals who post or share something offensive a 24 hour time out from the site. After 15 times of being locked out, individuals should be banned for a year. Although this may seem extreme to some since no one wants to be logged out of their account for 24 hours (especially since we have become addicted to social media) or lose all their memories, it may be an effective method to start holding individuals accountable for their actions.

Digital culture and memes give individuals a new way to communicate with one another. The things we share online create the online communities we become a part of. Most of the memes we see and share online are created by companies, politicians and normal people. The memes we share within our online communities allow us to find amusement in the things going on around us. However, where one may interpret a meme as funny, another may see it as offensive (Thompson 2016). Memes can have harmful effects on someone's self perception and emotional and/or mental well being. This is why it is crucial for individuals to think about the impact a meme may have on others. All in all, although digital culture allows us to build social identities, create online communities and learn about social issues going on around us, they can also have detrimental effects on those who are the face of a meme they did not consent to.

**I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.**

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