LOLs, Lulz, and ROFL:
The Culture, Fun, and Serious Business of Internet Memes

by

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Bachelor of Philosophy, University of Pittsburgh, 2012

Submitted to the Faculty of

The University of Pittsburgh Honors College in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Philosophy

University of Pittsburgh

2012

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

University Honors College

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July 30, 2012

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This thesis takes an analytical look into the workings of Internet Memes and the culture that surrounds and nourishes them. Through a selection of Internet Meme case studies, a list of cultural qualities are compiled and then used to identify the attitudes of Internet Meme Culture. Then by comparing the relationship between Internet Memes and advertising, film, and television, a contrast between Old and New Media is established. Alongside using political Memes to find connections between Internet Memes and general expression and communication, the final hope is to understand Internet Meme Culture and where it might take Mass and Popular Culture as the digital millennial becomes the new digital citizens.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION: WHY STUDY INTERNET MEMES?

"I think you may be overestimating the power of Reddit..."
                              - Cade Levinson, the author's brother

The title of my thesis uses three terms close to the Internet's heart: LOLs, lulz, and ROFL. LOL, short for "laughing out loud," is viewing something that quite literally makes you laugh out loud. Its associations are fairly positive, and its use has been adapted into the general lexicon of society. ROFL, short for "rolling on the floor laughing," indicates an even greater amount of hilarity, one that can paralyze with laughter, while rolling about the floor.

But it is the last term, lulz, that is essential to the creation, distribution, and inner workings of the tiny, byte sized, rapidly viewed and created in unfathomably mass amounts pieces of media called Internet Memes. Lulz closely relates to LOLs, but necessitates gaining laughs from the misfortune of others (Phillips 9). Mainly a practical joke, although occasionally more malicious, it is a staple of the culture of Internet, the ultimate inside joke. Basically consisting of a picture with text referencing things the normal user would not understand, you either get them or you do not. But when you do, an entirely new media, jargon, and culture reveals itself for your viewing and creating pleasure. Before proving the serious business of Internet Memes and Internet Meme Culture, terms that will be clarified and refined throughout this entire thesis, it will be necessary to first prove the serious business of the Internet to any abject naysayer luddites.

As general Internet consumption and online media viewership have enormously increased, it is now entirely possible to completely entertain oneself by "surfing the web" for hours at a time.[1] Alongside active media consumption either with a user's deliberate purpose to seek entertainment (sitting down and consciously deciding that I want to entertain myself online) and the quick five minute procrastination break from work to, people also consume online media with Internet capable cell phones simply to pass time. Additionally, 76% of cell phone users take photos with their phones and 72% send text messages regularly.[2] And as the amount of smart phones only increase, the balance between accessing data on the go and creating your own will increase exponentially.[3]

Consider a hypothetical afternoon for a teenager coming home from school to go online. Our youth, let's call him Tim, departs a technology-infused day of school for a half-hour bus ride, playing with his smart phone the entire time. His friend texts him the phrase ROFL, which Tim responds to with the image of the ROFLcopter, a funny picture he found online over the weekend (for variations of the ROFLcopter, see http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/roflcopter). He arrives home and sits at his computer, opening several tabs in his browser. Tim navigates to Facebook to check to see if anyone has contacted him or left him any notifications and sees that his friend has uploaded the picture of the ROFLcopter to his profile. Tim "likes" the post and shares it on his own profile to his several hundred friends. Tim Googles the ROFLcopter to learn more about it, and sees a mixture of wiki-articles and messaging boards that display several versions of the ROFLcopter, which he downloads into a folder on his desktop for later. He

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[1] Between 2000 and 2010, for adults over the age of 18 Internet use has increased to 79% in 2010 from 50% in 2000. For teens 12-17, a 20% increase to 93%. (http://pewinternet.org/Infographics/2010/Internet-acess-by-age-group-over-time-Update.aspx)

[2] http://pewinternet.org/Infographics/2011/Generations-and-cell-phones.aspx

[3] Currently, 1 in 4 teens uses a smartphone. (http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2012/Teens-and-smartphones/Summary-of-findings.aspx)

uploads his favorite to Twitter and Tumblr, while also scanning through the hundreds of images and text-sized posts, or Tweets, that each microblogging site is known for. Tim moves on to entertainment websites, like www.cheezburger.com to look at more funny pictures and comment on them, including a Cheezburger Network site, KnowYourMeme.com, which discusses the origins of the ROFLcopter. Tim decides to create his own in Photoshop. He then uploads his own ROFLcopter image to Reddit, which calls itself "The Front Page of the Internet," a community-based Internet content user-aggregated website set out to report on and display the silliest, thought-provoking, and sometimes down-right weird content online ("Frequently Asked Questions."). Tim's ROFLcopter is given attention, with several thousand upvotes (similar to Facebook "Likes") and hundreds of comments. All while this occurs, Tim listens to a mix of music from iTunes, Pandora, or Spotify and ends his evening watching movies perhaps from Netflix, Hulu, or The Pirate Bay. Tim started his journey at 4:30PM. It is now nearly 11:00PM, and time for Tim to go to bed.

We are submerged in screens, the monitor and the cellphone screen alike delivering content at a rapid pace, between work and home. However, what distinguishes the Internet from pervious media is that it truly is a medium made of media. It uses its endlessly growing library of media to actively encourage opportunities for creation through user-generated content. And in the midst of this, an entirely new cultural object has risen from the very depths of the Internet. It can be viewed as the essence of online attention spans, partially captivating them and inciting them to scatter. It is simple, brief, sometimes cute, sometimes horrifying, and almost lucid in its ability to communicate. It has been called viral and spreadable, but its origins lie in its exclusivity. It flourishes in a culture of remixing and nostalgia, and rarely comes to the party unaware of itself and its friends. Behold, the Internet Meme.

At its core, a meme is a silly piece of media, either an image or video or animated GIF, that evolved from the photograph, comic, and harsh commenting spirit of the web. The standard format consists of an image (usually a photograph of a cute animal), captioned by text often above and below the main character of the image in a punch-line format, many times packaged in a template to encourage even more imitation and replication. It takes seconds to consume, share, and then move on to the next one. If you were to ask what one of the most significant differences in culture is today compared to ten years ago, a likely answer would be the fact that there are Internet Memes splattered all over the place in Western culture. After the first decade of a new century, a decade poised in uncertainty and turmoil as the Internet progressed from a subculture tool to a completely new medium with the potential to be of the masses. Internet Memes, as they are now, came into play late in the decade initially as the newest fad or fashion. Yet, in the process that keeps them alive, they go beyond fad in their complexity, as people are consuming, distributing, and producing them non-stop. Websites that cater to the culture and community that follows Internet Memes (like Reddit, 4chan, Buzzfeed, and Know Your Meme) have traffic and audiences that other websites can only dream of and are constantly attempting to borrow. Even though there are so many recorded and unrecorded Internet Memes out there, and the content of many of these Internet Memes derives from past culture, their medium of the Internet is rapidly changing their past meanings. And not just our past but our present: the Internet, and with it Internet Memes, is changing the ways humans interact with each other. It is changing the way that we are talking about things, and what we are talking about.

This thesis will attempt a content analysis of several Internet Memes to further gain concepts from them in relation to popular and mass culture; politics; and communication, community, and creative expression in an Internet Meme Culture. While the topics are broad,

and could easily merit several theses and conferences, I intend to work through specific case studies of Internet Memes and their relationships to the above topics. Until recently, there was no definitive term to describe the large amount of cultural objects online. Their quantity and speedy lifespan alone were enough to intimidate labeling, however, there is a specific set of subcultural values that constitute an Internet Meme. Since Internet Memes are produced anonymously, demographics are hard to ascertain. In a profile on the imageboard 4chan, Whitney Philips finds its Internet Meme heavy users to be English, between the ages of 18 and 30 (due to the nostalgia of late 80s and early 90s popular culture) and mainly white (Philips 6). Yet, a sub-counter-culture of sorts has evolved, sometimes through stereotypes of nerds, gamers, and hackers populating the web. In these stereotypes, though, a majority of Internet Meme Culture can be found.

The word meme (rhymes with "team") originates in the last chapter of The Selfish Gene, an influential book written by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in 1974. In it, Dawkins argues that evolutionary genes actually fight for their own survival – not that the genes have a form of higher consciousness, but in that genes compete with each other and will do what it takes to survive. In the last chapter, entitled "Memes: The New Replicators," Dawkins contemplates a different kind of transmission device, one that permits cultural evolution. He calls this a meme (Dawkins 206). The term inspired other evolutionary biologists and psychologists such as Susan Blackmore, Richard Brodie, and Aaron Lynch to develop the field of memetics. While I do not plan to discuss the value of memetics as a legitimate field, it is necessary to understand its basic concepts and differences before continuing.

Susan Blackmore, a psychologist, follows Dawkin's last chapter in her book The Meme Machine, in which she clarifies the uses and limitations of memetics. She describes memes as

traveling longitudinally through generations and horizontally through friends and fellow society members via imitation (Blackmore ix). However, while the theory of memetics relates closely to the mechanisms that encourage Internet Memes propagation (i.e., imitations), she argues an idea that contradicts Internet Meme Culture:

> Instead of thinking of our ideas as our creations, and as working for us, we have to think of them as autonomous selfish memes, working only to get themselves copied. We humans, because of our power of imitation, have become just the physical 'hosts' needed for the memes to get around. This is how the world looks from a "meme's eye view." (Blackmore 8)

Seeing humans simply as vehicles of memes is far too passive for Internet Memes; to be a part of Internet Meme Culture requires a massive amount of active participation and knowledge. Its culture is active in a constant whirl of production and consumption through participation on a large anonymous scale through Internet Meme Community. This community is essential to the essence of Internet Memes; they are shared, understood, and created with a community that values similar cultural qualities and interacts in a way that utilizes the most important technologies of computing and Internet media. Internet Memes are one of the first cultural objects to fully embrace and depend upon the medium of the Internet for their popularity and survival.

Take a concrete example from 2004 of a video (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=60og9gwKh1o) entitled "Numa Numa Dance." A heavyset student named Gary Brolsma does a dance and lip-synch cover of the song "Dragostea Din Tei," by O-Zone, a Moldovan pop band. He wears a white and blue ringer t-shirt, pumps his fists in the air, and gives not the slightest care of who sees it. He then sends the video to his friends, who all

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know Gary as the class clown, so are unsurprised by the video. However, Gary gets the idea to post the video on the viral video sharing site, newgrounds.com

Perhaps what spread Gary's dance video across the Internet so quickly was the strange foreign song, or the imagery of a fat man moving quickly, or just the simple fact that Gary does not care who sees him dance like this, but in no time at all Gary is an Internet Celebrity (Levinson 9). People in the past referred to Gary's video as a viral video, a video that propagates like a contagious illness, rapidly moving through the participants of popular culture. And while meme theory and the medical terminology of virus and infection are closely related, it is necessary to distinguish them. A viral video remains a viral video and keeps its original form: I send the Numa Numa video to a friend, who sends it to his friend, etc. However, at a certain point the video reached such ardent fans of the video that they were inspired to remake their own version, imitating Gary's dance in front of their own computer webcams. The videos are not exact clones (the quintessential details such as the fishbowl or Gary's glasses may change) but people copy the Numa Numa dance. It inspires parodies, remakes, and remixes, even versions of anthropomorphic animals doing the dance appear. When all this happens, the viral video claims the title of Internet Meme.

But when "Numa Numa Guy," as he is referred to once reaching Internet fame, attempts to open his own online site and create more videos, produce merchandise, and guest star himself and his dance in countless other media, he tries to brand the meme and profit off something he did not necessarily have to work to make popular. But "Numa Numa" is everywhere — Gary is featured in a music video for the rock band Weezer, alongside countless other Internet references. Or Gary makes several sequels to his video, and eventually partners an ad deal with Geico. I'm sure even a high school talent show, and one participant (why not Tim?) goes on

stage and sits in a chair in a ringer tee and does the Numa Numa dance. While of course, the idea of something popular in one medium then being appropriated into another medium and message, or, as I call it, popular is popular, can explain the prevalence of Numa Numa, there is something important about Gary's story. He is not unique. This sort of meme life-cycle happens repeatedly and fairly consistently through thousands upon thousands of Internet Memes.

Internet Meme Culture comes closer to invading another term that is simple, but contains much more theoretical consequences that hopefully will be fleshed out by the end of this thesis: IRL or "In Real Life." The idea is simple: that the world of the Internet is separate to physical reality, the screen versus physical objects in the world we live in. And even though there is overlap between the two, in that I can access the Internet in the physical, the best example of IRL is when someone physically prints out an Internet Meme and hangs it up as a poster on a cork-board or wall. But not only does Gary Brolsma's persona and livelihood depend on the Internet reaching IRL, but so does the cultural idea of Numa Numa. These media have to be reaching for something greater than "that silly thing online" in order for it to survive.

Yet, IRL has greater consequences for consumers, producers, scholars, and practically anyone who deals with any form of media. A refusal to admit the Internet's power, permanence, and effects can be problematic. Choosing not to enter Internet Culture, while possibly considered niche or "out of touch" by many users, or completely ignoring it is downright dangerous. Many scholars, such as Nathan Jurgenson, see a separate viewing of Internet Culture and IRL culture as a weakness. He calls this viewpoint "digital dualism," or the idea that you can go from using the Internet to not using the Internet. Even though it is possible to actually turn off the Internet, i.e. removing the power, the Internet never turns off. What we do online, such as working with social media platforms, processing information through online articles and blogs, or even just how we

search for information, changes how we react to environments when we are offline. Jurgenson writes that "social media users are being trained to experience the world always as a potential photo, tweet, check-in or status update. The logic of social media sites and smart phone technologies fundamentally influence how we experience reality even when offline" (Jurgenson 85). He goes on to hypothesize an idea of an augmented reality, which may become even closer to truth as products such as Google Glasses come closer to fruition, a filter of reality through Internet information processing and Internet culture ("Google Glasses, make the world look like rainbows.").

An augmented reality then has its greatest effect on the divide between work and leisure. New Media scholar, Lev Manovich, positions a separate idea in his seminal book, albeit slightly dated in references, but strikingly accurate in ideas, The Language of New Media. He sees "work" and "leisure" based applications as switchable, in that the divide between the two is crumbling. "The best examples of this convergence," he writes, "is a Web browser employed both in the office and at home, both for work and for play." The shared purpose of the Web browser, and the computer in general, leads to a lack of a "clear separation between the field of work and the field of leisure" (Manovich 65). With the increase in cell phone use and ownership, the divide weakens even further as business calls, texts, and messages can be accessed instantly from Internet devices in our pockets. With the common possibility of Internet nearly always available, and our brains ready to seek our entertainment at any moment, what kind of media we consume online also influences our mindsets offline.

Internet Memes are an object of Convergence Culture, a term coined by New Media theorist Henry Jenkins in his 2008 book Convergence Culture. Convergence Culture depends on three items: media convergence, participatory culture, and collective intelligence. Media

convergence depends on the merging of Old Media with New Media, as in the use of film and television clips/stills as the content of Internet Memes. Participatory culture involves consumers of creative content also generating their own user-driven content; Jenkins sees this most often in fan culture such as Star Wars or The Matrix. Finally, collective intelligence deals with a community with similar values, especially of that on a specific shared knowledge necessary to participate in a culture, i.e. an Internet Meme Culture (Jenkins 1-3). Jenkins follows up with his ideas on Convergence Culture in a yet to be released book on Spreadable Media, about the specific way the media of Convergence Culture (Internet Memes) move throughout that culture. He argues for abandoning the idea of creation with the intent of attaining viral status, for Convergence Culture makes creating and spreading media throughout it more difficult than media before it (although, slightly ironically, a view can be taken that distribution of digital media has never been technically easier than with the Internet. All it takes is one upload to YouTube to distribute your film).

Internet Memes are versatile objects that can entertain, contain meaning, and maintain and instigate discourse on various political, ideological, and cultural institutions. In the past, Internet usage has been defined by two major terms when applying it to a mainstream media model: Web 1.0, where content is put online by producers and then consumed by users, and Web 2.0, where the line between producers and consumers is blurred. And at a basic level, Web 2.0 involves producers creating content such as news articles (as in CNN's "iReporters") or short produced videos from websites such as Funny or Die, and consumers not only reading those items but then either producing their own written responses on social media, or creating their own blogs without interest of compensation. The model of Web 2.0 does not plan for anything more than free labor through social media and fan fiction, the idea of consumers now producing content for a majority

of users may not fit into the Web 2.0 model. Yet when a cultural object turns into an Internet Meme, the relationship of producer and consumer in what many are now calling a post-Web 2.0 era swirls together in appropriations, misappropriations, modifications, and relations of media between parties. Considering the theories of Jenkins, Manovich, and Jurgenson, perhaps there is a more complex way to look at Web 2.0, where the lines between online and offline, work and leisure, and production and consumption have all blurred. Even though the mainstay line of sending data and receiving data remains standard in technically how Internet works, perhaps the way that users send and receive information to and from each other has changed radically, beyond the description of Web 2.0. I dare to call it "Web 3.33333333..."

1.1   WEB 3.33333333… AND BRONIES

A nice place to demonstrate this "Web 3.33333333..." is in the fandom that has spurred from the most recent reincarnation of a television property called *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. The show, originally premiered in 1983, catered to a younger girl audience with its adorable every-girl-wants-a-pony characters, high-pitched voice actors, and excessive use of vibrant, colorful, and cute animation designs. In 2011, television network the Hub acquired the property and began producing the fourth generation of the cartoon with animator Lauren Faust, who had worked on the popular 1990s cartoon *The Powerpuff Girls* from 2002-2004, a show that broke many gender barriers through its three kick-butt superhero characters made from sugar, spice, and everything nice (Ohanesian). While Faust's version of the show used the same hyper-feminine aesthetics (see http://www.hubworld.com/my-little-pony/shows/friendship-is-magic/ for an aesthetic example), the culture ready to receive the new cartoon perhaps reacted in a way

that no one expected. A group of über-fans decided to call themselves Bronies (a combination of the slang word "bro" and ponies) and followed the show to nearly religious levels of devotion. Yet, their love of the show, while possibly ironic in its initial formation, quickly moved far past irony to a true authentic love.

The group chooses to call themselves Bronies, referencing the stereotype term, bro, or hyper-masculine college aged fraternity brothers, ironically contrasting the hyper-femininity of *My Little Ponies*. However, what may have started as ironic parodic love swirled into something much more complex. A website called equestriadaily.com is Brony central, a place to learn how to become a Brony, to display fan-made art and fiction, to post news and updates from the show and Brony community at large, and to discuss topics such as what location you would like to see in the third season (Las Pegasus won with over 13,000 votes).[4] The blog updates regularly, averaging nearly twenty posts a day, and has over 211 million total page views. Additionally, Bronies created mash-ups and remixes with other Internet phenomenon, like a remix of the trailer for <u>Watchmen</u> (2011) with characters and scenes from *My Little Pony*. They created a series called *Epic Pony Time* that had the characters portray, oddly enough, the hyper masculine team of Epic Meal Time as they create abominable culinary dishes not with excess amounts of meat, but pies from apples and Apple Jack Whiskey. They even entered the music scene with Dub Trot, a genre of music that mashes the cult-ish dub step (loved by both bros and ironic bros) and the characters' voices from the show. Even Hasbro and the Hub (which also shows remakes of 1980s television shows like *Pound Puppies*, *Carebears*, and *GI Joe* alongside late-night reruns of classic feel good shows like *Wonder Years* and *Happy Days*) approves of the pony fandom, responding to to the Bronies with a music video spoof of "California Girls" by Katy Perry called

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[4] http://www.equestriadaily.com/ (13 July 2012)

"Equestria Girls" (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pTPqjKk_xCo). What makes the relationships between the producers and consumers of My Little Pony impressive with "Equestria Girls" is that it features a character named DJ Pon-3, a minor character that became appropriated by the Bronies, many times as a Dub Trot DJ, as a major character through a mix of fanfiction and Internet Memes.

Though entertaining, several reasons make it difficult to read this sort of culture. First, what do we read? Is it possible to separate the material most influenced from the original 1980s productions from the Lauren Faust re-hash? The content produced and appropriated by Bronies must now be taken into consideration, as they skew and bend all original intentions by either parties. On a different track, how do we read material created by a fan-based community, accepted by the producers, and then fed back into fandom? How does this feedback loop exactly work, and what is the most important part?

In my travels, I luckily happened to come across the path of several hundred Bronies in real life. The herd of fans was headed towards a small toy store/art gallery in LA called Toy Art Gallery for autographs. It contained original My Little Pony merchandise, but also t-shirts, posters, and toys and models that were based more on fan usage of the characters than direct from Hasbro alongside a diverse amount of fan art. The reality of the Gallery, I later found out, was that Hasbro had commissioned an independent curator and chosen Toy Art Gallery to host the My Little Pony show. Hasbro was directly organizing this gallery, and catering to the demands and attitudes of the Brony fan base. The group of Bronies was a mix of men and women their ages ranging everywhere from young adolescence to even some in their 60s. One leader with blonde hair raised a staff into the air, every so often shouting, "Ponies!" in the most absurdly masculine deep voice possible. The fans generally seemed welcoming as they ate up the

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merchandise in the store and tolerated my fandom questions. I was amazed at the redistribution of gender norms: the majority of the characters of the show are all girls, the lead male character a small bumbling dragon assistant to the show's hero, Rainbow Dash. When asked why they loved the show, the fans mostly responded in a completely non-ironic fashion. Many commented on the good nature of the show, the excellent morals and teachings of friendship, the lovable cast, and the excellent animation quality, the word "Awesome!" being interjected in between every sentence.

This is where reading becomes truly difficult: why do these fans chose *My Little Pony* and dedicate themselves to the herd and ponydom? What turned an ironic love of such a hyper-feminine show into something more authentic? How and when did this take place? What evidence is there for any shift? None of the remixes of *My Little Pony* are parodies in a way that marginalize *My Little Pony*, but embrace it. Do the Bronies love *My Little Pony* earnestly for its content, or is there still some hint of irony in their love? Perhaps the irony is so ingrained in their systems, just as younger generations will take up social media as if it has always been there, that this sort of ironic love and appropriation is different than any other sort of irony combined, a post-irony perhaps. When I first watched the show, I only felt embarrassment at the corniness of the show and its characters. But as I continued I could see hints of ironic love, earnest good will nature, and pure entertainment.

1.2   THE COMMUNITY OF INTERNET MEMES

This is only one "small" community in a vast Internet culture. And as the Internet separates itself into more smaller communities (or on Reddit, subreddits as they are called), Internet users

can distance their attitudes from each other. On top of an entire group of producers creating content for consumption within each subgroup, and misappropriation of these groups becoming an accidental norm, Internet Meme Culture itself may become more difficult to quantify and qualify. However, as far apart as subgroups may separate, I still believe that through their medium of the Internet, these groups all contain a connection of cultural values. The world of Internet Memes is vast; the amount of cultural objects created on a daily basis is astounding, turning readers into authors and critics and back to readers at a rapid pace. By looking at the patterns between Internet Memes in general and how they are used, we can see larger structures of culture within this Internet Culture. These patterns can help determine more precisely how other modes of culture work for and against each other (the differences between Old and New Media), how we chose to express on current events as they are broadcasted seconds after they happen, and what indeed Internet Memes tell us about how our culture is changing.

Again, I must emphasize that due to the lacking of demographic data from the mainly anonymous creation of Internet Memes, it is difficult who is creating, viewing, and popularizing what. Perhaps as the Internet moves to become a less anonymous place, this data may be found somehow. But for the purposes of this thesis, I hope to stay as close to the memes as possible, strictly analyzing the content of each image while keeping in mind that anyone can be an Internet user. Additionally, this paper deals with memes from Western culture mainly. While memes are not completely international yet, they are expanding quickly. China has been at the forefront of political memes, but Brazil's culture has perhaps embraced Internet Meme Culture faster than many others. These topics perhaps go beyond the scope of my work, although will be excellent places to return to in the future.

With this thesis, I hope to guide the reader through this ever expanding, sometimes self-

reflexive to a point of absurdity, universe of memes. Following this introduction, I would like to answer basic questions, perhaps at its purest, about what an Internet Meme is. In Part II, I have selected different examples of Internet Memes, dissecting the qualities of memes to identify basic building blocks. Using a similar form of cultural comprehension as Roland Barthes in his *Mythologies*, I hope to combine a critical analyses of the cultural object with my own personal intuitions, knowledge, and membership of the community of those objects: Internet Meme Culture. In Part III, I will investigate the relationships between Internet Memes, mass culture, and popular culture using case studies from advertising and marketing and film and television, and lastly discussing ideas of ownership through the question of who exactly owns an Internet Meme? Who deserves credit? Is authorship deserved to the person who took the photograph, the user that added the caption and/or edited the image, the programmer that developed the software that allows quick meme creation, or the social media website that hosts the Internet Meme, and many times puts its own watermark in the corner of the image? The attitudes of Internet Meme Culture towards ownership become incredibly important, considering ideas of piracy and copyright play an enormous role in Internet Meme Culture. For Part IV, I will consider the Internet Meme as a political object, looking at moments that were prefaced, created, or commented through Internet Memes. While discussing Internet Memes of political origins like Anonymous and Lulz Security, I will take a close look at the "Casually Pepper Spraying Cop" meme from the Occupy protests in late 2011 at UC Davis. Lastly, in Part V I hope to use the expanding lexicon of Advice Animals, a specific type of Internet Meme, to show how users are communicating through an Internet Meme community.

Just as other forms of culture tend to comment consciously and unconsciously of the times that they are in, I intend to take many different examples of Internet Memes and carefully

analyze them, while at the same time searching to understand the relationships between the Internet Memes and broader cultural, political, or social schemas. After determining what exactly an Internet Meme and its qualities are, I hope to look at how Internet Memes have commented on and played a part in dealings with mass media and current events. I hope as well to see how Internet Memes are being used in communications between one person and another, finally thinking about whether Internet Memes have anything to say about the upcoming generations as technology becomes more ingrained in peoples' lives.

If we consider Mirror Theory, that a society represents its current dreams, worries, and fears in its culture, what that society is physically making, then ignoring Internet Memes would be to ignore one of the most rapidly expanding aspects of our current culture. These little pixels are harnessing so many aspects of retroculture, exploding at exponential levels, taking the idea of fad and fashion to the next level. The rate that we can exchange information with each other compliments the rate of cultural exchange. If someone does not take a moment to see these individual cultural objects flying by and analyze their structure and attitudes, then grouping Internet Memes and Internet Meme Culture into one solid bulk, regardless of attributing a qualitative label such as "good" (I'm happy to see people creating things online) or "bad" (The Internet is a dark, evil recess, considering that one of its cultural entities, 4chan, is fondly nicknamed "The Asshole of the Internet"), is the same as saying that film is a fad or television will not be here for long. Of course, Internet Memes will not be here forever, but th culture that stems from them will evolve into a possibly more mainstream culture if Old Media attempts to appropriate Internet Meme Culture.

Internet Memes are one of the unique cultural entities to come from the development of the Internet. While Old Media such as books, films, and musical recordings have been changed

forever in terms of production and distribution by having a brand new network available, I agree with New Media and Digital Media scholars that the Internet is perhaps the most important and ground changing invention since the printing press. It allows for more publication on a large and small scale: Kraft tweets right alongside your childhood best friend. While the Internet may not be created equal, considering that Kraft can pay Twitter to make their tweet the top listed tweet on everyone's profile, neither my distribution power. But consider a statistic from Denis G. Pelli and Charles Bigelow: "Since 1400, book authorship has grown nearly tenfold in each *century*. Currently, authorship, including books and new media, is growing nearly tenfold each *year*. That's 100 times faster. Authors, once a select minority, will soon be a majority." If anything, Internet Memes are part of a wave of New Media which encourages users to create alongside consumption. "Before 1455, books were handwritten, and it took a scribe a year to produce a Bible. Today, it takes only a minute to send a tweet or update a blog. Rates of authorship are increasing by historic orders of magnitude. Nearly universal authorship, like universal literacy before it, stands to reshape society by hastening the flow of information and making individuals more influential" (Pelli).

The Internet has taken the high reigns of creative expression and decentralized it. The models of Old Media are falling apart; the record industry is in shambles and the Hollywood distribution system is in a massive shift. And it's not simply the fact that the Internet is giving people more "freedom" to create. Regardless or not if you have a computer hooked into a bunch of other computers, you can sit down and write a book or paint a portrait if you feel like it. But the Internet has fostered a culture of creativity, where within discussion boards, messaging posts, creative content sharing platforms like YouTube, Vimeo, Imgur, and Flickr users are encouraged to create on a daily basis. The line between work and pleasure fades as one second we are typing

spreadsheets, the next we are browsing through memes, and the next we are taking a photo and Instagramming it to Twitter. And, most importantly, it is all the same platform: the Internet — Yes, everything that comes out is not necessarily a masterpiece. The majority is crap! But, alongside removing many of the overhyped and strenuous pressures of general creative expression, it's the fact that the Internet wants us to eliminate the idea of work in our creative process.

Work is a fascinating concept when the Internet is involved. People create blogs and publish music and create memes for no apparent reason other than to express themselves and perhaps acquire (sometimes) anonymous notability. Of course if any larger entity offers the creator a contract or agreement with a lump sum, I doubt that many would refuse it. However, the Internet has changed the idea of work. We work for free, create content without little monetary value in return. And we work diligently. Internet users loves hard work. It doesn't enjoy crap, it ridicules and destroys crap (an art-form in itself), sometimes taking it to the point of making it popular again (consider Rebecca Black's *Friday* experience, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kfVsfOSbJY0).

The Internet mocks laziness while fostering it simultaneously. How dare you only make a lazy song to create profit and fans, or how dare you make a film with a terrible script that copies every other script, or how dare you STEAL someone else's ideas? But paradoxically, Internet Meme Culture is based in wasting time, goofing off, consuming as much content as possible as entertainment (when sometimes creation is as simple as 2-minute photoshopping that cuts out one person and puts it in something else or captions an already existing template...comparable to the amount of work done on a motion picture, even if it doesn't get more than 2 stars?). The

relationship between work and Internet Meme Culture is a confusing, complicated, paradoxical,

parodic relationship, and will come up again before this thesis is finished.

2.0   THE QUALITIES OF INTERNET MEME CULTURE

"It's been my policy to view the Internet not as an 'information highway,' but as an electronic asylum filled with babbling loonies."
                    - Mike Royko, journalist

At http://ano.lolcathost.org/thumbs//picture-unrelated.jpg is a Demotivational Poster, a parody of the commonplace motivational poster that hangs around office cubicles in order to inspire morale. A forerunner to contemporary Internet Memes, Demotivational Posters were wildly popular in the early 2000s that people shared through social media aggregators and humor sites like Ebaumsworld.com. The most important similarities between Demotivational Posters and the cultural content of Internet Memes is the easy template: find an image, position it in front of a black background, and write a funny caption. Bonus points for one word abstract ideas common to the workplace like Leadership, Knowledge, or Dedication. Yet, take a look at what's going on in the "Picture Unrelated" example above. A cuddly looking panda rises above a hill to shoot a rainbow through a knight. First, we have the cute, the basic cartoonish illustration of the panda bear. It looks soft and non-threatening, malleable and something I would want to cuddle with (Ngai 816). It also shoots a rainbow from its mouth. Then we have the complete opposite of cute, the grotesque, in the rainbow piercing through the knight. We have retroculture, a culture based in "an interpretation of history that taps nostalgia and an undercurrent of ironic understanding" (Guffey 27), and gamer culture with the knight, a character that frequently occurs in video games.

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Lastly, the title: "Picture Unrelated," gives a clear indicator of the level of absurdity within Internet Meme Culture. Sometimes random is the best policy, many of the best Internet Memes make no logical sense at all with the intent of "who cares, have fun!" But I would rather not stop there (of course, though, I will have fun). In this section, through four case studies of Internet Memes, we can also see the lifespan and evolution of an Internet Meme while also compiling common cultural attributes.

The first meme that truly caught my interest was something called Trololololo, a viral video of a Russian man from the 1970s singing an old Soviet song in front of an orange-brown-yellow disco-era background (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t6FUR_nhGX8). As the song got louder, its lyrics completely non-nonsensical (trolololo, lololo, lololo), I became obsessed. Remixes of the video appeared, slowing it down and speeding it up, but more importantly, people began to use it as a Russian Rickroll of sorts. A Rickroll is a misdirection video used to trick someone who thinks they are clicking a link to one video, and is actually sent to another (the most popular version sends the victim to music video of Rick Astley's 1987 song "Never Gonna Give You Up"). Perhaps it was my interest in video that truly pushed me into this culture. Perhaps it was the Internet Meme Culture's obsession with retroculture, archiving it and finding bits and pieces of it to treasure. Yet, Internet Meme Culture has spread far and beyond due to one word: cats.

2.1   LOLCATS

On the imageboard 4chan every Saturday, its users would flock to the Random board (/b/

for short) and post pictures of cats. For it was Caturday, and the users would not only flood the website with silly cat photos, but also praise and keep them in the conversation by "bumping," or posting in a thread to prevent the post from deletion. The first recording of this occurrence taking place on Urban Dictionary in 2006, the photographs posted to 4chan were essentially photographs of cats doing anything considered adorable: cats eating human food, cats making silly faces, cats on computers, the list is infinite (Menning. "Caturday"). Mimicking the *My Little Pony* irony/authenticity dichotomy, 4chan adored cats at a "crazy cat lady" level. Combining this with the fact that cats are symbols for trickery, cunning, selfishness, and bad luck (Cooper 30), cats would be the perfect mascot for lulz. In their tiny, adorable exterior, perhaps in the eyes of 4chan users, lurked something slightly more sinister. Additionally, related closely to Demotivational Posters which were so popular at the same time, cats had been the subjects of various motivational posters, including an especially famous one: Hang in there, baby! The phrase and image were imitated often, and if Web 3.33333333... existed in the 1970s, Hang in there baby would have certainly came into the memesphere (Wilkinson. "LOLcats").

However, if it was the rush of cat images each week on 4chan that maintained a constant supply of cats on the imageboard, it was Ben Huh and his Cheezburger Network that brought them to the mainstream. By this point the images were accompanied with LOLSpeak, a combination of Internet chat speak (LOL, BRB, CYA, TTYL, etc.) and a strange bastardization of spellings and grammar to partially fit the wacky appearances of many of the cats. After noticing how popular a picture of a cat with the misspelled yet adorable phrase "I can has cheezburger?" took off after posting it on one of his sites, Huh would eventually create an entire entertainment empire based off Internet Memes. Sometimes called a thief and crook by users of 4chan and other original meme sharers for profiting off their memes, it was Huh's mainstreamed,

perhaps friendlier, community based website that truly pushed LOLCats into the mainstream (Oneill. "I Can Has Hiztory").

Eventually, many of the images were turned into characters, depending on the spatial position of the cat, its facial expression, or something else that made the photograph humorous. The "original" LOLCat found by Huh was labeled Happy Cat. A cat sticking its head from a ceiling panel was named Ceiling Cat (http://www.roflcat.com/ceiling-cat-is-watching-you-masturbate). Another with its mouth agape in either shock or horror was titled OMG Cat (http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/omg-cat). The LOLCats were then reused in messaging boards as responses or either re-captioned with other jokes to fit their character names. The LOLCats, now a mega-meme like Advice Animals, spawned individual memes as the characters invaded the Internet. As Know Your Meme reports: "The overall decrease in cat searches is likely an effect to the ever-growing supply of cats on the internet" (Wilkinson. "LOLcats"). Yet, what about LOLCats caused it to increase dramatically in popularity? While one argument can be that everyone has a little bit of troll culture in them, rather, perhaps Caturday needed a softer, friendlier community to be shared throughout. 4chan (to repeat, "The Asshole of the Internet") is a scary place to many users, even today. A still hilarious joke on competing website Reddit is that its members only post screenshots of 4chan posts because they are afraid of the actual site. When Huh created the vibrant and friendly community of Cheezburger, other blogs were set up for even more fans, including the Cheez Town Cryer (Miltner 5).

Silly pictures of cats are nearly universal in their appeal for their cuteness. However, in their original creation, perhaps cute may be slightly twisted in LOLCats, allowing the grotesque and taboo to come through the captions. However, looking at the immense amount of LOLCats in circulation, it is quite fathomable that an entire cast and universe of LOLCats is available to

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those that wish to pursue it. With characters referencing each other and interacting as anthropomorphic personas for people to communicate on messaging boards, creating a sort of community narrative, the universe of LOLCats is expansive enough to possibly compare to <u>Star Wars</u>. Even the Bible has been translated into LOLSpeak, the place of God being portrayed by Ceiling Cat (Miltner 16).

2.2   PEDOBEAR

Pedobear is perhaps one of the most inclusive Internet Memes to have reached mild mainstream status. Alongside being one of the most offensive, it also lends itself to users in real life consistently getting caught. For those readers familiar with Pedobear, he may be perhaps be the most difficult meme to explain to someone, especially if they are not a member of Internet Meme Culture and familiar with the values of the community (Hinton. Personal Interview). For those readers unfamiliar with Pedobear, prepare to meet the satirical mascot of what may be considered a unanimous criminal act: pedophilia.

The cartoon bear comes from the original 4chan of Japan, 2channel, where the ASCii art version of the bear was meant to indicate an imageboard only for expressing users' emotions with ASCii art. However, 4chan adopted this creature into a indicator of the topic of child pornography and pedophilia. On the 4chan boards, if someone posted child pornography, a sadly often happening reoccurrence at one point due to the anonymous nature of the site, a user would post the picture of Pedobear to alert the community. Additionally, the bear would call out the poster by asking "Is that some loli?" a term used to describe child porn, both referencing lollipops and Lolita culture. However, the character eventually was inserted into similar caption

lined images, creating puns and jokes based on pedophilia (Stryker 234).

Pedophilia is rarely a laughing matter. And for the most part, I believe that many 4chan users and the majority of Internet Meme users are aware of this. However, in the essence of how 4chan and troll culture works, pedophilia became fair game because anything is fair game. Whitney Philips writes about the one-upmanship of 4chan culture, where a user is always trying to type the next snarky or witty comment, find the funniest most obscure image, or be the most offensive user possible. Anonymous users on 4chan call each other fags and niggers, offensive indicators to remove anyone who they do not want in their exclusive club (they call them moralfags), although the terms are endearing on the site (Philips 7).

As an outsider, however, the word "child pornography" itself is an alert, so seeing Pedobear alongside so much child porn and pedophiliac humor could only cause miscommunications. Multiple times the image has been mistaken as an indicator of a safe-haven for child porn users, but when Pedobear is misappropriated, rather than misinterpreted by an outsider to 4chan, is where the real lulz begin. Groups unaware of its more offensive backgrounds, use the image mistakenly because of its mistaken cuteness (Wilkinson "Pedobear").

Even the California police in response to people dressing up as Pedobear at the San Diego Comic-Con wrote a public safety notice including the line "PedoBear is and should be associated with the Internet and pedophiles/sexually-preferential offenders who reportedly use him to communicate their interests in young children to each other" (Chen. "Stupid California Police…"). These sorts of reports are what Internet Meme Culture, originally rooted in 4chan culture, thrive on: the extreme misinterpretation of Internet Memes to the point of fear for morals (a similar incident occurred with the political hacktivism group Anonymous via a FoxNews

report calling them, an "Internet Hate Machine" and showing dangerous imagery while reporting on 4chan users' antics) (Philips 11). Yet in this relationship between cute and grotesque, the harmless and the dangerous, lies an essential dichotomy to Internet Meme Culture.

2.3   NYAN CAT

Nyan Cat is a cat with a cherry Pop-Tart for a body that flies through space while leaving a trail of rainbows behind it. His original design was created by illustrator Chris Torres, who posted the image, based off his own cat, onto his webcomics site. After receiving suggestions to combine the cat and a Pop-Tart, he created Pop-Tart Cat, a GIF animation of just the cat, sans rainbow and background. Three days later, a YouTube user uploaded a three and a half minute video of the cat GIF, now flying through space as seen above, with the song Nyanyanyanyanyanyanya by Daniwell-P, a Japanese pop singer. The entire video is like one giant GIF, as both the animation and several measures of the song, repeat endlessly. Even single-serving websites, sites with usually one piece of repeating content like zombo.com, were created with the character. One such site titled Nyan.Cat, included the promise of Never Ending Nyan Cat. What is remarkable about Nyan Cat is not only its evolution from original creation to current status, but the enormous amount of variations available. Countless remixes are on YouTube, including Russian Nyan Cat, French Nyan Cat, and Smooth Jazz Nyan Cat. Several months after its creation, it was featured as a loading bar option for YouTube videos, and has

been used in a variety of appropriations from an advertisement for Vitamin Water and a replacement image for the PBS website when hacked by Anonymous (Brad. "Nyan Cat / Pop Tart Cat").

When taking a look at the repetitive Nyan.Cat, based on the original YouTube video, several of the most important qualities of Internet Meme Culture come forward. What perhaps contributes to Nyan Cat's popularity most is its catchiness; the Japanese song's simple lyrics, the length of the image and song, and the fact that its components can be broken up so easily (cat, Pop-Tart, space, rainbows, nyan) all make it extremely easy to remember. It feels like pop music, reminiscent of the catchy intros of songs like "Hey Ya" by Outkast, "Billie Jean" by Michael Jackson, or even more recently, "Call Me Maybe" by Carly Rae Jensen.

Yet, going past its catchiness, Nyan Cat is based in the absurd and surreal. The cat comes from a place of fantasy, where the best parts of young adulthood come together. It is our visualization of our attempts to annoy each other (perhaps coming back to troll culture and lulz). Even the idea of a website devoted to an endurance contest, how much Nyan Cat can you last, shows a mixture of our attempt to break down someone's psyche, but at the same time, confirming a mindset of "*Challenge Accepted*." Its roots in Japanese culture are apparent with the song "Nyanyanyanyan." Its associations with online and tech culture, though, are essential: the animated GIF format being a key part of Internet history in its pixelated quality, as to be discussed in later sections. And what cannot be forgotten is that the foundation Nyan Cat is essentially a LOLCat, a character who interacts with the rest of LOLCat community. Nyan Cat, however, may possibly represent the best of Internet Meme Culture, in a sense, a perfect meme in its collaborative, nonsensical creation, its distribution as an object for lulz and LOLs, and its spread to real life in outside media, an excellent representative and mascot of Internet Meme

Culture.

2.4   ANTOINE DODSON AND THE BED INTRUDER SONG

A common YouTube upload is the quirky newscast, the strange interview of someone who just cannot possibly exist that television news yearns for, a true character. Usually acting as fluff pieces, everything from a leprechaun sighting and loud whistles on cars (interestingly, both from poorer primarily black neighborhoods), one upload became an instant viral sensation from not so funny content: an attempted rape in Huntsville, Alabama. In the piece about a suspect climbing through a window with the intent to rape, immediately the interview subject and her family are picked out for their extreme poverty, "odd" vocabulary and syntax, and general casualness about the entire situation, an unintentional parody on the news reporters' attempts to deliver a serious story. "I was attacked by some idiot out here in the projects," says the victim. However, it was her brother, Antoine Dodson, wearing a red bandana and black wife beater, slowly annunciating his words between annoyance and a threat to the victim:

"Well, obviously we have a RAPIST in Lincoln Park. He's climbin' in your windows, he's snatchin' your people up, tryin' to rape 'em. So y'all need to hide your kids, hide your wife, and hide your husband cause they're rapin' everybody out here."

- Antoine Dodson (Caldwell, "Antoine Dodson")

This video alone was enough to become a meme. Shortly after its enormous popularity, follow up stories were done by the same news station, even speaking to Dodson about his new found fame. On the same day of this follow up, yet again, not even three days after the event, online comedy group The Gregory Brothers, a group that uses auto-tuning, an audio technology

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for correcting pitch, to make songs out of news reports, had already made a catchy song out of Dodson's video. The response was absolutely explosive. The song was covered by other popular artists, including comedian Dane Cook, it sold over 10,000 copies in the first two days available on iTunes, and even reached the Billboard Hot 100 at number 89 (Caldwell, "Antoine Dodson").

Dodson is now one of the most notable Internet celebrities and in the process of releasing a reality show documenting his and his family's journey to fame and Hollywood. Yet, its origins again root closely to lulz and troll culture. As Pedobear is a way to talk through pedophilia and child pornography online, Dodson made rape an Internet sensation. Because regardless of the fame, the main reason Dodson reached any sort of fame was because someone attempted to rape his sister. Yet, in his nonchalant response (as if, an even more serious subject, this kind of shit happens all the time) he makes some viewers comfortable with this story by both acknowledging the rape, making us laugh about it, and then casually throwing it aside. And comfortable people have become: I've heard the song on many cellphones as its ringtones (granted, Eduard Hill's Trololololo is my own) and witnessed many multiple people dressing up as Dodson across the country. Dodson's own celebrity journey in due time will be an excellent example of a strange sort of evolution of the star system and old Hollywood with current show business, but for now, Dodson and his song are an integral part of not just Internet Meme Culture, but popular culture in general.

Following these four specific case studies, and the thousands of memes I have come across in my studies, I have been able to glean five main aspects of Internet Memes. I am weary to list five qualities and have them read as absolutes, since they are in no ways the attributes to follow to create the perfect Meme, but I believe that if you are to look at the majority of Internet

Memes, a good majority will contain all five of these qualities. And all of them will at least include three of the five.

2.5   THE FIVE QUALITIES OF INTERNET MEMES

INTERNET MEMES ARE FUNNY. INTERNET MEMES ARE PARODY.

Internet Memes are comedic objects. Their main intention is to create laughs, which can either be attributed to LOLs or lulz. While original creations like Nyan Cat exist in Internet Meme Culture, the majority of Internet Memes are based in parody due to the commenting culture behind the Internet and the immense catalogue of cultural objects already available to users online. Internet commenting in itself is an art form, the style of commenting varying dramatically between websites, considering Reddit's dialogue that is essentially self-moderated through a down/up-voting system, 4chan's anarchic and fast chaos of one-upmanship due to the newest comment moving directly to the top of the thread, or YouTube, whose system is a combination of both and its commenters generally thought to be of a lesser quality than most other websites. Comments are the land of wit and sometimes harsh commentary, making fun of other posters, and a place of general discourse. The language and culture of Internet Memes stem from comments. On 4chan, the image posted acts as much as a comment as the text alongside it. When someone posts something online and leaves room for comments, discussion and critique are bound to occur. Internet Memes parody Old Media, current events, and each other.

INTERNET MEMES ARE CUTE. INTERNET MEMES ARE GROTESQUE.

An immediate response to Internet Memes is usually a visceral reaction based on either if the meme is cute or grotesque. The Internet: where you can find billions of images of cats and just as many of coprophilia. Sianne Ngai writes in her article "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde," "And while the avant-garde is conventionally imagined as sharp and pointy, as hard- or cutting-edge, cute objects have no edge to speak of, usually being soft, round, and deeply associated with infantile and the feminine" (Ngai 814). Ngai also associates cute with the formal properties of "smallness, compactness, pitifulness, and even despondency." The softness especially, considering the feminine nature of the cute, is something that you want to touch and make malleable to your content. The opposite of the cute, the tactile and malleable, is then the grotesque, something you wouldn't want to touch and possibly avoid manipulating in any way besides killing it. Perhaps Internet Memes are a nearly perfect duality of the too, and therefore, the perfect vehicle to discuss taboo.

4chan culture, the cradle of meme life, is a culture of one-upmanship. Partly from Internet commenting too, discussion is nearly a competition, where whoever says the crudest or funniest thing is usually praised. Especially on 4chan, this results in competition of offensiveness: who can make the other person cringe first and most. It's an inherent part of the culture of lulz, to take entertainment and joy out of someone's uncomfortable awkwardness. Getting them to respond to offensiveness is even better.

So in a non-ironic embrace of the cute (cats, for example) and an acknowledgment of the offensive nature of the taboo (Pedobear) while sharing a collective attitude towards the subject of the taboo, Internet Memes propagate as the truly ultimate inside joke. They are the password to the club. They alienate those outside the club and are an object to rejoice around inside of it. You

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are a member if you use them correctly. And once you are a member, you are allowed to truly get personal and share the weird inside of you.

INTERNET MEMES ARE ABSURD, SURREAL, AND WEIRD.

While some objects are uploaded online with already absurdist and surrealist characteristics, the idea of these aesthetics themselves are parody, or at least commentary, of what could be considered normal popular culture. But why are absurd and surreal pieces accepted so quickly in Internet Meme Culture? The weirder the better? It would be simple to start with the idea that Internet Meme Culture craves new content, even though there is simply so much content available to begin with. Yet, users are always searching for that brand new, exciting thing. With such a new tool, they expect to see new and original creativity as well. Additionally, as many Internet users are turning into Internet content creators (Pelli), perhaps this shift fosters an eye for originality that scrutinizes the same thing. Considering that countless Internet Memes are made on a daily basis, it even takes an original eye to pick out memes that are either unique in content or message.

So the absurd and surreal could be valued as original, yet there is a greater step this idea could take if looked at through the community that the Internet creates. In a TED Talk, composer Eric Whitacre talks about his experience directing a virtual choir: people would send him videos of them performing individual parts to a piece he wrote, guided by another video Whitacre sent beforehand conducting. He edited them to create his video and discussed that while the choir and himself were alone, everyone was all-together in their aloneness. If we are to consider the absurd and surreal to be a personal, original type of creative production that comes from unconscious or subconscious sources, then perhaps in a way we are all alone in our absurdity. These suggestive

meanings in absurdist and surreal art may never be completely understood. Yet, in the anonymous nature of the Internet, by admitting that we are alone in our absurdity *together*, then a community can form that embraces the weird.The Internet is then the perfect medium for anonymous absurdity. Of course, there may be a certain type of absurd that is valued over another, or a community mindset of what weird is acceptable and what weird is not, but the value of the absurd or weird is nearly synonymous with Internet Meme Culture's oddly paradoxical value of authenticity.

INTERNET MEMES ARE BASED IN RETROCULTURE.

When looking at the building blocks of Internet Memes, without a doubt, popular and retroculture hold the largest foundations, consisting of a variety of media objects, the majority actually being generic stock images. The appropriation of stock images comments nicely on the parodic nature of the web; many of these images are from giant stock image database and consist of some of the odder photos that are asking to be made fun of.

Yet, clumping together in online searches when, say, looking for images of "mobsters," is not only true mobsters, but also Vito and Michael Corleone from the Godfather. Fictional characters are then implemented easily into Internet Memes. Even further, in parody of characters, we find another form of the meme. Of course, there are many reasons why popular culture finds its way into Internet Memes, most importantly the fact that it is popular culture. People aren't on the Internet creating and not familiar with items from popular culture. Some popular culture icons thrive better than others online and are discussed and referenced more, but popular culture is utilized because most people are familiar with it and can talk about it in real life so therefore talk about it and share their ideas through popular culture online.

What's more important is why certain Internet Memes last longer and tend to be used more often, upvoted the most, and given the most LOLs. The basic component of the Internet Meme besides the image is the caption. And many of these captions revolve around quotation, so just as in reality, more quotable pieces are included in Internet Memes. Many times, the quotations are parodied or mutated to comment on Internet Meme Culture to continue the exclusivity of memes. Many times, it's also based in parody, something as simple as mishearing something, including it in text without its auditory partner. Parody as discussed earlier, is one of the strongest forms of culture in the Internet, so any popular culture item that lends itself to parody can be easily accessible to the Internet. Even further, moving into exclusivity, cult items such as <u>Rocky Horror Picture Show</u>, <u>The Room</u>, and b-movies come up because of their distance from mainstream popular culture and embrace of their participatory nature. Internet Meme Culture embraces exclusivity, so it makes sense that they would throw around cult film iconography.

However, the cult and the mainstream share close places online. Following the difficult to garner demographics of Internet Meme Culture, many popular culture items online do fall into the land of fan culture and also young adult male driven. So items like <u>Transformers</u>, <u>Avengers</u>, and James Bond are made into memes frequently, however many world based stories such as <u>Harry Potter </u>and <u>The Matrix </u>are included as well. The satirical animated show <u>South Park</u>, in many ways, has raised the culture of the Internet, a group that makes references mainly to 1980s and 1990s culture. Yet, more recent icons like <u>Scott Pilgrim </u>and <u>Mean Girls </u>are also fair game. And while certain thing of the past aren't discussed frequently (I doubt there are that many *Three's Company* memes out there, that kind of parody is meant for parents), many classics or genre heroes also turn up in memes.

The Internet drowns in retroculture. Just to take a quick second and think: anything you can

imagine existing in terms of media, be it a book, film, song, image, etc., anything from Andy Warhol inspired designs, to some of the first images of the bible, to a Baha Men album, it can be found online most times under sixty seconds. Then, with this thought in mind, consider that in the world of Internet Memes, *any piece of media is fair game*. And while images and videos, mostly converted to animated GIFS, are the preferred vehicle for Internet Memes, auditory media is by no means excluded, as in the Antoine Dodson and Gregory Brothers Auto-Tune the News "Bed Intruder Song." In a comparison to the hipster movement (I heard about x before x was cool), the more distant and hilarious the object, the better suited it is for Internet Memes. Perhaps this distant reference game is some sort of competition, who knows most about popular culture (although most times, it is who has the best Googling skills).

This obsession with retroculture contains several consequences. Consider a brief video from the 1952 film adaptation of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. A woman says deeply and disgustedly into the camera, "A handbag!?" As one Reddit user phrased best, regardless of the enormous repertoire of films that this actress has done before *Importance*, she will always be remembered online for these brief six seconds. Additionally, the example of Eduard Hill's video *Trololololo*, will also instate him in a rebirth due to the personalization of a dated cultural artifact. Perhaps what would have otherwise been lost in the cultural cemetery is with an extended life span due to users and the community personalizing the brief clips.

Yet, with this personalization will come an even more interesting scenario with the increase of online celebrity. As a friend phrased an idea to me once: since the Internet can find so much media and create so much micro/major-celebrity, the amount of celebrity deaths that we will be broadcasted and noted in the future will increase at exponential rates. As more people achieve micro-fame, and more often are remembered for 15 seconds, rather than 15 minutes,

there will be an interesting trend of culture where we feel we are losing culture as more and more celebrities die. This will of course have to be rectified by some means to alleviate the mortality idea of culture, or we will be obsessed with retroculture for as long as we allow more cultural celebrities, and then mourn their passing.

INTERNET MEMES ARE SELF-AWARE.

To participate in the creation, distribution, and consumption of Internet Memes, while not completely necessary, it helps to be a fluent member of Internet Meme Culture and Community. This is due to the fact that Internet Memes either comment on issues specifically related to Internet Meme Culture or comment on each other. As Internet Memes individually evolve into an established character, they tend to have discussions with each other. Similar to how LOLCats created an entire universe of characters that interacted with each other, Internet Memes are rarely independent of each other. Once the main idea or trope of their humor has been stretched out as long as possible, just as genre films reinvent themselves by deconstructing themselves or as television tends to "jump the shark "by making an extremely self-aware move, Internet Memes then talk about each other, requiring us to be aware of the community that surrounds them. This idea of self-awareness only invites more to the idea of Internet Meme as Internet exclusive joke: you won't get the joke unless you get the references. To take this one step further, if the art of Internet Meme making is so hyper aware and reflexive, then even the members of the Internet Meme community open themselves up to parody.

There is even an entire meme dedicated to the self-awareness that come with Internet

Meme Culture. It comes from a strange, almost school portrait-like, photograph of rapper Xzibit, and besides his notoriety in the hip hop community, he is also the host of *Pimp My Ride*. Many times, extraordinary absurd and superfluous items are inserted in the cars in order to pimp them out. The line "Yo dawg, we heard you like TV, so we put TV in your car so you can watch TV while you drive," is something that could easily be a part of the show ("Xzibit"). Yet, when the image made its way onto 4chan, it turned into the most reflexive meme possible, Yo Dawg. Originally commenting on Xzibit's show, the meme took off, using only reflexive humor to attain laughs. The character Xzibit eventually became a symbol of reflexivity and things within things, where it would not even be necessary to include words with an image. Like Pedobear appearing in message boards, Xzibit could function in a similar way. This complex Internet Meme, which in essence is a type of mise en abyme, eventually only requires the face of Xzibit to understand (see http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/xzibit-yo-dawg for examples).

3.0   THE MEME AND THE MAINSTREAM

"We're in a transitional world right now if you're in any artistic field because the nature of distribution is changing. The model by which creator got their work out in the world and keep a roof over their head and buy sandwiches when they did that...they're all changing."
                                    -Neil Gaiman

Let's consider two separate worlds: The Internet, the place that I have described up to this point as a world based on computers and mobile devices, in screens that the user controls, and where the majority of sharing takes place on social media applications or image, message, and discussion boards, and Mainstream Media, outlets controlled by a main producer that delivers content mainly one-way to a consumer, like Web 1.0, with examples such as film, television, and all forms of advertising. Saying that the relationship between Internet and Mainstream Media is tense is perhaps an understatement; between constant battles of copyright infringement online and media piracy and a general misunderstanding of each own's distribution methods (except for a brilliant minority of advertising agencies and small production companies), these two media act antagonistically towards each other, yet neither can (or eventually will be able to) survive without the other. However, what can create the most emotional struggles between these two entities is when an Internet Meme is translated into Mainstream Media. This can happen via several ways: an Internet Meme appropriates into an advertisement, or an Internet Celebrity or Meme creator takes her creation into her own hand and attempts to profit from it, or perhaps, as in the Antoine Dodson case study, a news outlet does a report on the meme, sensationalizing it as

"There's a new meme on the Internet" (Zittrain "Keynote"). There are many ways a meme can die besides someone's parents find out about it. Yet, since Internet Meme Culture depends so much on correctly using the meme to prove membership, misappropriation of a meme can be disastrous.

The main discussion of appropriation of Internet Memes mostly confines itself to advertisement with the logic of "popular is popular," regardless of whether it is online or not. Then, by usually compensating the Meme creator, the advertiser can use the character in a commercial. Examples of these include advertisements both by Vitamin Water and Samsung, compiling a group of memes and simply displaying them all at once, practically an overload exhibition of memes. The same idea applies when the popular band Weezer created a music video for their song "Pork and Beans" mainly of them parodying Internet Memes (and bringing some actual Internet Celebrities into the music video as well). Even more recently, the incredibly popular Advice Animal of Success Kid (Puts 5 dollars in pocket; Pulls out 10), along with being used in the Vitamin Water commercial has been featured on billboards in the UK for Virgin Media. The other route is through Internet celebrity.

One of the earliest viral video sensations, as discussed in my introduction, was Gary Brolsma and his Numa Numa ad. Finalizing Gary's "sell-out" was the creation of Numa Network, solidifying the Numa Numa brand with a website meant for funny videos created by Gary and his friends, selling merchandise (including a video on how to do the Numa dance) and a logo in the welcome banner, with a cartoon version of Gary in white undershirt in mid Numa dance. Many of these commercializations of Internet Memes end as failures, practically killing the meme. However, the few successes of Internet Meme influenced/appropriated advertising are notable because they go beyond the idea of popular is popular, understanding their audience and

their audience's core beliefs. So can there ever be a guide to create a perfect Internet Meme advertisement, or even better, an advertisement that becomes an Internet Meme? The answer is an obvious no. What will sound airy now will be explained later on, but, as with many cultural fashions, attempting to create an Internet Meme advertisement or sensation implies "trying too hard." Rarely is it in the actual creation that something is an Internet Meme, but only when the Internet itself appropriates the cultural material to create and spread memes. Henry Jenkins defines this as spreadability, which "refers to the potential — both technical and cultural — for audiences to share content for their own purposes, sometimes with the permission of rights holders, sometimes against their wishes" (Jenkins 12). While Participatory and Convergence Culture is key to Spreadable Media, spreadability also depends on being aware of the community that you are putting your product, or advertisement into. Being aware of Internet Meme Culture is one of the surest ways to stay relevant, and not turn into that parent who laments finding out what Socially Awkward Penguin is.

Yet, in dealing with this culture, users' values evolve from ironic mocking and parody, to truly authentic love of nostalgia and retroculture. To discuss an excellent partner vehicle for the meme, which in itself can be considered its own type of meme, is the GIF or Graphics Interchange Format, a file made of a brief looped animation. A popular Tumblr blog, #whatshouldwecallme, uses GIFs from television or film to represent either an emotion or feeling. Its static image quality remains due to the choppiness of the image, although lately with the upgrade of Tumblr restrictions on file size, GIFs have increased in complexity. The content, structure, and popularity of GIFs are dependent on the technical limitations: perhaps the last push of the GIF will be their inclusion on Facebook (right now, GIFs are not allowed on the site). Originally noted for their basic animation abilities, such as a frog hopping every several seconds,

according to meme artist Olia Lialina, after the GIF moved through a strangely spectacle based transition of the addition of glittering to animations, the recent trend of GIFs has been based on subtle movements (Lialina, "The GIFs that Keep on GIFing"). Take for example the GIF blog If We Don't, Remember Me (http://iwdrm.tumblr.com/), a Tumblr that takes extremely brief moments from film and turns them into art GIFs. Examples range from the main protagonist of Oldboy smiling after beating up an entire hallway of goons with a hammer, to a lead character of The Royal Tenenbaums taking a photograph while the curtains behind him blow in the wind.

There are several parts of the GIF that are interesting in terms of memes: in its repetition it creates a jarring mise-en-abyme, where we see the film in two minutes, similar to the films of Martin Arnold and Bruce Connor's A Report. Users that are familiar with the film experience different feelings and interpretations, as will be discussed, but regardless of familiarity, as the GIF takes its place perfectly between video and photography, we watch it looped over and over and recognize not only the patterns but pick out every difference, (e.g. the camera shutter or the blowing curtain). In another IWDRM GIF, from The Conversation, we watch the main character's hands move slightly in the shadows for several seconds, expecting some sort of movement, until he picks his head up, noticing something. Then repeat. The visual stimuli is limited and manageable. The movement is what captures our attention, and then going back and looking in detail keeps our attention. The GIF lies nicely in between the quickly digestible photograph and the sometimes too much information video. However, what becomes important in appropriation of the meme related to The Royal Tenenbaums GIF is the levels of understanding. Does someone who has seen the film read the GIF of the character taking a picture differently than someone who hasn't?

Internet Memes are limited in their level of understanding, as its culture requires an

extensive knowledge of the popular and retroculture discussed above, or at the least, an advanced researching skill that would allow immediate looking up of the reference. Although, many times, this is not even enough. Take for example a GIF commonly used on 4chan and other imageboards to represent applause at a comment, sometimes sarcastically or authentically depending on the context of the conversation. Can the image be deciphered alone in conversation?

Someone posts a GIF of the film character Citizen Kane repeatedly clapping (http://media.tumblr.com/tumblr_m56jzneq7v1qc480z.gif). The looped image is of an older man, without a smile, in hard shadows, clapping. The meaning of this GIF changes depending on your levels of understanding:

Level 1: This is a man applauding.

Level 2: This is from a movie.

Level 3: This is from the movie Citizen Kane.

Level 4: This is the character Citizen Kane.

Level 5: This is from the scene where Citizen Kane is clapping when no one else is clapping in the theater. It is pathetic.

The differences between levels one and five can change the entire meaning of the image. However, this could be said about any sort of media that is referential, in that if you are unfamiliar with the source material, the meaning will be lost. This idea becomes even more important as advertising and mainstream media appropriate Internet Memes, and what understanding is lost in the translation.

3.1   INTERNET MEMES AND ADVERTISING

As more advertising firms tread onto online territory they tend to look into areas of social media research, creating for consumers Facebook pages to like or Twitter pages to follow. However, some choose to use Internet Memes as their model, mainly because of their immense popularity online. Even though I will dissuade against using the term viral, many firms see the Internet as a place for advertisements to go as viral as Internet Memes, to be shared rapidly and infect the minds of users. The work on online advertising is vast and comprehensive, but for the sake of Internet Memes, let us say that there are two main ways advertising relates to Internet Meme Culture: by either appropriating a meme from the memesphere and using it in advertisements in other media other than the Internet (such as film, television, print), or by creating new Internet Memes to spread throughout the Internet in a "viral fashion."

Internet Memes, the inclusive joke that they act as, can harm a company if appropriated incorrectly. The misuse of a meme is a joke, showing that they are not a part of meme culture, and ruins the credibility of the user. Additionally, the mechanics of how viral media work mean that while there are several methods and techniques that can be utilized in content creation that may harbor or help maintain a viral sensation, there is nothing that can be done to directly create viral media (Jenkins).

I would like to look at several case studies from the advertising world. For the first, appropriation of Internet Memes, we look at a recent Vitamin Water advertisement that features about thirteen Internet Memes as they follow one man in his purchase to get Vitamin Water, ending with the tagline "prepare for anything."

Bloomberg Business Week paints a perfect picture of the 30 second ad:

"A scruffy, twentysomething man in a cardigan walks down the street, trailed by

Sergio Flores, aka Sexy Sax Man, belting out a grinding tune. Cardigan guy passes someone "planking" atop a fire hydrant, someone else doing "the worm" along the sidewalk, and cats with limes on their heads, before Flores gets plowed over by an antelope, and our hero rides off on the beast through a crowd of dancing prisoners in orange jumpsuits into a sunset of animated, Pop-Tart cats making double rainbows in the sky." (Sax, "The Growing Power of the Meme")

Vitamin Water is not the first brand to use Internet Memes. Samsung displayed a collective of memes in an ad for its cell phone, and Internet celebrities like Gary "Numa Numa" Brolsma and Double Rainbow Guy have leased out their micro-celebrity image to companies, mainly parodying their original videos. The Vitamin Water ad is slightly different in terms of context, though, since Samsung's advertisement had Internet Memes coming out of a cellphone. There was at least a link connecting back to the meme's backyard: technology, the memes living in a cellphone. Additionally, this was an advertisement that played before movies, instructing people to turn off their cell phones before the show and keep the meme characters inside the phone. Vitamin Water uses its memes without any mentioning of the Internet. In fact, out of context, while these memes may look funny even if you do not know what they are, Vitamin Water and the firm that produced the ad have distanced themselves from the content in terms of "Levels of Understanding," creating an enormous gap in viewer understanding. Unless the viewer is a dedicated member of Internet Meme Culture, then these images simply remain silly images, with little cultural value. But the most important question remains, does the ad work? Will people remember Vitamin Water? Perhaps, but as the appropriation of memes continues, there is a much higher risk for mistrust or misappropriation. Relying on the idea of popular is popular, rather than creating their own remix and becoming part of Internet Meme Culture is not sustainable.

Using memes for a firm or company's own benefits, which unfortunately, goes against a major staple of Internet Meme Culture.

Perhaps a more successful appropriation of an Internet Meme to advertising would be of the *Futurama* memes, based off the 2000s animated television sitcom. For the seventh season, Comedy Central used many of the memes in their advertising campaign, creating their own imitations and airing them on TV. The memes, while promoting the seventh season, used the template correctly and were generally well received with little criticisms. In its appropriation, *Futurama* had two successful points: first, the body creating the meme is that of the meme itself. As the meme originated from *Futurama* as its source material, and developed and evolved throughout the Internet, it is easier for *Futurama* to create their memes deriving from their own source material. Second, even though *Futurama* is a more important popular cultural object in Internet Meme Culture, they are catering to their target demographic by joining the meme community, even getting quite reflexive in one spot (Need a promo? Why not Zoidberg!). It is easier for *Futurama* to embrace Internet Meme Culture since they are members and a popular reference made in online forums, but is able to hide the fact that they are using the meme for their own interests by appropriating its meaning correctly and being the original creator of the content that wasn't expected to be a meme. This is different than say Gary Brolsma using his own meme for profit, since the original content was accidentally made famous, without work. *Futurama* was a part of television culture, created specifically for an audience with hard work behind it (Caldwell, "Futurama Fry...")(Carp, "Comedy Central...").

The majority of advertising firm created memes have been failures, but is this anything extraordinary to expect considering the extremely high failure rate that comes with meme creation? Yet, perhaps in the process that some firms use memes, advertisement Internet Memes

are just not created with the intention of serving an economical or specific message-based purpose. Internet Memes are made in a fun quick spirit, with the hope of perhaps getting popular one day, but is made even more difficult by the anonymous nature of the image boards of their creation. So when a company creates a meme, uses existing advertising outlets to advertise the meme (banner ads, paid for posts on websites like Twitter, Buzzfeed, Reddit), and then expects you to spread it, the motives are too obvious. Take for example McDonalds, who had already attempted an online social media campaign with a failed #McDStories hashtag on Twitter, searching for people sharing happy nostalgic McDonald's memories and instead received a negative, sarcastic response of tweets like "#McDStories never get old, kinda like a box of McDonald's 10 piece Chicken McNuggests left in the sun for a week." They tried again to emulate a type of meme (called Photo Fads by KnowYourMeme) where people put their bodies into funny positions in random locations and take a picture with their cellphone, like planking or owling. McDonalds, for its annual March Shamrock Shake promotion, asks us in a paid for BuzzFeed post "Have you tried #Shamrocking yet?"

Shamrocking consisted of people standing in a pose, holding an iconic green Shamrock Shake, while emulating a sort of Irish jig, which actually appeared more like the Captain Morgan pose. Besides the forced nature of the meme (there is a hashtag symbol right in the paid for post's headline), the meme is awkward, many of the sample participants appearing uncomfortable or at least very staged. Perhaps what holds #Shamrocking back though is the inevitable corporate and marketed vibe that comes with an enormous company like McDonalds (McDonalds. "Have You Tried #Shamrocking Yet?")(Nudd. "McDonalds Fabricates..."). The meme is not the brainchild of one clever poster, as many are, but a careful process of selection and analysis, using market statistics, by a large group of paid individuals. But uncomfortable

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meme participation is not only the fault of major corporations; an online comic site that is usually featured highly on Reddit.com called The Oatmeal attempted a similar strategy. The comic's creator made a comic called My Daily Life, that ended in a panel emulating an Advice Animal. He then held a contest to see who could make the best MDL meme. As in the words of Professor Zittrain, "the response was anemic. People don't like being prompted. It seems that they're trying too hard, there's something inauthentic about it" (Zittrain. "Keynote").

What perhaps can be considered one of the best examples of online advertising in general would be Old Spice Guy, created by Portland advertising firm Wieden + Kennedy. In a recent article from BusinessWeek, the global director for interactive strategies, Renny Gleeson, said, "There's a difference between ripping off and riffing off" (Sax. "The Growing Power of the Meme"). This philosophy applies to all the wrongs discussed above. Not only can you rip off the meme by directly copying it from the Internet, but you can rip off the consumer by producing forced, inauthentic content. However, Old Spice Guy not only started a meme, but then maintained its own status online in the memesphere.

In W + K's "The Man Your Man Could Smell Like," a fast, cool talking former football wide receiver Issah Mustafa (although his sport past is not noted) talks seductively to the ladies about how her man could smell like him, as the background rapidly changes setting, ending with him on a horse, saying "I'm on a horse." The commercial itself is fast, absurd, and encompasses many of the qualities of Internet Meme Culture. The spot aired on TV and YouTube for the Super Bowl in 2010, perhaps the best possible time a commercial could premiere. Then, five months later, Old Spice Guy's character appeared on Twitter, Facebook, and many other social media platforms, requesting that people send in their questions. Old Spice Guy (Issah Mustafa, in the bathroom set and costume from the original commercial) responded to 186 user questions

each with a 30 second YouTube video. He responded to comments from celebrities and regular users alike. However, what may have been most brilliant, was OSG's response to Anonymous, the political group that was slowly growing from 4chan, spiteful of appropriation of Internet Memes since many came straight from 4chan's boards (Stryker 199).

The brilliance of this response was that during the video, Mustafa holds up various random objects, such as a cake, a fish, a magnifying glass, all references to inside jokes on 4chan. W + K was not just appropriating Internet Meme Culture, they were trying to become a part of it (Stryker 200). Old Spice Guy evolved into a character of Internet Meme Culture, countless remixes and mashups were created using Mustafa's character, while Old Spice reaped the benefits: nearly 24 million people saw the YouTube *responses* alone. And while the specific body-wash in the commercial has sales decrease 7% (Robertson, "Alas, The Old Spice Guy..."), overall sales of Old Spice increased 107% (Axon, "Old Spice Sales Double"). What Old Spice may have been attempting was to redefine its brand, a brand reserved for fathers and grandpas now actively caters to a younger audience by appropriating their culture. Could this strategy work for all companies? Not exactly, it depends on many variables, especially what it is you are exactly trying to sell. While Old Spice had elderly connotations, it is a body wash and shower product. There's nothing that excludes this product from the youth market. Yet, W+K's marketing department bridged the gap between target audience and brand, they improved the relationship between the two.

However, if a relationship between Internet Meme Culture and mainstream media intends on evolving, it will depend on the respect and understanding of media ownership from both cultures. The cultural content, which I try to define in earlier sections, is not anything revolutionary. Perhaps a combination of all three major components, parody, retroculture/remix,

and absurdism are a unique combination in terms of this newest phase of cultural, but each one individually has been around for quite some time. It is then, as always with Old Media and New Media, the clashing of the changes that sets them apart. Before getting deeper into the difference between what I shall call, for television, film, and non-Internet advertising, Old Media, and all sole web based programming, New Media, I would like to explain one more case study.

3.2   SNAKES ON A PLANE

When it comes to Hollywood, rarely do Internet Memes and Internet Meme Culture play a larger role in blockbuster films than as advertising devices, with the hope that certain characters or tropes in the film may in themselves become memes, or that the content of the film may be close enough to Internet Meme Culture that the demographic of Internet users might also be convinced to go to the movies rather than download it more comfortably on your computer. One of the most direct examples of film and memes clashing would be the Hitler Reacts meme, where a scene from the German film, <u>Downfall</u>, about the last days of Adolph Hitler, is parodied over and over again with different subtitles during an especially tense scene. The subtitles have commented on everything from Xbox Live accounts, football games, and even the creation of memes in a truly meta-meme. However, the film's company, invested in the matter of copyright infringement, attempted to request that YouTube and other online video providers remove the <u>Downfall</u> videos immediately. Of course, while many of the original spoofs were taken down, this could not stop more from being made and uploaded to the countless different Internet video providers online (Rohrer, "The Rise, Rise...").

Yet, a film that came closest to Internet Meme Culture in 2006, in which what many

journalists consider one of the best online marketing campaigns for a movie before viral marketing giants like The Dark Knight came along, was Snakes on a Plane. The premise seemed solid enough: while transporting a witness willing to testify against drug dealers, an assassination attempt is made by releasing hundreds of snakes on the transport plane in an effort to poison the witness with snake venom. The premise alone includes various aspects of aforementioned Internet Meme Culture — I point to the absurdism and the silliness (even though the film started as a dramatic screenplay). The film was originally titled Venom, then codenamed Snakes on a Plane, then Pacific Air Flight 121, and then officially back to Snakes on a Plane after lead actor Samuel L. Jackson demanded the title back, since it was the main reason he joined the film in the first place.("'Snakes on a Plane' - The Cult"). Already buzzing online, considering Mr. Jackson's notoriety as an a figure of cult and popular culture, screenwriter Josh Friedman then posted about the movie after being hired to work on it, imagining Jackson saying lines along the vein of "There are motherfucking snakes on this motherfucking plane" (Friedman. "Snakes on a Motherfucking Plane"). Video remixes of Snakes on a Plane were popping up everywhere, including some like Cats on a Plane, Snakes Who Missed the Plane, All Your Snakes Are Belong To Us (a play on the Internet Meme "All Your Base Are Belong to Us), Steaks on a Train, and Badgers on a Plane (a parody of the online viral video "Badger Badger Badger") ("Snakes on a Plane"). Snakes on a Plane had officially become an Internet Meme, if not already a meta-meme commenting on other memes as well, the template being X(an animal) on a Y(a transportation device).

The production team, who had finished shooting the film, added an additional five days of re-shoots to take advantage of this Internet hype, including a modified version of Friedman's line: "Get these motherfucking snakes off this motherfucking plane." Even at the time of the

release, the marketing team still tried to play on the meme, cleverly releasing a program that would call people in the voice of Samuel L. Jackson and leave voice messages with dialogue in the same style of the film. However, with its release, Snakes on a Plane performed lackluster critically and at the box office, grossing over 30 million dollars, but considered at large to be overhyped ("Snakes on a Plane (2006)"). BoxOfficeMojo claimed that, "The title said it all, and the movie itself was an afterthought. Months of media and Internet coverage over the bluntly descriptive yet ridiculous name, Snakes on a Plane, turned out to be nothing but hype, and the picture remained what it always was: an average horror genre picture for August" (Gray. "'Snakes' All Hiss and No Bite"). Let's take a look at the relationship between the film and Internet Meme Culture played a role in this response, since Snakes on a Plane perhaps did most of what I preached this entire section: created original content, working with Internet Meme Culture and Participatory Culture and playing along, becoming a part of Internet Meme Culture.

At the end of the film, Snakes on a Plane is a fun concept. The title alone inspires hilarious scenarios, and there is no disregard saying that a shorter version may have worked. But to extend the Internet Meme-like joke to 105 minutes may have been overdoing it. However, while the film may have failed, the Internet Meme was a success. As always, advertising can overhype a product, but film and television content should not cater to Internet Meme Culture. While in marketing, distribution, and in most creations, becoming a part of Internet Meme Culture is essential to reaching the right demographics, the content creators are and always will be the content creators. They will never be 100% participants of Internet Meme Culture because the Internet is looking at film alongside television, newspapers, and other mass media to produce the content that the Internet can then have fun with. Regardless of the success of 50 Shades of Grey, fan fiction will rarely become cultural successes except to that small audience. It will

always be up to the content creators to create substantial pieces of media that adhere to the laws of their medium. These content creators should not work on something perhaps becoming a meme, but create good material that can be parodied online. Then it is the relationship that the content creators hold with participatory culture that truly defines their utilization of Internet Meme Culture. No one will watch a television show simply because they created an Advice Animal about it. It takes followers to watch and pay attention to the media and then create media, because meme culture relies on fans that require good content.

4.0   MEMES AND POLITICS

"This is what democracy looks like!"
                -Anonymous Occupy Protest Chant

Even though individual human beings are behind the creations of corporate memes like McDonalds, they remain distant from Internet Meme Culture because they represent much larger bodies of power trying to assert their dominance on a mainly anonymous group of people. This divide is only widened by one of the most confrontational fights online: piracy and ownership. I hope to take a look at the Internet Meme specifically and what it shows about Internet Meme Culture that may give a slight insight into the Internet versus Mainstream Media, Piracy versus Copyright, and Us versus Them.

When a meme is created, there are multiple copyright owners to acknowledge: the person who assembled the images together and added the caption, the designers of the program that programed the template in order for the meme creator to make his meme (memegenerator.com, for example), the creator of the original template (the first person to ever make Socially Awkward Penguin, for example), and the person (or persons) who took the photograph(s) that compose the Internet Meme. A little over a decade ago, these sort of copyright infringements would rarely have been ignored, but now the massive amount of Internet Memes coming and going from people's screens makes it difficult to sue a meme for copyright infringement. The only issues that occur is when someone attempts to take credit for a meme, making it their own and usually profiting off it with merchandise, or when someone refuses to embrace their meme-

ness, aggressively requesting it to be deleted or removed or pushing legal action, as in the Hitler Reacts meme.

The reason why Internet Memes are so tricky with ownership is because of the attitude of the users and community that propagate Internet Memes: the Internet owns the meme. Meme creation and distribution at first is done anonymously. Users then continue the life-span of a meme by imitation or it will die and become a cultural artifact. The Internet, as a body of users, feels that while acknowledging your identity as a creator, it is inappropriate for an individual to claim ownership on a meme, since technically, everyone taking a part in Internet Meme Culture owns the meme since they made it popular. It is their culture, and their inside joke, their distribution methods, and their humor that makes these images so popular.

A large portion of Internet users find copyright law troubling considering this stance on memes. With the many valuable free distribution methods available online, limitations become questioned: why can't I watch TV on my computer? Why are certain shows available and other ones not? What is causing the delay of certain shows and films from becoming available online? A basic argument is that Old Media like film and television, and most regular media do take an amount of money to create, many times a very large amount of currency. Without those budgets, films would be absolutely nothing like they are today. But an incorrect assumption has been taught to most users: the enormous amounts of money spent and gained on studio movies is so large and intangible that it may not mean anything to the consumer. However, at the same time, I see this generation as the generation that also stops believing in physical media. As Apple continues to eliminate optical drives from its computers and services like Netflix, Hulu, YouTube, and Spotify continue to increase in popularity, no one will necessarily own media except for collectors, audio/cinephiles, or people who value them for sentimental reasons. The

only way to move from here is to see what Internet Meme Culture thinks of ownership and then modify business models, practices, and philosophies of Old Media in order to come to a compromise.

It will become essential (and perhaps part of my future work) to understand how the Internet can become, or is becoming, the dominant form of media distribution. While arguments of technical visual quality, especially in film and music, may be valid, the Internet can transmit television as well as cable or satellite. It is the business models that cannot transmit. The music industry is relying on different sources of income, specifically artists making the majority of their income in concerts and merchandise, rather than physical or digital album sales (Lee. "Why We Shouldn't Worry..."). This method of course puts the record companies in quite a bind. What is their place in New Media? Louis C.K. has gained immense support online by dealing with his fans directly in smaller ways, such as selling tickets directly and opting to sell his live special for only $5 right on his website. From these trends alone, it seems that the Culture Industry is getting smaller in terms of distribution: less people involved and more direct interaction between the producer and consumer, rather than a middleman getting in between the two.

Copyright is an important issue to discuss alongside Internet Memes and their culture because so much of the political activity between Internet users and Mainstream Media stems from issues of privacy, copyright infringement and protection, which leads sometimes to censorship. Within the first six months of 2012, when this thesis was written, four major pieces of Internet legislation, the Stop Online Privacy Act (SOPA), PROTECT IP Act (PIPA), Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA), and Cyber Intelligence Sharing and Protection Act (CISPA) met considerable resistance by online communities like Reddit and Wikipedia. These laws all included provisions that were interpreted by many as some sort of Internet censorship,

what perhaps is the largest taboo of Internet Meme Culture. SOPA, for example, originally gave corporate entities such as the MPAA the power to request that an entire website be taken down if a piece of their copyrighted material appeared on the site. This became blurry when the bill allowed for a website like tumblr to be completely blacked out even if one user uploaded a copyrighted piece of video or music. While aggressive lobbying by the music and film and television industries may have contributed to some of SOPA and PIPA's power, the other bills do sincerely have good intention in the realm of copyright law, but inadvertently, albeit a mistaken or brilliant understanding of how the web works, can lead to serious issues of Internet censorship (Weisman. "In Fight Over Piracy Bills...").

And while the legitimacy, values, and moral considerations regarding these and future pieces of legislation have been covered extensively in other texts, what is more relevant to this paper is the reaction of the Internet Community, comprised of major, minor, celebrity, and anonymous users and creators alike, to these proposed laws. The Internet, in its hive-mind collective identity, decided that January 18th, 2012, would be a massive Internet blackout, the last major blackout protest occurring almost six years earlier in February 1996 (Lewis. "Protest, Cyberspace-Style, for New Law"). While the bill originally came to fruition in May of 2011, articles were written and smaller protests were taken in advance of the massive blackout day, which the credit for originally claiming a sort of black out protest came from Wikipedia owner Jimmy Wales. Several online freedom organizations like Fight for the Future created Internet Censorship Day, where many major pages had acknowledgment to the day and importance of Internet freedoms. Later, in December, a massive precursor protest of the online IP provider, Go Daddy, started through messaging board sites like Reddit and 4CHAN. Eventually, major websites including Wikipedia, Buzzfeed and mainstream meme website network, Cheezburger,

moved their domains to other providers on December 29, 2011. It is estimated that over 70,000 domains were moved from GoDaddy, even after the website publicly announced their reversal of opinions towards SOPA/PIPA (the damage was already done). Yet, with over 100,000 websites participating in Internet Censorship Day, everything from Reddit, 4CHAn, Wikipedia, and even small websites wanting to take part as well, the bill was successfully removed from the House and set for reconsiderations.

And while the response to SOPA/PIPA did populate itself to memes such as advice animals, quick to comment on any current event issue, and the fact that the day without Wikipedia became a sort of event in the mindset of Internet users as the ramifications of simple search and answer being removed were found out that day, it was the collective mind of the Internet that spurred these protests (Kim. "Day Without Wikipedia"). Even now, many of the original founders of the Internet freedom groups, including Reddit founder Alexis Ohanian, especially, continue to update the Internet whenever a new threat is detected, wittily, with a Cat Symbol, a small application that users can post on their websites whenever an Internet bill is proposed or mentioned that may threaten certain freedoms of censorship. However, in this response, it becomes evident that Creative Freedom is an essential component of the Internet. Censorship is perhaps one of the most deadly sins online, and whenever the freedom to create is threatened, the Internet feels compelled to act.

4.1   ANONYMOUS AND LULZ SECURITY

It can be argued that 4chan's Internet Trolls are the founders of the contemporary Internet Meme, that in the ultimate act of trolling, they created an entirely inside-joke based form of

communication and entertainment, everything from RageFaces to Advice Animals, the majority of most Internet Memes do find their beginnings on 4chan (Stryker 33).

Of the cultural qualities of Internet Memes I discussed earlier, the majority of them come from earlier 4channers, most importantly the idea of the inside joke, the competition of one-upmanship the other person in the sake of taboo breaking, the absurd humor, and the various pop culture references (Philips 16). Yet in trolling, an act that has its beginnings in pre-Internet activities as early as phone-phreaking, 4chan users worked together to wreak havoc on individuals in prank-like acts such as black faxes or pizza deliveries, but evolved into something stronger when they changed from the lowercase anonymous into the political group Anonymous.

What is agreed by many as the major beginnings of Anonymous is Project Chanology: an attack on the Church of Scientology after a video of Tom Cruise behaving erratically was released and demanded to be removed from the web. The target of Anonymous's first online attack could have most likely been a variety of groups, but what spurred most initial response to the Church of Scientology was, as in SOPA/PIPA and other political bills, in real life legal action. The Church of Scientology not only repeatedly and aggressively threatened any site hosting the video of Cruise, one of the church's celebrity members, but pressed legal action on those that did not comply. As Internet users continued to host the video and mirror the video so that if one were to be taken down, another would be found quickly, 4chan and its IRC users were discussing the greater implications of the Church of Scientology's reaction to this video (Olson 60) (Stryker 238).

Based alongside several users accounts of what Scientology members go through, some even referring to the church as "Brainwashers," it became more apparent to users that the Church of Scientology could potentially represent the opposite of everything that the Internet believed in.

The protests even moved into real life, the members choosing to picket outside of Scientology Centers all over the world wearing Guy Fawkes masks, based on another meme stemming from the film and graphic novel, V for Vendetta. Both the mask and the logo of Anonymous itself, the man with the question mark on his head, have been rooted indefinitely in meme culture. However, it was the jacking group LulzSec, which would eventually merge into Anonymous as Antisec after their disbandment (Olson 330).

The anarchic hacking group LulzSec, also known as Lulz Security, uses the major cultural components of Internet Meme Culture in its random attacks on various websites, releasing enormous amounts of data for the web to attain Lulz with. LulzSec comprised of several members, unlike the Anonymous hive-mind, was based a smaller group. Its main sources of news distribution came from its website, Lulzsecurity.com (which played the theme to the Love Boat in the background along with an ASCii image of the Lulz Boat) and its Twitter account, @LulzSec. The group hacked into confidential information and publicly leaked whatever it could get its hands on: the contestant database of *XFactor* from Fox, Sony's user databases (, and even changing the website of PBS. Many times, the target really didn't matter, it was all up to what sort of information was available online, whatever they could get their hands on (Caldwell. "LulzSec Hacks").

Yet, it was LulzSec's imagery, a modification of various Internet Memes, that truly gives it a place in this thesis. Including the ASCii art with the obviously rageface inspired main character, the memes creates a personality for their group. He is a mascot, with a top hat and monocle holding a glass of wine, part representing the fun, playful, self-satirical commenting side of the web and also perhaps what Anonymous and online activism hope to bring down, the pretentious elite that chooses not to understand the Internet. But, the mascot works with other

Internet Memes, specifically Nyan Cat, which both replaced the main website for PBS during a LulzSec raid. As both Philips and Internet anthropologist Gabriella Coleman have discussed, LulzSec is spectacle. Their actions are rarely political, but mainly in order to release information for more people to acquire lulz. And it was these lulz and anti-authority principles that, while creating an anarchic show, also helped establish future online and in real life attitudes. Within an attitude of dissatisfaction and protest, Anonymous and magazine Adbusters would instigate the Occupy movement.

Reaching cities across the world, the Occupy movement encouraged protestors to camp in public areas and demand a change for the 99%, against the 1%. Originally based in New York City under Occupy WallStreet, Occupy became a phenomenon, immediately recognized by the press in relation to the Arab Spring, London Riots, and other international protest movements. What perhaps was its most notable contribution to the lexicon of Internet, though, was the photographic and video capture of police brutality among protestors. Several of these videos included women being pepper sprayed, elderly people being beaten, tear gas, and other confrontations already familiar to a G-20 anarchist protest counter culture, but unfamiliar to a grander population. People drawn to Occupy from Internet Meme Culture could not even begin to prepare for the onslaught of protest violence to occur, sometimes outside the Occupy community and other times within.

4.2   THE PEPPER SPRAY COP

What became most visibly the symbol of Occupy, besides the blue tents sprawled across Zuccotti Park in downtown New York, was an event occurring across the country at the University of California's campus in Davis. A group of Occupy protestors, which by this point had spread to almost every major city in the United States, camped across a sidewalk in the middle of the campus, sitting down and linking arms together. The protestors were mainly members of the UC Davis community, with very few not being students or at least young adults from various areas. University police attempted to break up the so far peaceful protest, and then eventually claimed that the protestors were causing a safety hazard by blocking the movement on a main sidewalk on the campus. A police officer then pulled out a can of pepper spray, and no more than a foot away from the sitting protestors held the can in the air, forewarning what would become the most famous symbol of the movement: orange pepper spray being forced down the throats and into the eyes of the protestors. Fortunately for the crying and screaming protestors, and unfortunately for the University's police and eventually the entire UC system, the event was captured in photographs and video. Already notable for being a viral video, the footage spread quickly as one of the most direct examples of the police brutality. The closeness of the recorders to the event and the quiet non-aggressive state of the protestors (many of the videos coming from other cities were chaotic, at night, and terribly difficult to see brutality in action) set this video apart. Yet, what caused it to jump into extreme notoriety among the mainstream media, causing the University to certainly comment on it, was a meme. Based off an oddly timed photograph captured at a lucky moment of insincerity on the cop's face and in the middle of a stroll. His name coming from that casualness forms Casually Spraying Pepper Spray Cop, or simply, Pepper Spray Cop (Kim. "Casually Pepper Spray Everything Cop").

While the popularity of the photograph (seen here: http://i1.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/original/000/203/420/UCDavis_pepperspray.jpg) can be attributed to many different aspects, what pushed it into the Photoshopping remix culture of Internet Memes? Perhaps it was the similarity to an already popular meme called Strutting Leo, of actor Leonardo DiCaprio in mid walk with a gleaming smile, but people began placing Lt. Pike in various paintings and photographs spanning all across history. What follows is a brief collection of some of the more notable Pepper Spray Cops and my observations.

Name: Pepper Spray Cop Replaced with Strutting Leo

Image: http://blog.zap2it.com/pop2it/pepper6.jpg

Notice the similarity between Strutting Leo and Lt. John Pike. This physical similarity in their stance may be one of the prime associations of the photograph with meme culture, the fact that it indirectly referenced meme culture, bringing it closer to meme culture.

However, what separates Pepper Spray Cop from other memes is the amount of interpretations that can be garnered by the Photoshops. While intentions cannot be guessed, the variety of images used with Lt. Pike was astounding in their various political meanings.

Name: Pepper Spray Cop in George Serat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Grand Island of La Jette*

Image: http://i0.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/original/000/203/407/peppersprayeverything.jpg

PSC sprays innocent bystanders, commenting on the protestors being as peaceful as the

visitors of *La Jette*. However, take note of the paradoxical relationship between mostly bourgeois and upper class representations of the park goers and the philosophical ground of Occupy, the 1% versus the 99%.

Name: Pepper Spray Cop in John Trumball's *Declaration of Independence*.

Image: http://i2.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/original/000/203/411/320665_309085722453433_100000560234460_1161317_489395404_n.jpg

Perhaps a comment on the protestors' freedoms being oppressed by PSC: he is the evolution of what this country has become, spewing pepper spray on people's freedoms. Although, the Declaration of Independence was also a declaration of war, perhaps a war of Occupy versus Authority, while the main protest was the 99% versus the 1%, the fighting between cops and protestors highlighted a major component of the protests as well.

Name: Pepper Spray Cop turned into a Banksy image

Image: http://i1.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/original/000/203/671/VhOeq.jpg

Using the same stylistic tendencies as street artist, Banksy, the cop instead sprays butterflies. Banksy's artwork itself includes the ironic tendencies of online culture, many times violent imagery transformed into more peaceful art, such as protestors throwing flowers instead of what should be Molotov cocktails.

Name: Pepper Spray Cop with Yoda from Star Wars

Image: http://llwproductions.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/pepper-spraying-cop-john-pike-and-yoda.jpg?w=500

The meme plays on the famous quote: May the force be with you" and manages to create political commentary through popular culture reference and quotation.

Name: Pepper Spray Cop Alternate Photograph

Image: http://static7.businessinsider.com/image/4ec78eececad04c71c000016/uc-davis-pepper-spray.jpg

Even though more graphic photos of police beating were taken, it was still the original photograph by Louise Macabitas that gained attention due to the photoshop memeification that was to later ensue.

Name: Pepper Spray Cop and Beatles Album Covers

Image: http://static.selfdeprecate.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Beatles_Abbey_Road_Pepper_Spray.jpg

http://blogs.ocweekly.com/navelgazing/pepper-spray-sgt-pepper.jpg

The amount of scenarios that PSC could fit into were limitless, creating insanely absurd scenarios in every place possible. The idea of pepper spraying outside of an extremely hostile situation (as the original photograph depicts) itself seems absurd, partly as in the Abbey Road cover. Additionally, notice the play on words in the Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band album cover mash-up.

Name: Washington Examiner Cartoon

Image: http://www.flickr.com/photos/mysticpolitics/6490053795/

A mainstream political cartoon for the Washington Examiner even got in on the Pepper Spray Cop. However, somehow the context of the meme is removed — the original event lost — PSC is used mainly as a character to blind this viewer as he watches a Republican debate (which actually never happened). It doesn't seem to comment on the original event at all.

Name: Pepper Spray Cop in *Liberty Leading the People*

Image: http://www.motherjones.com/files/imagecache/node-gallery-display/photoessays/davis_meme_lady_liberty.jpg

PSC seemed to be most utilized within political or revolutionary artwork, like *Liberty Leading the People* Eugène Delacroix, especially of the last 300 years. For some reason, the duality of the clear photograph of Lt. Pike in such a picture perfect pose with the strong subjective artwork seemed to fit well within the Internet.

Name: Pepper Spray Cop Y U NOOOOOOOO

Image: http://chzmemebase.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/internet-memes-pepper-spraying-cop-y-u-noooooo.jpg

A rage face meme being silence by PSC's spray. Notice how the meme goes out of the boundaries of the frame, a popular technique to play mainly with meta memes, when the meme becomes very aware of itself. PSC isn't even in the frame entirely, meaning you must be familiar with PSC to even understand the YUNO meme.

Name: Pepper Spray Cop in Portal

Image: http://pics.blameitonthevoices.com/112011/small_portal%20pepper%20spray%20cop.jpg

A reference to the video game Portal, where you have a gun to create portals. The cop is spraying himself, partly referencing an extremely possible video game, which in itself crated the meme of Portals and the possibilities that come with them, and the other half possibly being a revenge based meme.

Name: Mise en Abyme Pepper Spray Cop

Image: http://doodiepants.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/wpid-pepper_spraying_cop_meme_39.jpg

In a similar manner to Sad Keanu and Strutting Leo, a certain stylistic pattern of repetition can be drawn from the memes. While, repetition in photoshops, can be considered a meme in itself, consider the quality of reflexivity in Internet Meme Culture. This image represents a perfect example of a mise-en-abyme structure, like Yo Dawg.

Name: Pepper Spray Cop in Depression Era Artwork

Image: http://i2.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/original/000/203/454/tumblr_luzhlaDHFc1qz50dao1_500.jpg

This is where the interpretation gets muddled. As the meme became more and more popular, the inside joke and taboo-ness, one upping of each other, needed to be reinforced. That is one possibility, or either this was created to argue the other hypothesis, that this Occupy generation is overreacting to something that doesn't even compare to the hardships that come before it.

Name: Pepper Spray Cop in Vietnam

Image: http://farm7.staticflickr.com/6056/6381400407_c2a9fb5144_z.jpg

Another one up in offensiveness, taking the extremely profound Vietnam War photograph (also of American injustice) and comparing it to pepper spray. Notice the comparisons to Agent Orange chemical warfare, but is Occupy overblowing its complaints of police brutality compared to what this country has done in the past?

Name: Pepper Spray Cop at Tiananmen Square.

Image:

http://mcweekly.media.clients.ellingtoncms.com/img/blogs/entry_img/2011/Nov/21/tiananmen_t 620.gif?fbf2daa044e08a86b24c9c38cd7501865a0e2373

A similar commentary on different repressions. Notice the color scheme matching the tanks, a nice coincidence. Additionally, this photograph is actually zoomed in. While the photographs of PSC were meant to capture him in protest, this photograph was more so meant to capture the entire event, and not one individual. This photo was actually zoomed in to center on the Unknown Man.

Name: Pepper Spray Cop at Kent State

Image: http://s3.amazonaws.com/files.posterous.com/temp-2011-11-27/eAJbjgCwssdCupDDCmEAbskgyibDplJdnoEgItBuiqgbyJvimmBtmmxEkpea/CopPepperSpr ayKentStateMassacre.jpg.scaled1000.jpg?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAJFZAE65UYRT34AOQ&E xpires=1344547564&Signature=pMqP5%2BSU1t3kxf2Ae%2BoZO7uWv6I%3D

What brings us to what might possibly be the most argumentative PSC meme against the general feelings of Occupy and the UC Davis incident. This picture has the most general contrast, the Kent State peaceful protests that ended in someone's death, while the Occupy protests in general have claimed no fatalities. Is our generation truly overreacting? Or is this establishing a link to a larger tradition of protest violence? As the meme grew exponentially, mainstream media like the New York Times and other periodicals wrote about the phenomenon, paying attention to how fast PSC as a Meme was growing. Eventually the University did have to address the incident, issuing apologies and suspensions, but was this due to the meme?

Pepper Spray Cop works in several different manners as a meme, on and offline. The meme itself is protest iconography, using the oppressor as the main source of content. He and his actions are ridiculed as he is thrown from Beatles album covers to Spongebob Squarepants online and makes his way to clothing and Halloween costumes in reality. Yet, noticing that the majority of PSC lies within revolution or protest iconography, some from colonial America and 19th century France, for example, and 20th century photojournalism, the Meme takes on much more specific politic qualities. I have discussed that Internet Memes, in their anonymous community based templates, can in a way remove certain artificial chains of creative expression, making it easier to create. PSC then functions in a manner that allows a protest movement, specifically the somewhat ambiguously motivated Occupy protest, to find its protest imagery in past imagery. Current protest culture remixes its protest imagery from older images, as seen through PSC.

A political Meme such as PSC based in a remix culture and parody is not a new cultural item. Yet, in the way it was rapidly distributed online, as Memes are, PSC reached mainstream levels of news media attention within days of its creation. How long would have it taken a

similar incident being captured on film in World War II to make its way from Europe to America? And it simply is not the technology of the Internet that creates a mainstream political object, but the Internet Meme Culture and Community that foster such specific creative expression and then popularize it.

It is this reason that the members of Internet Meme Culture feel as if they own these media as a community: in their anonymous creation and popularization within the communities of 4chan, Reddit, and other meme creators, Memes are then owned by the community and no individual user. Yet, it is then not one specific photograph that goes down in Internet Meme Culture's history, as the photograph of Lt. Pike, but the repertoire of memes that come with it. The entire family of Pepper Spray Cop's define the event, mainly from PSC's character and personality, a casual spraying cop who doesn't give a damn. That is what comes from the photograph and the meme. Yet, in the understanding of this personality comes the a sort of password to the secret club — the more inclusive the password/joke, the harder it is for outside forces to infiltrate.

5.0   MEMES AS COMMUNICATION

In late winter of 2012, I stumbled across a strange development in my meme research. On Facebook, I had been invited to join a group called Pitt Memes that allowed its members to display their own memes about the University of Pittsburgh's college campuses. The system mimicked the subreddits mini-communities, in a way, and were blooming all across American campuses. Before long, membership in the Pitt Memes group crossed several thousand, along with other college campuses, and Reddit and 4chan exploded in anger. Mainly due to the misuse of Internet Memes, the users of those communities were angry that Memes had gone too Mainstream, and it would only be a matter of time until everyone's parents were using them.

Yet, while the evolution of any cult object into mainstream popular culture angers its original members, the way people were using Internet Memes, specifically the Advice Animal format, seemed slightly different when thinking about Advice Animal's mechanisms. Advice Animals, according to KnowYourMeme, "are a type of image macro series featuring animals of some kind (including humans) that are accompanied by captioned text to represent a character trait or an archetype that fits the role of a 'stock character'" (Caldwell. "Advice Animals"). Advice Animals work in a similar way to the LOLCat universe, the individual memes becoming characters and having discussions with each other. They also represent basic stereotypical feelings or emotions, and just as with Yo Dawg, can be referenced just by the image alone to use.

The Internet Meme community was aghast at the mass appropriation of their memes to the

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rest of their generation, literally in the span of one to two nights. But why would this community be ok with television shows and advertisement appropriation, but not when their fellow youth take part? Many of the memes in Facebook Memes were campus specific, discussing the area's geography, or a certain building or individual that only the campus community would understand. What may have been most alienating to the Internet Meme Community, making Facebook Memes an antagonist of sorts, was that college students were using the memes to communicate with each other, but by using specific references that a general populace would not understand, they were not joining the Internet Meme Community — perhaps the whole point of the inside joke or inclusive password of Internet Memes.

Advice Animals, beyond being simply stereotypes or tropes, are also at heart basic commonalities. The irony of the inclusive joke is that the joke is based off a belief that would have remained private unless shared within the anonymous context of an Internet Meme (an excellent example of this sort of belief I saw once in a Paranoid Parrot deciding whether or not it had farted or "sharted," or the combination of something slightly more vile). Then, in the animal's anthropomorphic qualities we can laugh at the thought because we are distanced from it, which allows us a sense of superiority over the animal. Yet, paradoxically, we both identify with the animal and its secret stereotypical common emotion and have power over it as well in its animal distance (Miltner. Online Interview).

Internet Meme Culture, as vast and diverse as it is, can be defined by its paradoxical dichotomies. Political memes that attempt to define Internet Meme Culture do create this sort of competition of us versus them, us being Internet Meme creators and users, and them being everyone else. This sort of conflict has always appeared in youth culture, but however, never has a medium been defined at its core by the punk value of us versus them. The Internet can be

defined at this point by the insider versus the outsider. Ever since its inception, original users limited to those who could afford it, had the technical skill to communicate through it, and the patience to wait out the slow speeds while the world changed outside the computer, there has always been a network of users involved in Internet Culture and those not. And even though Internet has spread to cell phones and most daily activities, there still exists this basic network of users who are really a part of the Internet and those who are not. To prove it, they use Internet Memes.

Yet, all of Internet Culture is coming closer between these two polar points, these paradoxical dichotomies, and as Internet reaches out towards the masses, becomes moderate. The straight line that has divided those who create content and those who consume it, the ones in between being regulated to amateur or independent, is now blurred. While Occupy and Anonymous may not have created conclusive results (some even say an adverse result to the one that they aim for), their constant activities have created an air of dissent, one where the possibility of breaking away from convoluted systems and rejecting what is politically happening is possible. Not the passive signing of an online petition, but active protest that gets noticed. And in other countries, such as the many springs of Arab countries and China, the meme brings political discourse to the masses. Even as we continue to blur the line between work and life, with the ability to switch from a word processing document to YouTube in one slight gesture, to receive business emails and texts of funny pictures within the same minute, and work hours increasing and a general mood of businesses becoming the norm, the standard 9 to 5 work day is mostly dead. The pressures of individual creativity is lifted by a somewhat anonymous shield of online creation. And even at a simple core nature, memes work in an exclusive culture, however the jokes reference universal commonalities. Yet, as I posed the difference in the introduction

between lols and lulz, Internet Meme Culture is becoming ingrained somewhere in between the two. Everyone wants to be a little rebellious, to attack the taboo and the offensive, yet find it difficult to find the means to do it. With more than 0.1% of the world publishing, though, and the ability to remain nameless easily available, the pressure that comes with not only creative work, but just the essence of lulzing, being an online jerk, come easier. Perhaps we have moved beyond post-modernism, with the acceptance of these paradoxical dichotomies.

With one last case study, I hope to look at a topic I have almost successfully avoided up to this point: race on the Internet. Of course, there are extensive works available, most specifically, Nakamura's <u>Digitizing Race</u>, that take a more in-depth look at the race politics of Internet Culture, however, I hope to take a look at a very specific set of Advice Animals that are based in a racial humor that works off the same paradoxical dichotomies. The memes are Successful Black Man (also known as Successful Negro, see http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/successful-black-man), Ordinary Muslim Man (http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/ordinary-muslim-man), High Expectations Asian Father (http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/high-expectations-asian-father), Unimpressed Slave (http://www.quickmeme.com/Unimpressed-Slave/?upcoming), and Skeptical Third World Kid (http://wildammo.com/2012/07/02/skeptical-third-world-kid-meme-funniest/#2).

The first two of these memes work in a specific manner of racial humor, where the first half of the caption is a set-up enforcing a racial stereotype, and the second half subverts that stereotype by using a normal response. These memes do many things to both creator and viewer: in order for them to work, they must take part in the understanding of stereotype, the ability to assume what the second half of the meme should read. Or at least recognize what the stereotype is after reading the first caption. Yet, it is the tricking that not only acknowledges our knowledge

of racial stereotypes, but the fact that we can look back and laugh at it. Does the individual believe in the stereotype? That is up for discussion. However, they must believe that the stereotype is in effect offensive, or at least, making a comparison to a probably white person, jarring to the viewer who takes the stereotype as fact. However, inexperienced users could possibly not be able to completely read this meme. However, this acknowledgment of racial slur has been going on since 4chan, where users would constantly refer to each other as Nigger and Faggot. Yet, the hateful definitions to each word are left behind, as *everyone* is called Nigger and Faggot. As 4chan is a world of one-upmanship in the taboo, calling someone a nigger is fairly high up there in offensiveness. The use is not necessarily a reinforcement of the negative types, since the user is well aware of the offensiveness. That is why he or she uses it, in order to offend. So he or she must have a slight concept of why it might be offensive. They acknowledge its hateful usage, and move past it, even calling gay 4chan users fagfags. It separates those who are still offended by it (usually called moralfags) and those who use it straightforwardly hateful with a different sort of Internet user.

However, these memes do rely on stereotype, as well as the other three. Yet, in the stereotype, they are almost self-deprecating: as Third World Kid deals with aid that more well developed nations give to under developed, sometimes mocking it. Unimpressed slaves makes fun of the first world white people problems that people discuss all the time. Yet, High Expectations Asian Father may work alone on stereotype, however, in a community where this sort of work is commended (even though, ironically, memes are so quick and simple to create. They're templates) it's strange that it would be mocked.

The power of memes can be used for a hive-mind's advantage, though, especially if they constitute a large base of the meme creating population. A subreddit, r/atheism, recently when on

a splurge attacking Islam instead of its usual arguments towards Christianity. The memes were created in mass numbers, many depicting the prophet Muhammad. In what at one point caused a cartoon artist to run for his life and avoid death threats was now being done in 10 fold, and a million times more offensive. Yet, due to the anonymous nature and the fact that there were so many, there has not been a serious response yet from the Muslim community.

What clouds this analysis the most, however, is demographics. Who is making these memes? How do black men feel about Successful Black Man? How do female users feel about the entire community of Internet users in a forum where one-upmanship on 4chan meant shouting "Tits or GTFO (get the fuck out)" whenever a woman or girl revealed herself? If these communities make the move from irony to authenticity, where does the community's opinion on race and gender stand? And if you are part of a smaller minority in this community, are you partially censored due to the collective knowledge and attitudes of Internet Meme Culture?

The move to authenticity is a tricky move, since ironic awareness must still remain deep in the mind, or the group will run into parody once more (which still can happen). Yet, perhaps dealing with some of these histories, such as the word nigger or oppressive sexism, requires irony to fight through it. These topics will most certainly never be erased from any community. To completely deny their existence is practically futile. In the same way that when using Successful Black Man, though, one must be aware of the racial implications or they would not use it. Then if they are aware, there may be potential to grow in acknowledging the racism or sexism.

How does this move resist devolving into a "circle jerk" of sorts, with users throwing around racist and sexist terms without even acknowledging the ironic history of their authentic love? This goes back to my Levels of Understanding, where if we are not aware of a cultural

object's past, the meaning will change into the community. So to avoid the circle jerk, what must be understood is what causes changes in social media: the tools we are given. A general thought in the programming world, and in many creative worlds, is that sometimes when a creator makes something, they are not sure what they will use it for. They let the community figure it out. Right now, in the memesphere, the largest change in activity has come from the transition to the chaotic, anarchic 4chan to the more structured Reddit. On Reddit, there exists a self-censorship that many times does not allow blatant racism or sexism to propagate, either in memes or comments. Along with being downvoted and erased from the conversation, many times users will comment on the object explaining what they found offensive about it. And as indexing and search options on Reddit improve (unlike 4chan, Reddit archives its posts), being able to quickly search for Level of Understanding will keep the history of ironic/authentic love stable. Additionally, as more sites are discussing Internet Meme Culture, explanations and archives will exist all over the Internet. Some may find the game of communication in these racist, sexist, and many times offensive words downright regressive, yet, it is not as if these ideas can be eliminated from existence. They have permeated our culture for so long, that to think that it will be an anonymous medium without race and a face who improves these ideas is unfortunately slightly hopeless. The move from criticism, to parody and irony, to authenticity, though, depending on what tools are given to users next, will be perhaps one of the greatest hopes in alleviating the stresses of racism and sexism online.

5.1   CONCLUSIONS

I hope by now that I have been able to collect useful extrapolations from the world of

Internet Memes. With how rapidly they are digested, and how quickly they are shared, they can easily be overlooked. Yet, as one individual meme rarely tells a story, it takes an entire collective to define an attitude. And once that attitude is defined, it is given a personality and many times a character, like Nyan Cat, Pepper Spray Cop, or Pedobear. It is in these characters then that the ideals and values of Internet Meme Culture are represented best. Thus, putting these characters against models of entertainment, mass and mainstream, politics, and communications, can start to make sense of many different aspects of Internet use that will only become more important as more people are given electronic devices at a younger age. As Internet becomes an essential part of Western existence, these values will need to be appropriately addressed, and Internet Meme Culture will begin to define those values.

Lev Manovich, early New Media Theorist, argues that humans process the information they come upon either through cataloguing and categorizing in a database or creatively through a story or narrative. In a sense, the Internet Meme is a nearly perfect representation of attitudes through a hybrid of both. It takes both Database and Narrative to fully process Internet Meme Culture. One cannot understand a Meme character, its story and its attitudes, without being familiar with all the different variations and imitations of that meme. Then, since memes are inherently meta-memes or at least eventually become meta-memes, one must be familiar with the relationships and categorical qualities between different groups. You cannot understand Successful Black Man without understanding Advice Animals...without understanding stereotypes.

Thinking about my discussion on My Little Pony and Bronies, or moving beyond ironic to authentic love. Are we in a post-ironic era, where what was once hated, then loved for ironic reasoning, is now actually loved? So what was originally trashed in subculture for being

commercialized and meticulously programmed to a point of brainwashing is now embraced by Internet Meme Culture for its authenticity. Has the value for authenticity been exponentially increased in a time where the majority of online activity is either anonymous or fogged by usernames? Internet Meme Culture values those that either remove the mask of anonymity, like Numa Numa Guy or reveal truths through the common structure of Advice Animals. The larger Internet Meme Culture grows, there will be a specific set of commonalities that are regarded as valid to the community. Yet, if someone feels to be an outlier, is there not a subreddit for them or some community based website? And if they can even find five more people to believe in the same ideas they do, then that alone leaves a sense of validation (LulzSec itself was a tiny group of people with similar beliefs). Perhaps what I am trying to say is a basic idea, but depends on so many complex variables. The way we talk to each other varies depending on the community available to us, and the amount of communities online perhaps indicates that this sort of Internet Culture will become a valuable precursor to future In Real Life cultures. Perhaps I have been spending too much time on Reddit, but when I find a fellow Reddit user in physical reality, there usually is a fantastic bond due to a strange sort of anonymous sharing of honesty, through the personal absurd, through a love of a specific part of retroculture, or just being able to understand the passcode that is Insanity Wolf. However, Internet Memes will fade from the spotlight at some point, and who knows how we will reflect on them. Yet, by measuring the values and mechanisms that are attached to Internet Memes, quite possibly the first unique cultural object that only the medium of the Internet could sustain, I hope I have provided enough information to ponder on what will happen when augmented reality is the primary reality — and media shall be consumed through the goggles of Internet Meme Culture.

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