UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Virality and Obscurity:
Meme Practices, Social Dynamics, and Affective Belonging in Digital Culture

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Sociology

by

Ashley Lucia Torres

Dissertation Committee:
Professor David R. Schaefer, Chair
Chancellor's Professor Carter T. Butts
Chancellor's Professor Francesca Polletta
Lecturer William Dewan

2025

DEDICATION

for

my mom and dad

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express the deepest appreciation to my committee chair, Professor David R. Schaefer, who provided thoughtful feedback on my work throughout my six years at UC Irvine. Your guidance, patience, and commitment to helping me strengthen my ideas shaped every stage of this project. Your careful reading of drafts and discussions of my work with me not only improved the dissertation but also deepened my approach to sociological inquiry.

I would like to thank my committee members, Professors Carter T. Butts, Francesca Polletta, and William Dewan. Each of you brought a distinct and invaluable perspective that pushed my thinking in new directions. My sincerest gratitude to Professor Butts for the rigorous social network analysis training over the years that pushed me out of my comfort zone as well as the insightful feedback on much of my early work.

Thank you to Professor Kristin Turney for the opportunity to work as a graduate student research assistant on the Jail and Family Life and Jail Data Infrastructure projects. These allowed me to get hands-on qualitative research experience working with an incredible group of qualitative researchers—including Steven Schmidt, Isha Bhallamudi, and Amy Gong Liu.

In addition, a thank you to my undergraduate professor, Dr. Daniel J. Schneider, who ignited my excitement for sociological research at UC Berkeley and inspired me to pursue a doctoral degree.

While at UC Irvine, I have also had the opportunity to work alongside some incredible peers. Thank you to my friends for working with me, discussing my research, and helping me to frame my ideas. Kyle Levin, Sabrina Mai, Amy Gong Liu, Isha Bhallamudi, and Hannah Hertenstein, I appreciate all of the time we have spent together throughout graduate school.

Thank you to my undergraduate research assistants who helped me collect data for Chapter 3 of this dissertation: Ria Srivastava (head RA), Daini Huang, Fatima Capacete, Viv Dominguez, Jazmine Cobb, Aianah Lelis, Anthony Guillen, and Zoe Sizemore. This chapter would not have been possible without the hours of work you put into tedious data-pulling.

An additional thank you to all of my past undergraduate students who made me exited to come to campus. The opportunity to teach undergraduates was certainly the highlight of my graduate school career. It was a great honor to be a part of your undergraduate education and discuss your plans for your bright futures.

Thank you to some of my favorite coffee shops where I wrote the bulk of this dissertation—Contra Coffee Co., Hopper & Burr, Hola Adios, and Oslo Coffee Co. Honorable mention to the Huntington Beach Public Library. I couldn't have written this manuscript without the availability of these spaces.

Finally, a very obvious and massive thank you to my incredibly supportive family who always had my back. Particularly, my father who made sure I could pursue this degree and present research at conferences without worrying about the cost, my mother who had boundless faith in me that inspired me to continue this degree even when I doubted myself, and my older sister who

read drafts, celebrated every milestone with me, and provided endless emotional support (including helping me get my dog during my third year). Your love and belief in me have been the foundation of everything I've accomplished.

And all the love and appreciation to my dog, Renly, who has been my co-author for this project. She has been by my side through all the ups and downs no matter what. She doesn't know how important she is to the completion of this manuscript, but I hope she knows how loved she is.

VITA

Ashley Lucia Torres

2018	Bachelor of Arts in Sociology *University of California, Berkeley*
2019-25	Teaching Assistant *School of Social Sciences, University of California, Irvine*
2021-25	Graduate Research Assistant *School of Social Sciences, University of California, Irvine*
2022	Master of Arts in Demographic and Social Analysis *University of California, Irvine*
2025	Instructor of Record *School of Social Sciences, University of California, Irvine*

FIELD OF STUDY

Digital and Networked Culture, participatory meme culture

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Virality and Obscurity:

Meme Practices, Social Dynamics, and Affective Belonging in Digital Culture

by

Ashley Lucia Torres

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, Irvine, 2025

Professor David R. Schaefer, Chair

This dissertation examines how digital culture evolves through memes—cultural units that circulate, transform, and accrue symbolic meaning online. While existing research has largely emphasized virality, political communication, and diffusion, this project focuses on understudied forms of replication, obfuscation, and affective performance that define emerging meme ecologies. Across three empirical studies, I investigate how users merge, manipulate, and emotionally engage with memes to negotiate belonging, cultural fluency, and symbolic status.

Drawing from theories of cultural production, performativity, and affect, I integrate computational, qualitative, and interpretive methods to analyze diverse modes of meme transformation. Chapter 1 uses social network analysis to explore meme merging, showing that mergeability depends on a meme's medium flexibility and established recognizability, revealing how creativity online is shaped by hierarchies of accessibility and cultural competence. Chapter 2 rethinks meme classification, highlighting the need for a framework that accounts for temporal evolution, semantic drift, parody, and user experience—treating memes as unstable social objects whose forms and meanings shift over time. Chapter 3 examines affective expression of user

engagement with these objects, demonstrating that emotion itself functions as symbolic capital through which users perform expertise and belonging within platform-specific publics.

Together, these studies show that memes evolve not only through viral diffusion but also through reduction, ambiguity, and emotional calibration. Cultural value online emerges through interpretive labor—the ability to recognize and feel appropriately within shared codes. By centering these processes, this dissertation advances a sociological understanding of digital meme culture as stratified, affectively organized, and symbolically mediated, offering new directions for research tracing how meaning, recognition, and participation are produced across platforms and over time.

INTRODUCTION

Culture is not static but continually negotiated through everyday acts of interpretation and expression. It is both a shared ecosystem of meaning and a site of contestation where symbols, values, and identities are made and remade. In digital environments, this process has accelerated: users engage in near-constant acts of cultural production, remixing and circulating fragments of shared reference that together constitute the texture of online life. What was once the domain of cultural elites or mass media institutions is now enacted through micro-acts of posting, sharing, and commenting—each a small but consequential act in the collective production of meaning. Digital culture scholars have described this accelerated circulation as a condition of "hyperparticipation" (Jenkins et al. 2013), where the labor of making and interpreting culture becomes continuous, distributed, and deeply infrastructural.

Within this landscape, memes have become among the most visible and consequential cultural forms of the digital age. Originating as units of replication in Dawkins' (1976) evolutionary metaphor, memes have evolved into complex social signifiers: multimodal, participatory, and deeply embedded in the infrastructures of platforms (Shifman 2014; Milner 2016; Phillips and Milner 2017). Memes constitute what Milner (2016) calls a "lingua franca" of participatory culture—a shared symbolic system through which users articulate identity, negotiate meaning, and signal belonging. To participate effectively within these communities, members must be able to interpret and reproduce these symbols in ways that align with the group's shared frames of meaning. This interpretive capacity is further complicated by the intertextuality of meme culture, in which "memes often relate to each other in complex, creative, and surprising ways" (Shifman 2014:2). Understanding a meme, then, requires familiarity not

only with individual symbols but also with the broader web of cultural references through which meaning circulates.

Memes are a communicative genre that operates through replication with variation (Wiggins and Bowers 2015), where each iteration performs both recognition of a shared cultural form and innovation upon it. Meme circulation is not just a technical process of virality but a social process of meaning-making—a performance of in-group literacy, cultural fluency, and symbolic distinction. As scholars such as Milner (2016), Nissenbaum and Shifman (2017), and Phillips and Milner (2021) have shown, meme cultures are structured by visibility, status, and interpretive labor: to "get" a meme is to participate in a shared frame of reference that marks the boundaries of belonging.

Memes thus exist within a fundamental tension between virality and obfuscation. On the one hand, they are designed for circulation: digital artifacts meant to be recognized, replicated, and shared widely across networks. On the other hand, contemporary meme cultures often cultivate opacity and intertextual complexity, deliberately manipulating formats toward partial incomprehensibility. Through processes such as merging multiple memes, altering recognizable formats, or reducing familiar templates into reduced or "shitpost" forms, users obscure the meme object itself. This interplay between accessibility and obscurity allows memes to function simultaneously as invitations and barriers—encouraging engagement while signaling insider knowledge. The capacity to balance these forces becomes a form of cultural fluency, where users must know how to produce content that is legible enough to spread but layered enough to demonstrate subcultural sophistication (Shifman 2014; Phillips and Milner 2017).

This social dynamic resembles the logic of inside jokes, in which shared understanding becomes both the medium and marker of belonging. As Massanari observes in her ethnographic

study of Reddit, participants engage with memes and other forms of online humor as modes of "social play," joining for the "group of witty, interesting, like-minded individuals" and "stay[ing] for the community" (2015: 1). Meme participation thus hinges on a dual motivation: the desire for visibility through interaction, and the desire for intimacy through shared symbolic codes. Members are drawn not only to the affective pleasure of recognition but also to the sense of cohesion that emerges from collectively navigating a dense web of intertextual references—a process Massanari describes as "memetic retelling" (2015: 79, 169). In this way, the meme operates as both a communicative object and a social filter, structuring inclusion and exclusion through the capacity to interpret, remix, and obscure shared symbols. This aligns with broader sociological accounts of distinction (Bourdieu 1984), where mastery of niche cultural codes functions as a form of symbolic capital.

The significance of understanding online meme culture is highlighted through previous scholarship on digital folklore, political communication, and coping. Peck (2020a) situates internet culture within a longer genealogy of vernacular creativity, where communal meaning-making practices—iteration, satire, exaggeration—operate as contemporary forms of folklore with new digital affordances. Jorgenson and Lee (2020) show how memes are used to work through social tension, irony, and ambiguity in relation to coping with U.S. presidential election results in 2016 and Peck (2020b) argues that institutions increasingly appropriate vernacular formats for visibility and persuasion. Folklore scholars have similarly analyzed analog forms—urban legends, chain letters, faxlore, and photocopy humor—as earlier examples of participatory, variable, and anonymously authored cultural artifacts (Blank 2009; Ellis 2001), demonstrating that memetic logics long predate the internet. This framing highlights that memes are not anomalous nor ephemeral; they represent a durable cultural mode through which publics

navigate anxieties, social contradictions, power, and play. Folklorists and scholars of vernaculars of internet culture also show that Pepe the Frog's mutation reflects not only political co-optation but the broader folkloric dynamics of meaning-making online: the ways in which communities collectively create, reinterpret, and contest symbolic forms in ways that may resemble traditional folklore processes (Phillips 2019; Peck 2020a). Together, this work positions internet memes as part of a long-standing vernacular tradition that has adapted to new technological infrastructures.

Online meme culture also plays a defining role in contemporary political communication. The contested evolution of Pepe the Frog illustrates how memes can be co-opted by ideological groups, transformed into symbols of extremism, and circulated across platform infrastructures with high political consequence (Pelletier-Gagnon and Diniz 2021; Sun et al. 2025). Comparative analyses of Twitter and 4chan/pol show how memes assist conspiratorial diffusion, mobilize grievance, and scaffold collective identity during high-stakes events such as the U.S. Capitol insurrection on 6 January 2021 (Kasimov et al. 2025). These processes reveal that memes function as ideological vectors: they condense interpretive frames, enable rapid circulation, and embed political meaning within humor and visual shorthand. Understanding meme culture is thus indispensable for understanding how power, persuasion, and misinformation operate within digital ecosystems. Memes do ideological work not despite their humor, but through it: irony becomes a mechanism for both plausible deniability and political alignment (Wilson 2021).

Beyond politics, memes have become essential affective tools for navigating crisis. Research on COVID-19 meme circulation shows how users mobilized humor and irony as coping strategies, community-building practices, and forms of collective resilience (Akram et al. 2021; Griffith et al. 2025). Other work demonstrates how pandemic memes foster creativity and

help publics navigate uncertainty, particularly during a time of shifting cultural norms (Glăveanu and de Saint Laurent 2021). These studies underscore how memes function as affective technologies—not just entertainment, but mechanisms for managing anxiety, building solidarity, and articulating shared experiences during moments of disruption.

At the level of cultural practice, meme culture reveals how digital publics organize themselves around play, ambiguity, and interpretive experimentation. The pleasure users take when memes "escape"—when they travel across communities (or leave the digital realm for the physical one) or mutate into unexpected forms—reflects broader dynamics of ludic participation online. These dynamics are not purely digital: they share affinities with earlier vernacular movements such as Dadaism, where reduction, absurdity, and fragmentation served as critiques of social order. Memetic logic thus bridges online and offline cultural life, shaping everything from protest signage to political branding to the aesthetics of collective humor.

What emerges from this literature is that meme culture is a crucial site for understanding contemporary sociality, not because memes are novel, but because they concentrate and reveal the practices through which digital publics cohere. Memes expose how people learn to read cultural cues, how they perform affect as social style, how they navigate belonging and exclusion, and how platform-specific affordances (Gibbs et al. 2015; Leaver et al. 2020) organize the possibilities for expression. Their circulation clarifies how meaning is made collectively, how political narratives embed themselves in everyday media, and how emotion is mobilized as a resource for identity work. Examining memes allows us to example the more subtle ways publics may take shape—how humor becomes a mode of critique or conspiracy, how shared references turn into social boundaries, and how affective fluency itself becomes a form of cultural capital.

These dynamics reveal that memes are not mere content but socially situated practices that materialize broader theories of performativity, distinction, and affective publics.

This dissertation examines the various ways in which internet meme manipulation as a form of cultural change may lead to levels of obscurity and exclusivity in different ways. I explore two types of manipulation that increase meme complexity and thus obscurity online: memetic merging and memetic reduction.

Chapter 1 investigates how memetic merging–the combination of separate meme formats together–operates as a structural and cultural process within online networks. It situates merging within theories of broader cultural combination, exploring how memes draw upon recognizable formats and forms of cultural memory (Distin 2005; Aunger 2002; Shifman 2014). This chapter analyzes patterns of meme combination to understand how digital culture evolves through combination-based replication.

Chapter 2 examines memetic reduction–cases of extreme simplification of memetic images–through a comparative case study of loss.jpg, a meme that has evolved into a minimal, self-referential abstraction. Contrasting loss.jpg with a sample of non-reduced more classic memes, this chapter shows how reduction transforms memes into cultural puzzles that reward recognition over clarity. This reduction process destabilizes conventional meme typologies and calls for a more flexible, dynamic approach to categorizing memetic phenomena and an inclusion of social motivations into these considerations.

Chapter 3 then examines interaction of the audience with memes, focusing on the affective and interpretive performance visible in various forms of text-based user engagement. Through a focus on loss.jpg memes, it explores how users signal and negotiate in-group and out-group boundaries through modes of affective participation. By integrating theories of affective

publics (Papacharissi 2015), cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984), and digital distinction (Zulli and Zulli 2022), the chapter argues that affect is central to how social hierarchies and belonging are organized within meme cultures.

Together, these three chapters investigate how cultural objects and meanings transform within a shared digital ecosystem in ways not discussed in the literature. While much existing scholarship on memes focuses on virality, diffusion, political communication, and easily recognizable formats, this dissertation turns to understudied forms of memetic replication that operate according to different logics. By analyzing subtle and less legible practices—such as merging, reduction, and audience affective signaling—I explore how memes evolve outside the paradigms of simple remix or viral spread, revealing alternative modes of cultural reproduction that structure meaning, belonging, and distinction in contemporary online life.

CHAPTER 1

The Structure of Memetic Merging

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how memes are combined and recombined across platforms through a process I term memetic merging—the blending of existing memes into one. Drawing on theories of cultural mashups, symbolic capital, and digital performativity, I conceptualize merging as a form of cultural recombination shaped by accessibility, salience, and recognizability. Using a dataset of 117 memes with 46 mutual merge ties collected from Twitter/X, I apply exponential random graph models (ERGMs) and a multinomial logistic regression to identify which meme characteristics influence meme merging patterns.

Results show that multimodal flexibility—the ability of a meme to circulate via different media formats—is the strongest predictor of merge likelihood, underscoring the importance of accessibility for creative reuse. In contrast, measures of salience, including meme age and platform origin, were not significant predictors, suggesting that merging is driven more by interpretive dynamics than by visibility or exposure. Established memes, however, show distinct patterns: they are more likely to appear in single merge events, indicating their use as recognizable or "classic" cultural references rather than as adaptable templates for ongoing remix.

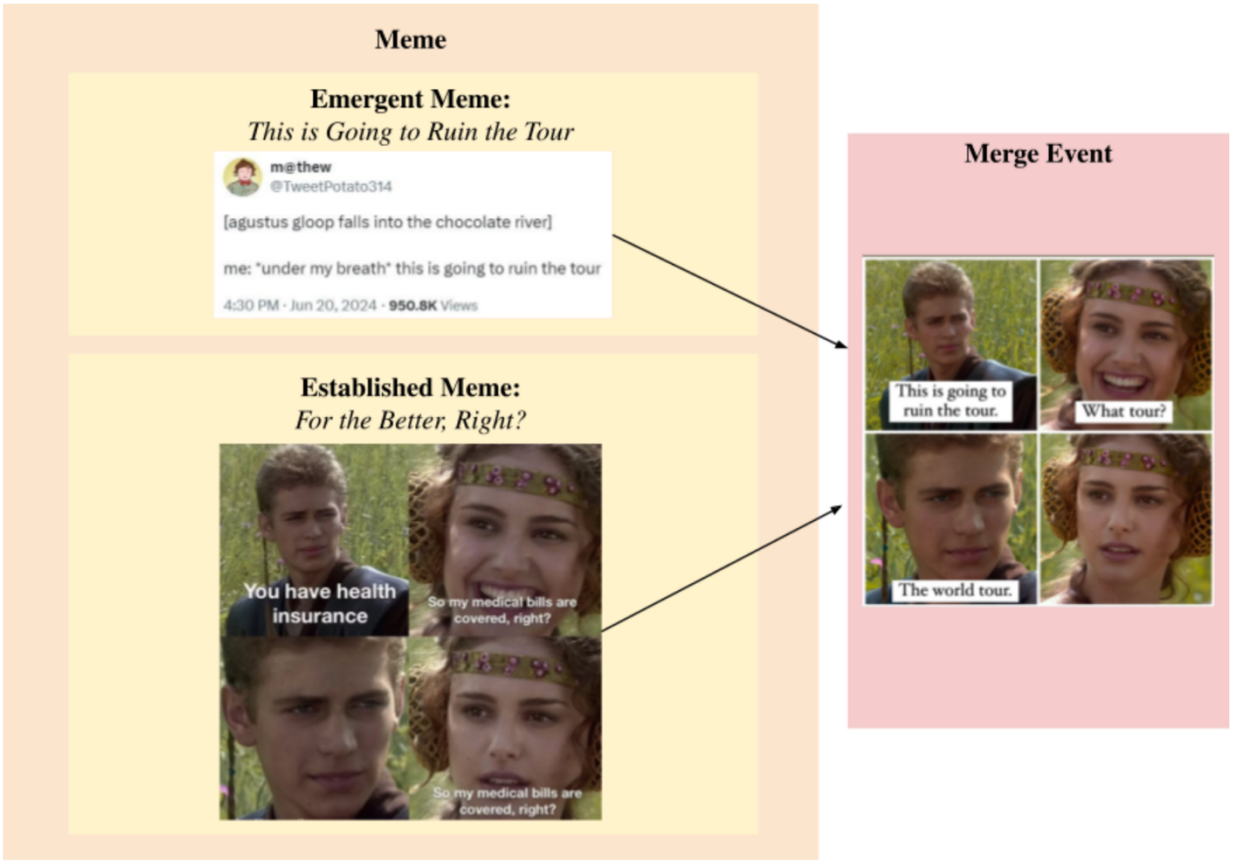
These findings reveal that meme merging is not a random or purely viral process but one structured by accessibility and cultural hierarchies of fluency and symbolic value. Memetic merging thus operates as a social signal of belonging and interpretive skill within digital publics, illuminating how online users navigate shared repertoires of humor, reference, and identity through the creative recombination of familiar formats.

keywords: internet memes, digital culture, memetic merging, cultural recombination, symbolic capital

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I explore how emergent cultural objects in the form of internet memes draw on accessibility, saliency, recognizability, and status to increase visibility and integration through user-generated merging of memes together. This is what I call memetic merging–when existing memes are combined by users to create intertextual meanings through combination-based replication (Distin 2005). An example of two emergent memes originating and then being used in memetic merging is included in Figure 1.1 below. Here, an emergent meme (top meme) is merged with an older, established meme (lower meme) to create an intertextual hybrid. By exploring emergent memes merging with others in the digital space, we will be able to examine how cultural objects are made to interact in digital spaces.

Figure 1.1. Example of Memes Merging



The increase of interactions held over digital spaces has grown exponentially in recent years and the speed of communication may lead to more rapid cultural evolution; however, we are limited in our knowledge of how emergent cultural objects interact in this space. Examinations of digital spaces and culture have focused on emergent social norms of activity and interaction (i.e. how to use forum posts, following community guidelines, post engagement practices, etc.) that form in those spaces and change over time, but we know relatively little about how these cultural objects are used. These memes may be used to convey meanings to other users in the space and move quickly across populations, even jumping social media platforms. They have become crucial to the interactions people have online, but we do not know how they interact with one another–particularly how emergent cultural objects are integrated with other cultural objects already in the space by users.

In fact, research on memes points to humor being one of its critical characteristics and finds that "the humorous element is frequently articulated through cross-references to popular culture and/or other memes…revealing multiple layers of intertextuality" (Procházka 2015: 57). Here, intertextuality refers to the way in which memes with different meanings are combined to communicate some new meaning based on knowledge of both pieces independently that makes an interdependent relationship between the two for the audience. Thus, the ways in which memes are used in reference to one another and current events which become memes themselves are critical to meme success and continued relevance online.

Understanding how emergent cultural objects interact with others matters because it speaks to broader sociological questions of cultural evolution and meaning-making in digital spaces. Memes, as cultural objects, are not simply playful or disposable artifacts but dynamic signifiers through which emergent culture takes shape (Shifman 2014; Milner 2016). When these

cultural objects merge, they make visible the processes by which users negotiate between novelty and recognition, balancing creative innovation with the need for cultural legibility. Such moments of merging illuminate how emergent culture does not develop in isolation but is co-constituted in relation to other cultural objects, whose accessibility, saliency, and recognizability may shape which new forms become integrated and circulated. Examining meme merging thus allows us to understand how emergent culture both draws on and challenges dominant cultural frames, offering insight into the ways cultural objects evolve, interact, and acquire social meaning in digital environments.

I first explain memes and highlight three factors that should affect whether they get merged based on the previous literature on cultural combination more broadly. I develop several hypotheses based on these factors and I test these by gathering new data from Twitter/X via a walkthrough method, constructing a network where a node signifies a meme and a tie notes an instance in which the two memes were observed merged during the sampling period. I then analyze this data using a combination of regression and network models, testing each hypothesis.

1.2 BACKGROUND

In this chapter, I am interested in the ways in which new cultural objects interact with existing cultural objects in the space during integration, contributing to cultural evolution and modes of obfuscation requiring more advanced cultural literacy for inclusion. One way that cultural objects emerge into the mainstream is through the combination of pieces of culture together in different ways. The meme paradigm is one way to think about these objects and their recombinations.

According to Raymond Williams (1977), cultural ideas and practices can be divided into three groups: dominant, residual, and emergent. These groups are constantly in flux and allow us to better understand the complexity of culture and how culture is dynamic and interrelated–with all three groups influencing action and values. Emergent culture refers to the "new meanings and values, new practices, news relationships and kinds of relationships" that are "continually being created" through social interaction (Williams 1977: 123). These emergent cultures, after being introduced, may then begin the "process of attempted incorporation" into dominant culture (Williams 1977: 124). In other words, once a new piece of culture is introduced into a given community, it will attempt to integrate into the existing culture. This is important because it allows us to understand how culture changes over time.

Other work on emergent culture has come from a wide range of fields from market research to rural studies and their focuses on aspects of emergent culture vary. Literature exploring emergent culture in organizations looks at how emergent culture may produce organizational change or external partnerships (Bryson 2008; Parker and Selsky 2004). Similarly, Thomas (2002) finds that changes to public space may contribute to new emergent cultures with relation to how people think about space and engage in an urban setting, leading to overall cultural evolution. We see that new spaces result in new social interactions and thus emergent cultures. We may think of digital spaces the same way. Work on online communities broadens the geographical constraints of prior work on emergent culture such as Heley's (2010) work on rural England, Thomas' (2002) work on urban Vietnam, and Ikegami's (2000) work on Japan. However, previous work on online communities tends to focus on culture as norms of activity in these digital spaces rather than examining cultural objects introduced into the space

(Ewing 2008; Strimling and Frey 2018). Across all of these, we can see emergent culture as relying on conformity and consistency for successful social integration (Bednar et al. 2010).

Rawlings and Childress (2019) explore "emergent meanings"–or how individuals make meaning from cultural objects and how these meanings become demographically and socially situated. Similar to emergent culture, emergent meanings are "created, affirmed, [and] transformed" through social interactions (Blumer 1969: 12). Both are competing with and being influenced by others in the space. Emergent meanings are competing with one another to become the consensus. Emergent cultural objects are competing with other emergent cultural objects to become part of the dominant culture. However, we know little about how these emergent cultural objects integrate into the dominant culture as Williams (1977) describes.

This chapter explores the cultural dynamics of what I call "memetic merging"–the process through which online memes are combined to create hybrid cultural units. Here, I am interested in the ways in which new cultural objects interact with existing cultural objects in the space during integration, contributing to cultural evolution and modes of intertextual communication. One way that cultural objects emerge into the mainstream is through the reference to and combination of pieces of culture together in different ways. Thus, I approach memes as evolving symbolic forms shaped by users' practices of creation, remixing, and circulation.

To understand this merging process, I begin with a definition of memes in their contemporary digital form and then explore the literature on participatory culture, cultural remixing more broadly, and multimodality in communication. I then explore how accessibility through multimodality, saliency, and recognizability/status may shape meme-merging behavior in online networks.

Memes in Contemporary Culture

The term "meme" was coined by Richard Dawkins in 1976 to describe units of culture that spread from person to person by some form of copying or imitation. For Dawkins, memes are units of cultural evolution just as genes are units of biological evolution and may consist of a wide variety of cultural units such as ideas, phrases, music, skills, fashion, etc. Here, I narrow that definition to focus on a more contemporary understanding of the term "meme" by the general public: that they are "user-driven" pieces of "participatory culture" in which people remix and copy images, videos, dances, etc. online as forms of jokes (Shifman 2014: 2, 4).

In communication and cultural studies, memes are now typically understood as digital artifacts that circulate widely, are rapidly reproducible, and frequently take on new iterations via user participation (Shifman 2014). These include not only image macros but also videos, GIFs, and screenshots, all of which carry and reproduce particular cultural meanings. Memes thus function as both communicative tools and cultural texts, operating as accessible yet symbolically dense ways of participating in online discourse (Milner 2016).

Meme culture is also fundamentally dialogic—memes respond to each other and to broader cultural events, forming chains of reference that require audience members to be culturally literate. This ties into notions of intertextuality and "heteroglossia," where meaning is co-produced through shared recognition of genre, voice, and subtext (Bakhtin 1981). These meanings are not fixed but emerge through circulation, recombination, and reception. As such, memes are not trivial but form a core component of how users make meaning in networked participatory culture.

Participatory Culture and the Role of Users

In a participatory culture, "community moves from the more or less involuntary connection between people" in physical communities "to the solely voluntary relations into which we enter as free individuals" within a virtual community (Cavanagh 2010: 104). Jenkins (2006) defines participatory culture as one with low barriers to expression and engagement, where members feel their contributions matter and share a sense of social connection. This ethos is central to meme culture, where users are not passive consumers but active participants. Meme creation and circulation relies on shared references, in-jokes, and affective resonance. Participation, then, is not simply about posting but about demonstrating cultural fluency and communal belonging to particular social groups online.

Motivations for participation are diverse: users may seek affective connection, social recognition, political expression, or simply the pleasure of contribution. Yet all participation is shaped by an audience, real or imagined. Creators are guided by perceived audience preferences and background knowledge. As cultural production becomes increasingly public and algorithmically governed by social media platforms, participants must also navigate a constant tension between authenticity and legibility. What circulates is not just what is said, but what resonates—what can be recognized, repeated, or recontextualized within shared frameworks of meaning with the most success.

Additionally, participation is recursive. Social feedback—likes, shares, comments, "duets"—functions not only as validation but as guidance. It shapes the patterns of participation itself, structuring what kinds of expression are seen, valued, or made possible. In this way, users do not simply express themselves within participatory culture; they co-construct it, iteratively and collectively, through acts of interpretation, adaptation, and response.

Cultural Combination & Remixing More Broadly

Remixing and cultural recombination are foundational to meme culture. These practices draw from a long lineage in cultural studies, from Hebdige's (1979) concept of bricolage in subcultures to more contemporary analyses of mashup and remix cultures that play a critical role in cultural development (Lessig 2008; Navas 2012). For Hebdige, subcultural styles were formed by recontextualizing dominant symbols in ways that subverted or reinterpreted their meanings. This concept applies directly to meme practices, where pop culture symbols, screenshots, and textual formats are stripped from their origins and used to communicate new, often ironic, meanings.

Cultural remixing is not unique to memes; it is also informed by contemporary music sampling and fan fiction to TikTok trends and internet mashups. What distinguishes digital remixing is its speed, scale, and saturation—remixed content can be created, circulated, and re-remixed rapidly, making cultural evolution more visible and traceable (Knobel and Lankshear 2008; Navas 2012). Here, I explore the literature around these other forms of cultural remixing to highlight key factors influencing remixing patterns more broadly.

Factors Contributing to Cultural Remixing

Remixing is not solely a product of digital meme culture but a broader cultural practice with deep roots in artistic, musical, and subcultural traditions. Across various media and communities, remixing functions as a creative strategy through which individuals and groups appropriate, recombine, and reframe existing cultural materials.

Here, the primary actor guiding remixing patterns is the creator–the person doing the remixing. Thus, the material must be accessible to them in order for them to engage in cultural combination. However, the audience as an actor must have some level of cultural knowledge–or

recognizability–of the source material for the creator's remix to have a full effect. Both the creator and the audience, then, would need to have the same pieces salient to themselves in order to make the creation match audience recognizability. Building on this, a review of the literature around art-based remixing highlights several key features that may guide what gets remixed.

The first key feature is accessibility of material used. Content that is digitally available, editable, and easily shareable is more likely to be merged. Lessig's (2008) discussion of read-write culture is also notable here in that it allows users to create and participate in culture in new ways with the rise of digital accessibility and new perspectives around copyright. Manovich (2007) and Jenkins (2004) emphasize the significant role of digital technologies in lowering the technical and logistical barriers to cultural remix and convergence. Manovich specifically argues that software platforms designed for creative production—such as design suites, music composition tools, and editing programs—make the act of remixing not only feasible but incredibly easy even across media types. The internet then further amplifies this accessibility by vastly expanding the availability of source materials: designers, musicians, and artists can now draw from a global, constantly updated archive of visual, sonic, and conceptual content (Manovich 2005: 2). This ease of access accelerates the circulation of styles and techniques across cultural fields, from architecture to fashion, collapsing distinctions between high and low, amateur and professional. Participation in culture, then, becomes increasingly defined by one's capacity to recombine existing materials with speed, fluency, and relevance.

Jenkins builds on this idea of accessibility in his discussion of new media technologies and the flow of content across a variety of platforms in a variety of formats simultaneously, allowing reception to take on a variety of forms in a process referred to as "convergence" (2006: 11, 2). With access via new technologies, Jenkins sees that participatory cultures engage most

with content that is already circulating in modifiable formats and via convergence culture in which content easily flows across multiple media platforms.

Another major factor is cultural salience. Timeliness is key: cultural materials that resonate with current social, political, or cultural topics or concerns are more likely to be picked up and transformed by users, especially when remix functions as a form of engagement or critique. Salient content—whether it emerges from breaking news, viral moments, or current events—provides a shared frame of reference that contributes to the communicative ability of a remix. Saliency allows for creative actors to identify candidates for remix while simultaneously increasing audience ability to interpret these remixing effectively. Jenkins et al. (2013) emphasize that remix is not merely an aesthetic practice but a civic one, enabling people to intervene in public discourse by reframing dominant narratives. The more culturally salient a piece of content is, the more effectively it can be remixed to challenge assumptions, amplify alternative perspectives, or express solidarity.

However, saliency plays a crucial role in informing remix practices, even outside of these politically-driven contexts. In creative platforms like fanfiction and user-generated games, remixers are drawn to content that is culturally recognizable and emotionally resonant for their audiences. Jing et al. (2019) find that in online fanfiction communities, works that build on familiar characters, genres, or tropes tend to attract more engagement, suggesting that narrative saliency—through shared fandom knowledge—enhances the appeal and spread of remixed content. Similarly, Hill and Monroy-Hernández (2017), studying the Scratch platform, show that projects grounded in salient structures (such as familiar game formats) are more likely to be remixed by others, though this often comes at the expense of originality. These findings indicate

that saliency acts as a catalyst for remix activity by lowering interpretive barriers and inviting participatory creativity.

The third feature is established recognizability of the source material. This is somewhat different from saliency in that it is more concerned with high-longevity and status. Cultural artifacts that are widely known or symbolically rich are more likely to be used during the remix process because they allow audiences to quickly and easily interpret new combinations. According to Lessig (2008), established recognizability is a critical feature of "read-write culture" for young people online in which audiences are not just passive consumers of art and culture, but active producers who rely on levels of shared cultural references to communicate meaning through remix. In fact, Lessig notes that in read-write culture, "meaning comes not from the content of what they say; it comes from the reference, which is expressible only if it is the original that gets used" (2008: 74). Using preexisting images or sounds is thus vital to the merging process based on the cultural reference's meaning. Similarly, Navas (2012) argues that the ability to trigger recognition and reinterpretation through the use of well-known pieces of culture is critical to remix as discourse.

Established recognizability also operates as a form of symbolic status within participatory culture. Whereas saliency reflects the immediate visibility or recency of a cultural form, established recognizability reflects its accumulated legitimacy—its endurance as a shared cultural reference that signals belonging and expertise. Highly established memes or formats function as what Bourdieu (1984) might describe as symbolic capital: they hold value not because they are new, but because they are culturally sanctioned and widely legible. When creators integrate such well-known elements into new combinations, they do more than evoke memory or humor—they perform a kind of cultural competence, displaying their ability to work

fluently within a shared symbolic system (Thompson and Haytko 1997; Fiske 1992). They are engaging in a kind of status spillover, borrowing the legitimacy and interpretive stability of the known to anchor the novelty of the new.

Multimodality and Communication

Multimodality in communication practices is also important to note here as it relates to the factor of accessibility. It is known to significantly increase the effectiveness and efficiency of communication by allowing messages to be conveyed to audiences through multiple forms. When individuals engage with content that combines text, visuals, audio, or gestures, they are more likely to comprehend and retain the information. Work in cognitive psychology calls this the "modality effect," in which people process information better when it is distributed across different sensory channels (Mayer 2009). Multimodality strengthens communication by increasing clarity, accessibility, and emotional resonance, and digital infrastructures have evolved to promote and reward these practices.

Digital environments further incentivize multimodal communication by structuring interaction around multimodal forms as the norm. Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube depend on the interplay of text, sound, image, and gesture for communicative success. Jewitt (2008) argues that multimodal communication reflects the complex ways people make meaning in contemporary contexts, where gestures, visuals, and speech work as an ensemble rather than in isolation. This approach has practical communicative benefits: multimodal messages are more engaging, more interpretable across different audiences with different levels of "literacy," and more likely to be remembered. As Flewitt et al. (2019) note, digital tools have made multimodal expression more accessible, encouraging users to adopt hybrid forms that enhance both the clarity and emotional resonance of their messages.

This multimodal approach may be seen in the way in which internet memes take on multimodal forms that may be compartmentalized in different contexts and allow for various uses of and interactions with them in the digital ecosystem. It may also include variations in a meme's medium over time. In digital communication, multimodality is not simply a stylistic choice but a functional advantage that supports faster and more robust transmission of meaning.

We can understand multimodality in memes as related to meme medium. Memes come in a variety of forms and vary by social media. These social media platforms vary greatly in their structures and types of interactions and these different digital environments that they provide to users thus provide different affordances.

Merging, Memes, and Structure

Despite the centrality of creativity and alteration to meme culture, relatively little research has explored the structure of meme merging—how and why certain memes are combined, and what this reveals about cultural evolution. While scholars have examined memes as replicators (Dawkins 1989; Blackmore 1999; Distin 2005), most studies focus on individual meme formats (e.g., image macros) or replication through variation, rather than combination.

Yet memetic merging—when two or more memes are explicitly combined into a hybrid meme—offers a unique lens for understanding cultural adaptation. Merging involves selecting memes with compatible meanings, mediums, or saliencies, and fusing them into a coherent (or intentionally incoherent) new unit. This process is shaped by creator accessibility, user knowledge, audience expectations, and platform affordances.

When we consider memes as part of a "symbolic web of meanings" online, understanding the structure of this referential meaning interplay becomes critical to broader understanding of

how communication is shaped via memes in digital places and how emergent pieces of culture are placed within this ecosystem (Biernacki 2002).

Why study memes?

Memes deserve particular scholarly attention because they are one of the most dynamic and participatory forms of cultural expression in the digital age. Unlike traditional media, memes are explicitly designed for circulation, modification, and iterative reinterpretation. Their modularity and brevity allow users to rapidly respond to events, participate in discourse, and express identity through alteration. Memes thus do not merely reflect culture—they enact it in real time. As Limor Shifman (2014) argues, memes function as both cultural artifacts and practices, enabling meaning to be collaboratively negotiated and distributed across digital networks. This participatory quality sets memes apart from more static pieces of culture: they thrive on user intervention and replication.

Studying memes in merging contexts—where multiple meme formats, genres, or cultural references are hybridized—offers unique insight into how users perform cultural literacy and negotiate meaning across fractured media ecologies. Cultural merging is not new, but meme creators operate at an unprecedented speed and scale, with layered meanings drawn from disparate sources often coexisting within a single image or video. This kind of convergence reflects a digital fluency that is both visual and intertextual, requiring creators and audiences to draw on a shared yet constantly evolving pool of references. Meme merging reveals how networked publics create new affective and ideological alignments, sometimes absurd or surreal, but often deeply resonant. It highlights the shifting boundaries of genre, authorship, and context in an era when culture is increasingly constructed not through singular narratives but through the constant blending and bending of formats. Memes thus provide a lens into contemporary habits

of sense-making, where fragmented media cultures are stitched together through playful, and often potent, acts of remix. Studying meme merging helps us understand not only the forms themselves, but the cognitive and cultural work people do when they engage with and produce them to navigate the increasingly complex media worlds they inhabit.

Meme merging is distinct from other forms of cultural remix—such as musical mashups, genre-bending television, or collage art—because it operates within a highly compressed, participatory, and rapidly iterative media environment. While remix in music or television often involves extended production cycles, semi-professional creators, and longer-form content, meme merging unfolds in informal, amateur-driven spaces where modular, ephemeral, and easily replicable formats dominate (Knobel and Lankshear 2008; Navas 2012). Merged memes frequently combine not only cultural references but also meme formats themselves—layering caption macros, TikTok audios, reaction images, and deep-fried aesthetics into hybridized forms. These are not just aesthetic collages; they are situated communicative acts that condense multiple cultural objects into a single object. As Shifman (2014) notes, memes are both artifacts and practices—social processes through which individuals negotiate meaning. Merging expands this negotiation across meme genres, producing highly intertextual, visually coded messages that require cultural fluency and platform literacy to decode.

Treating meme merging as a distinct category—rather than merely another instance of manipulation on an original form—allows scholars to more precisely account for the unique interpretive, affective, and social dynamics of digital meme culture. While "remix" has long described the reworking of cultural material (Lessig 2008; Navas 2012), "meme merging" often functions through combinatorial logic, referential meaning-making, and format hybridity. It reflects a form of digital vernacular practice shaped by the speed and scale of networked

communication, where users simultaneously draw from irony, fandom, critique, nostalgia, and absurdism (Milner 2016; Phillips and Milner 2017).

Memes are ideal objects for studying cultural remixing because their formats, content, and platforms invite and incentivize merging. Unlike broader forms of remix culture (e.g., film mashups or music remixes), memes are often produced with the explicit expectation of iteration and mutation. Their modularity—short format, symbolic clarity, and visual or textual punchlines—makes them uniquely amenable to replication through combination.

In this context, meme merging takes remixing a step further by bringing two or more meme formats into direct dialogue. This hybridization not only produces humor through complementary or incongruent formats but often creates new interpretive possibilities. Meme merging can parody the format itself, blend affective tones (e.g., irony and sincerity), or make meta-commentary on the repetitiveness or saturation of certain meme genres.

Factors Influencing Meme Combination

Considering the factors influencing broader remix patterns discussed previously as well as the distinct characteristics of meme culture, I will discuss how individual meme characteristics may influence the structure of memetic merging online.

Accessibility and Multimodality of Meme Medium

The first factor is accessibility via the multimodality of meme medium. This refers to (1) the selection of specific mediums to use during a merge by the creative user online (text, image, or video) and (2) the overall flexibility of medium that a given meme exhibits.

Accessibility and medium compatibility are key factors shaping how memes are merged. When combining memes, some types of memes "fit" together more easily than others. For instance, an image meme can be combined with a text meme through simple captioning or

overlay, whereas combining two video memes typically requires editing software, technical skill, and more creative labor. Accessibility of digital content and access to tools for these merges affect what will ultimately be merged by a creator. Since I am focusing on digital meme culture, all content is digitally accessible by actors. Differences in accessibility may be more distinct when it comes to access to tools to facilitate these merges. In this way, incongruent meme media may make the act of merging them more accessible to users.

Hypothesis 1A: Meme merges will tend to take place between memes of different typical media (*multimodality/accessibility*).

Building on this, memes also vary in their own multimodal flexibility—that is, the extent to which a meme can circulate across different media forms. Some memes are relatively fixed to one mode (e.g., a short video clip), while others appear in multiple forms across iterations, such as screenshots of videos, image macros referencing audio, or text-only callbacks to visual memes. These flexible memes are easier to integrate into merges because they can "travel" across media contexts and still be understood. In other words, multimodality through medium flexibility makes a meme accessible across different formats, increasing its likelihood of being merged.

Hypothesis 1B: Memes that have flexible media (can shift their medium in different tokens) are more likely to be used in merges (*multimodality/accessibility*).

Saliency

In the context of memetic merging, saliency refers to the degree to which a meme is visible, relevant, and easily encountered within a particular cultural moment or platform

environment. Saliency, thus, operates as a nodal property that makes certain memes more likely to be used in merges. A meme that circulates widely within a specific platform or that emerges amid heightened online attention is more likely to be seen, shared, and adapted. This increased exposure makes it a more available cultural resource for users engaging in remix and combination practices.

Platform visibility is one mechanism that shapes saliency. If merges are posted on a particular platform—such as Twitter/X—then memes that originate from or circulate widely on that platform are inherently more salient to the users creating and sharing merges. Creators are likely to draw from memes they encounter in their immediate platform environment, which ensures that merged content resonates with both themselves and the target audience. Temporal recency similarly affects saliency: memes that are currently trending or recently active occupy a privileged position in users' feeds, timelines, and comment spaces, increasing the likelihood that they will be recognized and reused.

Importantly, this logic applies to any sampled platform. On a platform where merges are less frequent or where meme circulation is more fragmented, a meme's saliency is still defined relative to the audience and context of that platform. Memes that are more visible, widely circulated, or currently relevant within that environment are more likely to be selected for merging than memes outside the platform or cultural moment. In this sense, saliency is not absolute—it is platform- and audience-specific, reflecting both exposure and interpretive availability.

This leads me to my next two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2: Memes originating on Twitter/X are more likely to merge overall (*saliency*).

Hypothesis 3: Emergent memes are more likely to be merged (*saliency*).

Established Recognizability and Status

Different patterns may emerge for older memes whose use in merges is instead rooted in established recognizability and status. Memes with high longevity—those circulating for extended periods—accumulate recognition through sustained exposure and cultural embedding. This established recognizability distinguishes them from salient memes: while saliency depends on current visibility, this reflects a meme's established place within the larger cultural repertoire.

Such established memes may operate as status-bearing cultural anchors in the merging process. Their symbolic weight makes them valuable resources for creators seeking to boost a newer meme's visibility or legitimacy through association, a form of "status spillover" (Jensen et al. 2022). Merging an emergent meme with a widely recognized "classic" can lend the newer meme cultural credibility, while the older meme gains renewed relevance through adaptation.

These dynamics position established memes as enduring signifiers invoked for their symbolic value rather than for ongoing interaction. Thus, they may attract merges as recognizable reference points but engage in fewer merges overall—appearing as prestige resources rather than active participants in ongoing memetic exchange.

This leads to my final hypotheses considering status as increased established recognizability:

Hypothesis 4A: Established memes have heterophilic mixing patterns on age (*status/recognizability*).

Hypothesis 4B: Established memes will have lower degree than emergent memes (*status*).

1.3 DATA & METHODS

This project uses a walkthrough sampling method and social network analysis. For the purposes of this paper, a "node" is any viral meme captured within the data-collection period. An "edge" will be placed between any two viral memes that are combined, or merged, together during the same period into a single meme token. For example, if an observed meme is a combination of Meme A and Meme B, then both A and B would become nodes in the sample and there would be an edge placed between them in the network to represent this merging. A meme that is observed that is not merged will be placed in the network as an isolate and may gain ties if it is seen to merge with another later on.

Sampling

The memes used in this analysis were sampled from Twitter/X between January and September of 2024, resulting in an overall sample of 117 memes. The site for data collection was selected due to the quick rate at which new memes appear on this social media platform as well as the prevalence of screenshotted content from this site on other platforms. This allowed me to capture emergent memes and their integration into the cultural environment through merge patterns.

Previous large-scale empirical work has relied on existing online data sources such as Know Your Meme to verify visual memes and obtain additional historical data on them (Zannettou et al. 2018). However, the way in which memes are merged together or manipulated in various ways makes it difficult for computer automation to accurately collect a sample of the results of memetic merging and relying on meme data sources removes low-longevity, emergent memes from being examined. There has been progress in this area such as the development of "motif mining," but language/text is often merged with different memetic images as well which

adds another layer of complexity (Theisen et al. 2023). Thus, in order to capture these merges and references to other memes most effectively, the person collecting the data must be familiar with the current and historical platform-specific memes in the pool of what might be merged.

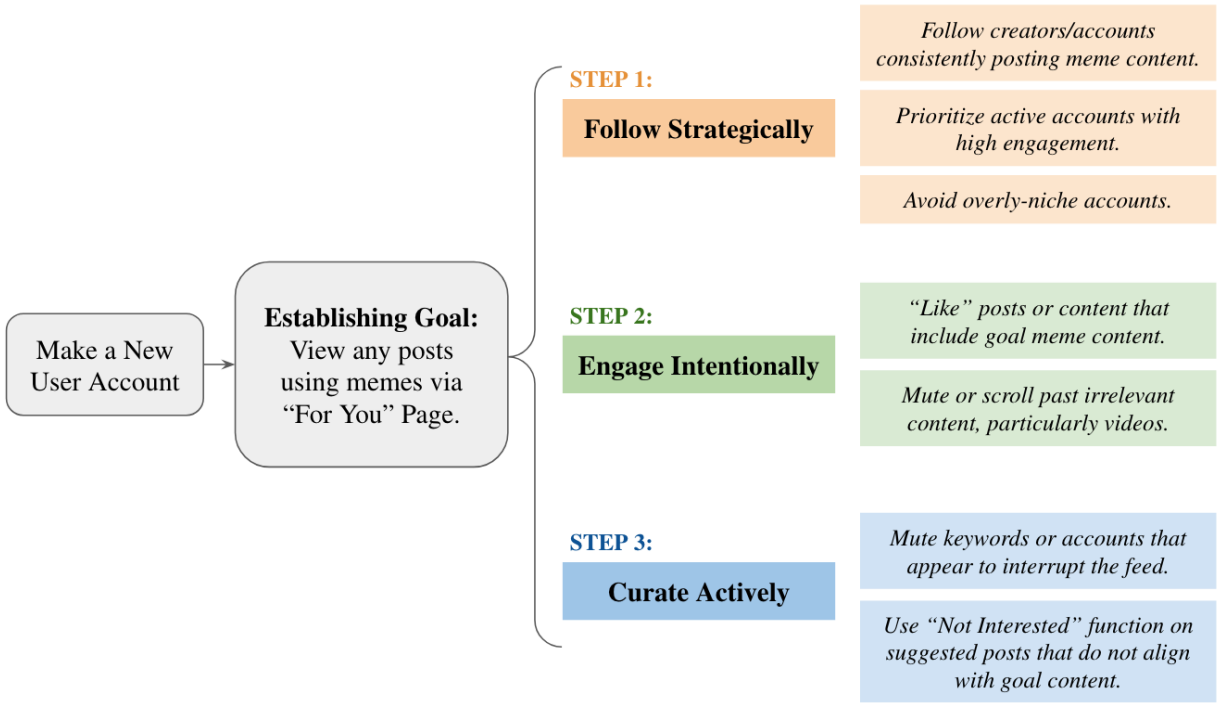
First, I considered how new memes emerge and then are combined on a social media site. While I would have ideally identified multiple social media platforms to look at simultaneously, some examination of these different platforms of interest led me to believe that focusing on only one platform for the purposes of this paper would be best. This is because each platform offers its own affordances and constraints for users and have different populations–thus producing different meme content; these different platforms also each have different populations, some have very different memetic content, and they all have some different rate at which new posts are made and thus how memes spread. Some memes are shared across platforms via screenshots which would still be included in the sample.

Across all social media platforms, the culture on Twitter/X shifts the quickest and most screenshots of memetic content shared on other platforms are screenshots from Twitter/X. New memes emerge on Twitter/X in various ways–an image is posted by some user that others then latch onto and make memes with, a user makes up a new text-based joke that others manipulate to make new jokes, or some current event incites activity. In almost all cases, it is difficult to predict which memes will emerge, what form they will take, and how long they will be relevant. Thus, the universe of possible memes that could end up in this network is constantly growing. Taking this data over a period of time allowed me to include both new/emerging memes with short longevity as well as older memes that may persist in their interaction with others.

I then made a Twitter/X account and identified 20 meme-focused accounts to follow based on post frequency, engagement, and primary use of humorous memetic content. I followed

these accounts and then engaged with meme posts on my resulting "For You" page to then train the algorithm to give me more memes content on that feed. The process through which I trained the algorithm for the "For You" page is summarized in Figure 1.2 below.

Figure 1.2. Summary of "For You" Page Training Approach



After establishing this algorithm, I employed a walkthrough method of sampling memes from that "For You" page. The walkthrough technique provided a structured yet flexible framework for capturing meme content in a way that reflects both user experience and platform systems. By first training the "For You" algorithm through following and engagement patterns—liking, following, muting, and curating content within specific interest areas—I effectively shaped the algorithmic feed to provide the kinds of meme material under study. This mirrors Light et al.'s (2016) emphasis on analyzing platforms not simply as neutral infrastructures, but as

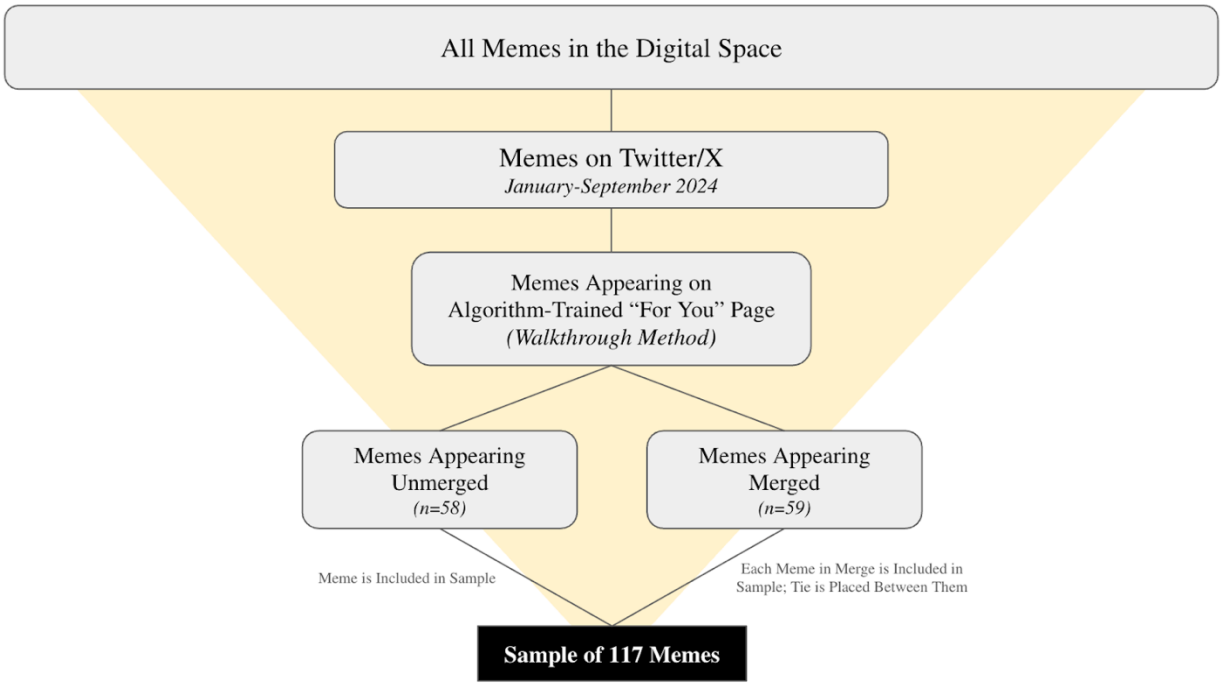
cultural interfaces that guide participation through affordances, structures, and algorithmic personalization. The walkthrough method, in this context, allows for a reflexive engagement with the platform-as-fieldsite, recognizing how memes are not just user-generated but co-constructed through platform affordances and algorithmic recommendations.

To reduce bias and better approximate the organic rhythms of meme circulation, I conducted data collection by scrolling through the trained feed at systematically varied times—across days of the week and times of day—to simulate the unpredictability of user interaction patterns while also attending to bursts of user activity. Multiple data collections were conducted each week to make sure short-lived viral memes were included. This design aligns with the walkthrough method's attention to temporality and user flows, emphasizing the situated nature of content exposure. Rather than extracting posts through search terms or hashtags (which risk overrepresenting high-visibility or pre-selected content), the walkthrough approach allowed me to experience and document memes as they were dynamically surfaced to a typical user within a tailored but evolving algorithmic environment. This method thus offers a balance between structure and serendipity—enabling the organic capture of culturally salient content while remaining attentive to how platforms mediate that visibility. The high frequency of manual data collection is important here because all three of these posts were made in one day and quickly became irrelevant again. This approach allows me to build the structure of meme intertextuality on Twitter/X.

The collection of data then entailed liking any post on the trained "For You" page reflecting memetic content and taking a screenshot of these memes for transfer into the dataset spreadsheet. For any post with only one meme present, that meme was added to the sample as an isolate node. For any post that included two or more pieces of memetic imagery or text

combined, all included memes were added to the sample as separate nodes with a tie between them. In the case that a previous isolate was later observed in a merge, any memes not already in the sample were added and ties were added between all necessary nodes. The ties in this network are undirected and an i to j tie would represent an instance in which a post containing a combination of meme i and meme j together appeared. I do not use weighted edges in this network due to no instances of a dyad being combined multiple times in different ways being present in the same. In all merge instances, the combination had not been present in the sample before. A summary of the resulting sampling is provided in Figure 1.3.

Figure 1.3. Summary of Sampling



Additional Measures

Intermittently during the sampling period, I reviewed memes added to the dataset to record additional descriptive data on each meme included in the network. This is necessary for identifying possible characteristics informing the memetic merging structure.

I recorded the typical meme medium (image, text, or video)–or the medium in which the meme appears the most often–not the original medium of the post that inspired the meme as well as any time a meme was presented in a different medium from its typical medium to account for medium flexibility. For merged memes, I recorded the format/medium the meme appeared as within the merge in order to account for particular uses of multimodality in memes accounting for meme structures.

Following the approach of literature on digital memes, I used KnowYourMeme.com as a way to identify each meme under a standard name and to collect other descriptive data (Zannettou et al. 2018). I recorded meme name, approximate origin date (based on when it became a meme and converted to age in years), and the social media platform of origin (if the meme originated from Twitter/X versus another platform such as TikTok, 4Chan, Reddit, etc.).

Finally, each meme's degree was taken from the complete network as a measure of the frequency at which each meme merged during the sampling period. This is a useful additional descriptive measure to enable an examination of differences in reuse–distinct from an overall likelihood of merging.

Analysis

To test the above hypotheses, I combine descriptive and inferential network approaches. Each hypothesis is first examined through descriptive evidence—such as mixing matrices, proportion distributions, or scatterplots—that provide an initial view of how meme

characteristics relate to merging patterns. These descriptive figures and tables illustrate the baseline patterns that motivate further modeling.

To formally evaluate these relationships, I then estimate a series of exponential random graph models (ERGMs) using the `sna` package in R. The ERGM predicts the probability that two memes in the network have a tie between them (or, in other words, are merged together during the sampling period) based on some set of controls and allows for dyads to be dependent, meaning probabilities of one tie depend on the presence of other ties in the network (Frank and Strauss 1986; Wasserman and Robins 2005). Through the inclusion of various controls, the ERGM describes the structure of the observed network using the observed network as the dependent variable (Hunter et al. 2008). The ERGM function then returns predicted log-odds of a tie occurring in the network based on the specified controls.

Each ERGM includes an edges term as a baseline and a single covariate or mixing effect tied to the hypothesis under consideration. This approach isolates the contribution of each factor—such as medium, platform of origin, or age—to the likelihood of tie formation in the meme merging network.

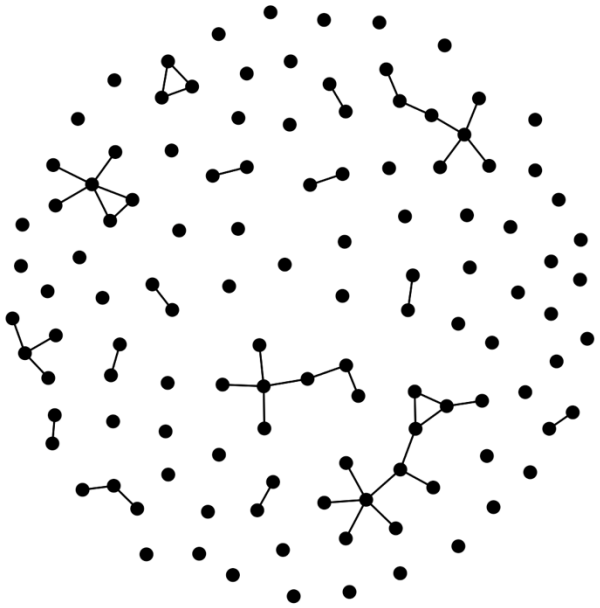
The final hypothesis differs in scope, focusing not on tie formation per se but on differences in meme outcomes present in the network. Specifically, I assess whether established and emergent memes vary in their degree of merging (never merged, merged once, or merged multiple times). Because this involves categorical outcomes at the node level, I use a multinomial logistic regression rather than an ERGM.

1.4 RESULTS

Network Overview

The meme merging network is composed of an analytic sample of 117 nodes, each representing a distinct meme[1], and 46 undirected edges, each representing an observed instance of two memes being merged into one. Overall network density is low (0.007), reflecting the relative rarity of meme merging events given the number of possible pairwise connections. A plot of the merge network is provided in Figure 1.4 and full descriptive statistics for the sample and network edges are included in Appendix B.

Figure 1.4. Plot of the Meme Merging Network



[1] A list identifying all 117 memes in the sample is included in Appendix A.

Descriptive and Bivariate Results

Hypothesis 1A: Meme merges will tend to take place between memes of different typical mediums (*multimodality/accessibility*).

Table 1.1 presents the mixing matrices by typical meme medium: the observed mixing matrix, the expected mixing based on the distribution of meme types and network density, and a z-score of the difference between them. Of the 46 observed dyads, the largest share (23 or 50.00%) occurs between a primarily text-based meme and a primarily image-based meme, just over 7 more dyads than would be expected if memes merged randomly. Within-medium merges are somewhat frequent for image-based memes with 14 dyads (30.43%) occurring here; however, text-based memes have a much lower medium-matching frequency in merges relative to how many of these memes occur in the overall meme sample with only 5 dyads (10.87%) occurring between them. Finally, video-based memes are not observed to be merged together in the sample. In fact, they are only observed to be merged with image-based memes.

Overall, 27 dyads (58.70%) reflect heterophily on meme medium, compared to 19 dyads (41.30%) that reflect homophily largely within image-based memes. If we consider what we would expect due to random chance, 23.5543 dyads (51.21%) should have reflected heterophily while 22.4457 dyads (48.80%) should have reflected homophily. Overall, we see that homophilous ties occur less often than they would due to chance; however, the small z-scores indicate that this difference is not significant.

Table 1.1. Mixing Matrices by Typical Meme Medium[2]

Observed

	text	image	video
text	**5**	23	0
image		**14**	4
video			**0**

Expected

	text	image	video
text	**5.9185**	19.7283	1.4348
image		**16.4402**	2.3913
video			**0.0870**

Z-Score of Difference (Poisson Approximation)

	text	image	video
text	**-0.3775**	0.7366	-1.1978
image		**-0.6018**	1.0403
video			**-0.2949**

H1A proposed that heterophily on typical meme medium would be observed in the merging network. I tested this first with a *nodematch* effect in an ERGM. The *nodematch* coefficient represents whether memes that have the same typical meme medium are more likely to be merged than memes that show heterophily on typical meme medium by coding each dyad as either having the same medium (yes = 1) or not (no = 0) and uses this to predict the likelihood of a merge. The results in Table 1.2's Model 1A.1 shows a coefficient of -0.3342 (SE: 0.3304), which is not statistically significant ($p = 0.2660$). While exponentiating this reveals that homophilic merges on typical meme medium are less likely than due to random chance (0.72 times the odds), the lack of statistical significance results in no support for H1A.

Model 1A.2 looks to build on this and look at the likelihood of every possible combination of meme pairings with the pairing of image–video as the reference category. This

[2] The analytic sample includes 31 text-based, 76 image-based, and 10 video-based memes.

ERGM uses the *nodemix* effect to predict log-odds of merges occurring for each combination of meme types. I further investigate patterns of heterophily in this way since the mixing matrix suggests that heterophilic merges that include a text-based meme are more likely to occur than due to random chance.

None of the *nodemix* coefficients reach statistical significance, but the signs are consistent with descriptive patterns. Text–text dyads (0.7200) and text–image dyads (0.6223) are positively associated with merging, while image–image dyads (-0.0694) are slightly negative when compared to image–video merging. Video–video and video–text merges are absent from the observed network, producing negative infinity estimates.

Table 1.2. ERGMs Predicting Homophily on Meme Medium

	Model 1A.1		**Model 1A.2**	
	coefficient	SE	coefficient	SE
edges	-4.8354	0.1932***	-5.2418	0.5013***
nodematch				
typical medium	-0.3342	0.3004		
nodemix				
Image x Image			-0.06935	0.5684
Image x Text			0.6223	0.5434
Text x Text			0.7200	0.6734
Image x Video			NA	NA
Text x Video			Neg. Inf.	
Video x Video			Neg. Inf.	
AIC	553.9		1047	
BIC	567.5		1095	

†p<0.10; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Taken together, while merges across mediums are the most frequent overall, the ERGM models suggest no significant statistical effect of medium homophily or heterophily. The results show no support for H1A and reveal no significant mixing patterns on typical meme medium.

This instead suggests that homophily on meme medium and specific combinations of medium do not affect merging patterns.

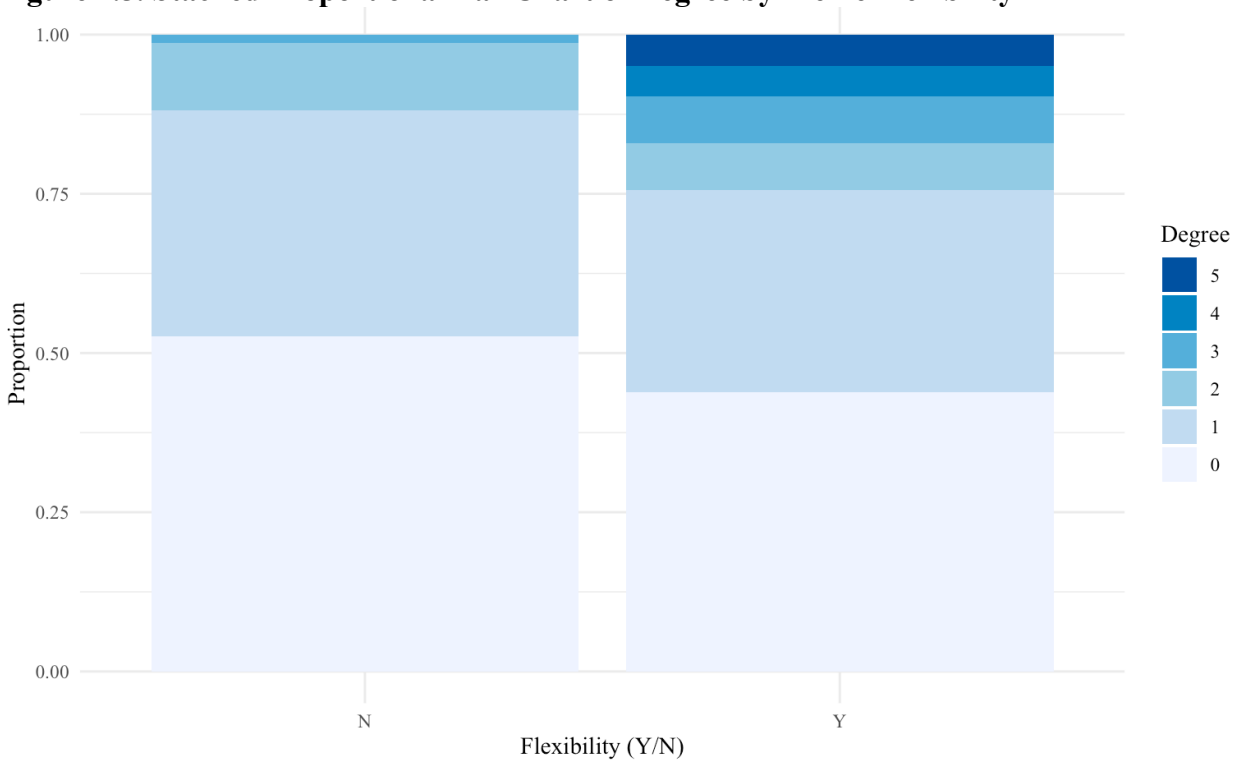
Hypothesis 1B: Memes that have flexible media (can shift their medium in different tokens) are more likely to be used in merges (*multimodality/accessibility*).

Hypothesis 1B approaches multimodality from the perspective of individual medium flexibility impacting a meme's likelihood to be merged despite its typical medium. By medium flexibility, I mean whether a meme has been observed in a different medium from its typical medium.

Figure 1.5 illustrates the relationship between medium flexibility and degree in the network. Of the 117 memes in the sample, 41 (35.04%) exhibit medium flexibility. Of these, 23 (56.10%) are merged at least once. Almost half of those, or 24.39% of all flexible memes, are observed to participate in more than one merge. Conversely, 47.37% of inflexible memes are observed to merge, with 11.84% of those inflexible memes being observed in more than one merge–none of which reach higher than three merges. Memes that can shift mediums across tokens thus appear to have higher degree within the network than those with fixed mediums.

Additionally, 11 of the 46 merges (23.91%) involved one of the memes in the dyad specifically shifting medium from its typical form within the merge itself (9 of the 41 flexible memes, or 21.95%, were represented in these dyads). In other words, memes are observed to specifically shift their mediums to engage in merges as well. This suggests that flexibility may also lower the barrier to merging.

Figure 1.5. Stacked Proportional Bar Chart of Degree by Meme Flexibility



H1B proposed that memes that exhibit flexible mediums are more likely to be merged. I tested this with a *nodefactor* effect in an ERGM. The *nodefactor* represents whether memes coded as being flexible are more likely to be involved in a merge than memes that are inflexible. With only two categories (flexible vs. inflexible), this *nodefactor* effect functions as a dummy variable, where flexible memes are coded as 1 and inflexible memes as 0, allowing the coefficient to be interpreted as the change in the log-odds of a merge associated with being flexible. The results in Table 1.3 show a coefficient of 0.6279 (SE: 0.2105), which is statistically significant (p=0.0027). Exponentiating this coefficient indicates that flexible-medium memes have 1.87 times the odds of being merged when compared to fixed-medium memes. These results provide strong support for Hypothesis 1B. Memes that can flexibly shift their medium across iterations are more likely to be incorporated into merges.

Table 1.3. ERGM Predicting Node-Level Multimodality Preference

	Model 1B	
	coefficient	SE
edges	-5.5190	0.2569***
nodefactor		
multimodal (ref: N)	0.6279	0.2105**
AIC	546.4	
BIC	560	

†p<0.10; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Hypothesis 2: Memes originating on Twitter/X are more likely to merge overall (*saliency*).

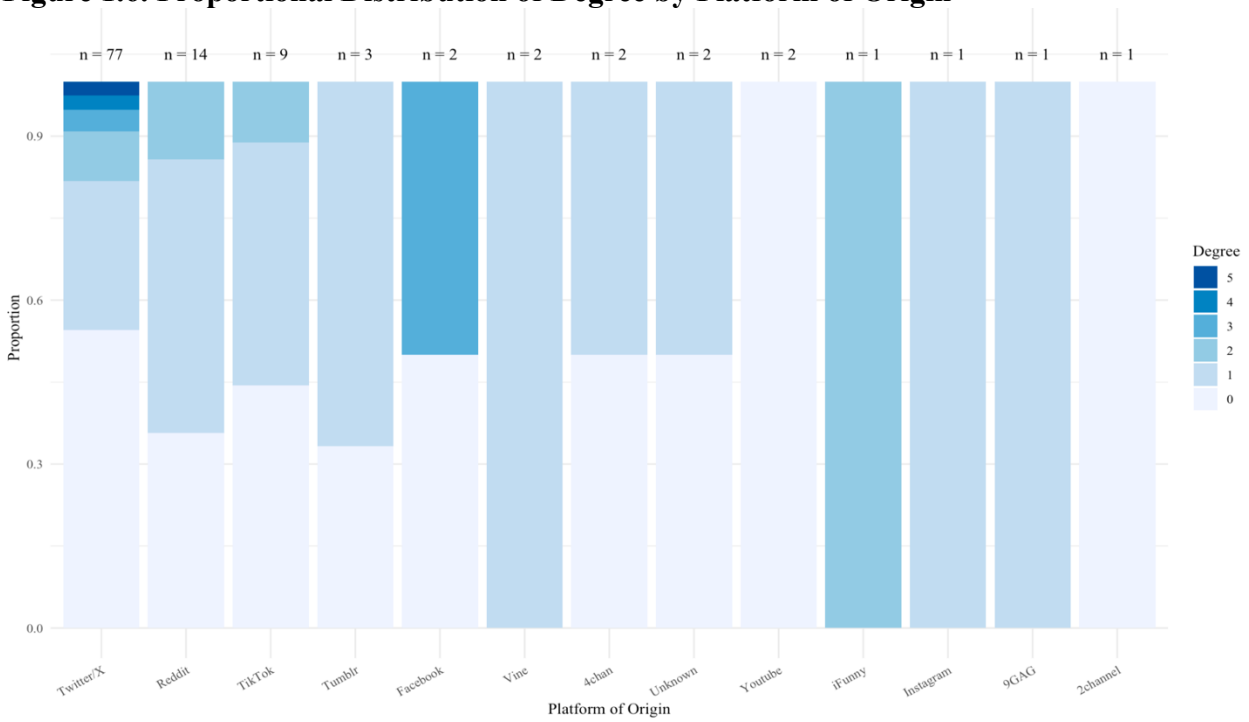
Figure 1.6 displays the proportional distribution of meme degree by platform of origin with each bar labeled with the number of memes in the sample originating from that platform. It is important to remember that since Twitter/X is the site of data collection, it is to be expected that memes originating from this site are the most common. Here, we see 77 of the 117 memes in the sample (65.81%) originating from Twitter/X. The only other consistently recurring origin platforms are Reddit with 14 memes (11.97% of the sample) and TikTok with 9 memes (7.69% of the sample).

Memes originating on Twitter/X account for the majority of merges in the sample. In terms of overall sample proportions, 37 of the 77 (48.05%) observed Twitter/X memes were merged, compared to 24 of 40 (60.00%) non-Twitter/X memes. While non-Twitter/X memes show a slightly higher merging rate overall, the highest-degree memes come exclusively from Twitter/X: all memes with degrees of four or five (n = 4) originated there.

Although memes originating from Twitter/X appear frequently in the merged dataset, this likely reflects the platform's overrepresentation in the sample rather than a unique tendency for

its memes to be more "mergeable." In other words, the high number of merges involving Twitter/X memes may stem from the platform's prominence and the sampling frame, not from greater mergeability itself. In fact, when examined proportionally, memes from other platforms are merged at comparable or even higher rates, suggesting that Twitter/X functions more as a high-volume source of repeatedly merged memes than as a generator of particularly merge-prone memes within the platform.

Figure 1.6. Proportional Distribution of Degree by Platform of Origin



H2 proposed that memes originating from Twitter/X would be more likely to be merged due to saliency on the platform. I tested this with a *nodefactor* effect in an ERGM. The *nodefactor* represents whether memes coded as originating from Twitter/X are more likely to be involved in a merge than memes from any other platform. Here, all other platforms are condensed into a Non-Twitter/X category due to small sample sizes in most other categories. With only two categories (Twitter/X vs. Other), this *nodefactor* effect functions as a dummy

variable, where memes originating from Twitter/X are coded as 1 and all other memes as 0, allowing the coefficient to be interpreted as the change in the log-odds of a merge associated with originating from Twitter/X.

The results in Table 1.4 show a coefficient of 0.0721 (SE: 0.2241), which is not statistically significant (p=0.748). Exponentiating this coefficient indicates that memes originating from Twitter/X have 1.07 times the odds of being merged when compared to memes from other platforms. The positive coefficient is in the expected direction, however due to a lack of statistical significance, these results provide no support for Hypothesis 2. Memes that originate from Twitter/X are not more likely to be merged.

Table 1.4. ERGM Predicting Node-Level Preference for Twitter/X Origin

	Model 2A	
	coefficient	SE
edges	-5.0832	0.3363***
nodefactor		
Twitter/X Origin (ref: Other)	0.0721	0.2241
AIC	555	
BIC	568.7	

†p<0.10; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

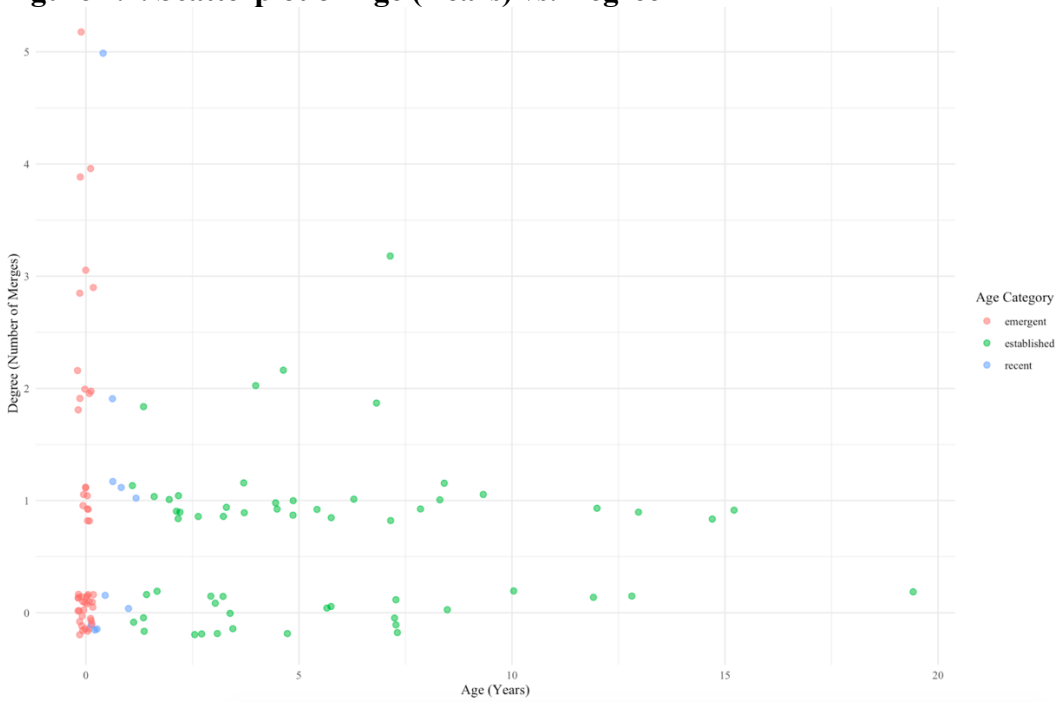
Taken together, while the proportional distributions suggest that while Twitter/X memes are merged multiple times more often, they are not more likely to merge overall than due to random chance according to the ERGM.

Hypothesis 3: Emergent memes are more likely to be merged (*saliency*).

To examine the relationship between age and merging, I first examine a scatterplot of meme age (in years) versus degree (number of merges), provided in Figure 1.7. Here, we can first see that more recent memes are observed to have higher numbers of merges more often than older memes.

Emergent memes (n=49) account for 41.88% of the overall sample. Of these, 42.86% are observed to be merged at least once, with 24.49% being merged multiple times. Recent memes (n=10)–memes less than a year old–make up 8.55% of the overall sample. Of these, 50.00% are observed to be merged at least once, with 20.00%) being merged multiple times. Finally, established memes (n=58) make up 49.57% of the overall sample. Of these, 56.90% are observed to be merged at least once, with 48.28% merging only once and 8.62% being merged multiple times. These proportions reveal that while established memes are merged proportionately more often than emergent memes, they are more often merged only once compared to emergent memes.

Figure 1.7. Scatterplot of Age (Years) vs. Degree



H3 proposed that younger memes are more likely to be merged as a result of saliency. I first tested this with a *nodecov* effect of age in an ERGM. The *nodecov* represents whether there is a change in likelihood of merging related to one-unit changes in meme age in years. The results of this first model (Model 3.1) are provided in Table 1.5. The coefficient is -0.0298 (SE: 0.0294), which is not statistically significant (p=0.311). Since this is not statistically significant, it does not provide support for H3. A negative coefficient is consistent with the idea that saliency is concentrated among emergent content, making older memes progressively less likely to merge. While the ERGM does not support this, one possibility, based on the scatterplot above, is that the relationship between merging and age in years is not linear.

Building on this, I then modeled age along with squared age to test for a possible curvilinear effect of age on merging likelihood in Model 3.2. Both coefficients are negative, indicating that the decline in merge likelihood as meme age increases is a steepening decline.

However, these coefficients, particularly the one for age squared, are not significant (p=0.693 and p=0.977).

Given the skewed distribution of meme ages—with many coded as emergent (age = 0) and a long tail of older memes—the linear and quadratic models may obscure meaningful early differences in salience. To better capture these differences, I next applied a log transformation to meme age, emphasizing variation among younger memes while compressing variation among older ones.

Table 1.5. ERGMs Predicting Meme Merging Based on Age (in years)

	Model 3.1		Model 3.2		Model 3.3		Model 3.4	
	coefficient	SE	coefficient	SE	coefficient	SE	coefficient	SE
edges	-4.8304	0.2057***	-4.8336	0.2324***	-4.7656	0.2364***	-4.7434	0.2547***
nodecov								
Age	-0.0298	0.0294	-0.0279	0.0707				
Squared Age			-0.0002	0.0055				
Log-Age					-0.1318	0.1171	-0.2149	0.3860
Squared Log-Age							0.0379	0.1674
AIC	554		556		553.8		555.8	
BIC	567.7		576.5		567.5		576.3	

†p<0.10; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

To account for the skewed distribution of meme ages where many nodes are clustered at 0 and then there is a large range of values, I also estimated Models 3.3 and 3.4 which use the same *nodecov* approach as Models 3.1 and 3.2 but with log-transformed age (and its squared term) instead. Log-transforming age changes the scale of this variable in a way that emphasizes differences among younger memes while compressing differences among older ones. This makes it particularly appropriate here, since H3 is focused on the distinctiveness of younger, emergent memes: the difference between a meme that is 0 versus 1 year old may matter much more than the difference between one that is 15 versus 16 years old. By applying the log transformation, the

models are better able to test whether the sharp decline in salience occurs early in a meme's life course rather than more gradually across years of use.

The results of these models are presented in Table 8. In Model 3.3, the coefficient for log-age is negative (-0.1318, SE = 0.1171), consistent with the interpretation that small increases in age among young memes are associated with a decline in merge likelihood, while age differences among older memes make little difference. This suggests that emergent memes may face the steepest decline in salience as they transition out of emergence. However, this coefficient is not significant (p=0.260).

Model 3.4 extends this approach by including both log-age and squared log-age. The coefficients are consistent in sign with the expectation that merge likelihood declines most sharply early on but then levels off or potentially rebounds among very old memes. However, neither effect is statistically significant ($p = 0.578$ for log-age; $p = 0.821$ for squared log-age).

Taken together, these log-age analyses confirm the earlier results: although descriptively younger memes appear central to merging, meme age does not have a significant or robust effect on tie formation once modeled in the ERGM. Hypothesis 3 is therefore not supported. The evidence suggests that salience may matter more for repeated merging patterns—i.e., which memes achieve higher merge degrees—rather than for the binary question of whether any merge occurs.

An alternative possibility is that the salience effect of meme age is not gradual, but rather an "all-or-nothing" distinction between emergent and non-emergent memes. From this perspective, the sharp drop-off in merge likelihood may occur at the threshold of emergence itself. This suggests that modeling meme age categorically—such as with a distinction between emergent memes and older, established ones—could provide valuable insight into meme

merging patterns. This suggests a shift from testing continuous effects of age to examining categorical distinctions, as examined in Hypothesis 4A.

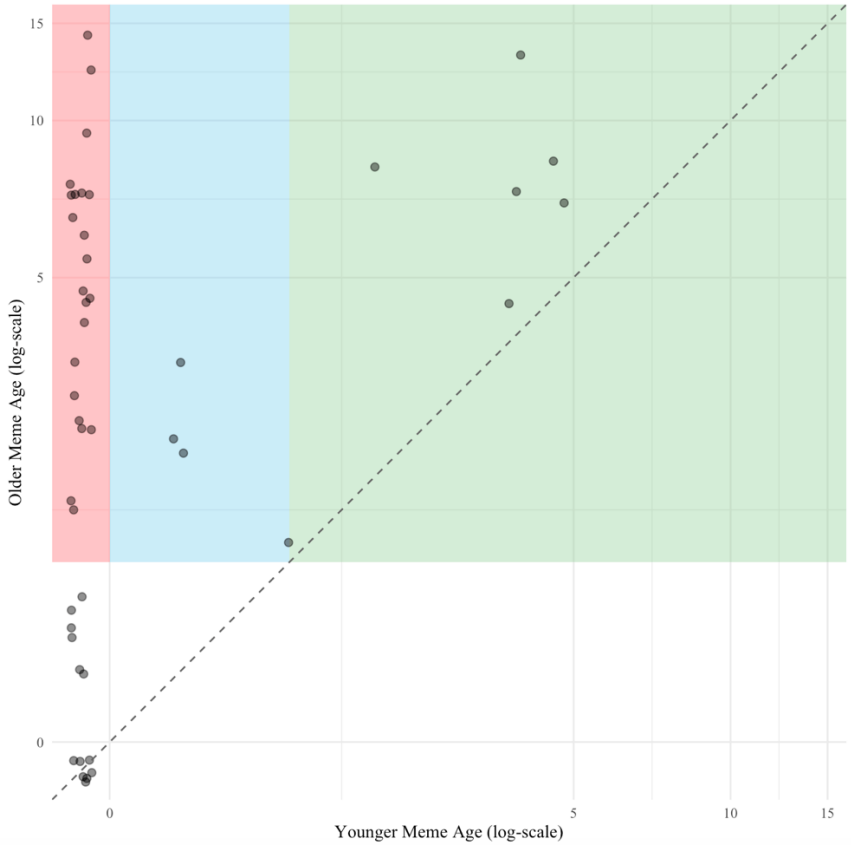
Hypothesis 4A: Established memes have heterophilic mixing patterns on age (*status/recognizability*).

This hypothesis proposes that established memes will tend to be merged with memes from a different age category than their own, which would be younger memes in this case. To examine whether established memes exhibit this heterophilic mixing pattern by age, Figure 1.8 plots meme ages for memes in each of the 46 observed dyads. Because the network is undirected, each pair can be interpreted symmetrically. To make comparisons clearer, I plotted each dyad with the younger meme's age on the x-axis and the older meme's age on the y-axis. A diagonal line is then plotted to represent exact age matching–or homophilic ties on age. The log-scaled axes emphasize age variation among emergent (0 years), recent (<1 year), and established (1–20 years) memes–mirroring the use of log-age in the previous ERGMs. Red boxes highlight dyads between established and emergent memes, blue boxes between established and recent memes, and green boxes indicate established meme homophily–overall, they highlight where dyads include established memes and differentiate them by heterophily and homophily.

The scatterplot reveals that established memes rarely merge with one another. Only 6 of the 46 dyads (13.04%) involve two established memes. By contrast, 23 dyads (50.00%) occur between an established meme and an emergent meme, and 4 dyads (8.70%) between established and recent memes. This pattern suggests that established memes are far more likely to merge heterophilically with younger memes than to form ties with other established ones. In particular,

the prominence of established–emergent ties highlights how recognizable, long-standing memes may function as anchor points or "templates" for incorporation with new and emergent formats.

Figure 1.8. Scatterplot of Ages of Nodes (log-scale) in Meme Merge Dyads[3]



H4A proposed that established memes engaged in heterophilic merging on age category, favoring emergent memes. To test this hypothesis, I used a *nodemix* term in the ERGM, which estimates the likelihood of ties forming between memes in three different age category combinations. The *nodemix* term compares each pairing of meme age categories against a reference group—in this case, established–established homophilic ties. This directly tests the hypothesis by asking whether established memes are more likely to form ties across age

[3] To enable visualization of emergent memes, which are coded as 0 years old (n = 49), all emergent cases are plotted at -0.1 with minor jitter applied to reduce overlap.

boundaries (heterophily), particularly with emergent memes, rather than tying within their own group.

First, I take a binary approach with Model 4A.1 shown in Table 1.6, grouping memes into "emergent" versus "established"[4] (all memes that existed prior to the sampling period). This simplification tests the core of the hypothesis: whether established memes are disproportionately tied to emergent ones. The coefficient for emergent–emergent ties is positive (0.3061, SE=0.4941), though not significant (p=0.5356). The key comparison, emergent–established ties, is also positive (0.6888, SE=0.3677). The result shows borderline significance (p=0.0611). This shows that relative to established–established pairs, emergent–established dyads are more likely to occur. While this does not provide support for H4A, it suggests that established memes appear more likely to merge with emergent memes, consistent with the idea that recognizability or status dynamics pull old content into interaction with new, salient content.

Table 1.6. ERGM Predicting Merging by Age Category

	Model 4A.1		**Model 4A .2**	
	coefficient	SE	coefficient	SE
edges	-5.4241	0.3169***	-5.6150	0.4090***
nodemix				
Emergent x Emergent	0.3061	0.4941	0.4970	0.5577
Emergent x Established	0.6888	0.3677†	0.8063	0.4595†
Established x Established	NA	NA	NA	NA
Emergent x Recent			1.2246	0.5797*
Established x Recent			0.6451	0.6473
Recent x Recent			- Inf	0
AIC	555		621.4	
BIC	568.7		669.2	

†p<0.10; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

[4] All "recent" memes are defaulted to the "established" category in the two-category age variable. They are not removed from the sample but are considered "preexisting" and thus not emergent.

Then, I expand the approach in Model 4A.2 by separating recent memes from established ones, which were collapsed together in the previous model. This distinction is important because recent memes occupy an intermediate position: they are no longer emergent, but their age is relatively low compared to the full range of meme ages in the sample. Including this category allows me to capture whether mixing patterns differ for memes that are transitioning out of emergence, and to see whether established–emergent ties reflect a broader tendency for established memes to link across age boundaries. I use the *nodemix* term in the ERGM again, but with six categories instead of three. The *nodemix* term in this model uses the same reference group but includes a third age category.

In this model, the emergent–established effect again remains positive (0.8063, SE=0.4595, p=0.079), similar in size and significance level to Model 4A.1. Exponentiating this coefficient tells us that emergent–established merges are 2.24 times more likely to occur when compared to established–established merges.

Interestingly, the emergent–recent effect is also positive and significant (1.2246, SE=0.5797, p=0.0346), suggesting that emergent memes merge with young but not brand-new memes more often than they merge with other older memes. Exponentiating this coefficient tells us that emergent–recent merges are 3.40 times more likely to occur when compared to established–established merges. By contrast, established–recent ties are positive but not significant (0.6451, SE=0.6473, p=0.3189), and no recent–recent dyads occur in the observed data (producing a coefficient of $-\infty$). Together, this suggests that the strongest cross-age interaction involves emergent memes, whether with established or with recent memes.

Comparing across models, the binary approach in 4A.1 isolates the hypothesized established–emergent heterophily and shows modest evidence for it. The expanded three-

category approach in 4A.2 shows that this dynamic is not limited to established–emergent mixing but is part of a broader pattern of emergent memes serving as hubs across age groups. Thus, H4A receives partial support: established memes do show evidence of heterophilic ties with emergent memes, but emergent memes also bridge across multiple age boundaries.

Hypothesis 4B: Established memes will have lower degree than emergent memes (*status*).

As Figure 1.9 illustrates, a much larger proportion of established memes are merged only once compared to emergent memes. This figure includes the recent (<1yr) age category in order to further separate the older memes in the sample from the emergent ones. Among the established memes, 48.28% are merged only once, compared to 56.90% that are merged at all. In contrast, only 18.37% of emergent memes are merged once, even though 42.86% of emergent memes are merged overall. Recent memes fall in the middle with 30.00% being merged only once while 50% were merged overall. This pattern shows an increase in the proportion of memes merged only once as we move to older age categories.

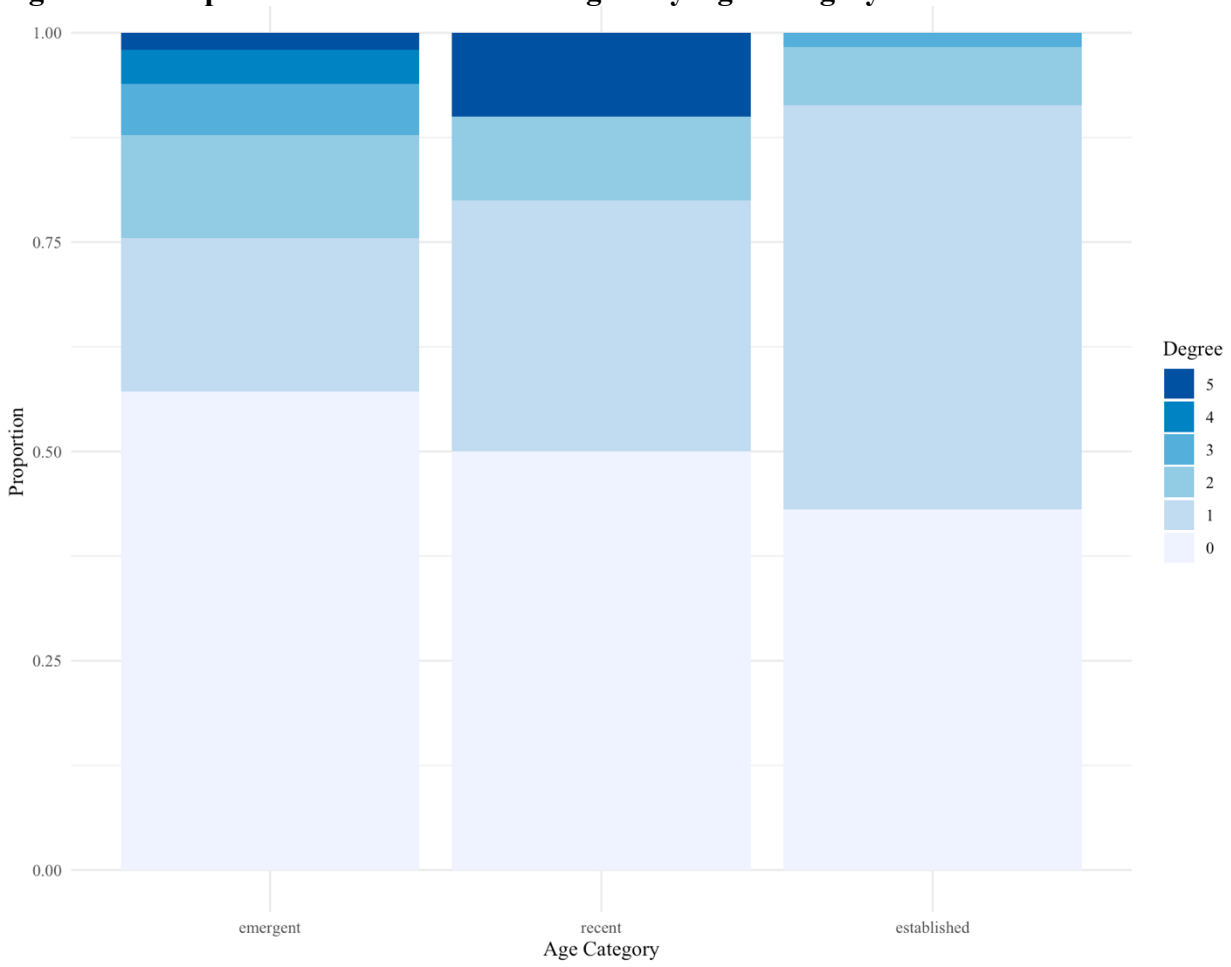
This difference reflects distinct merge patterns between established and emergent memes. As Figure 8 shows, emergent memes appear more widely across most degrees (0, 2, 3, 4, 5), with the highest proportion occurring at degree 0—indicating many emergent memes never enter a merge but that those which do are more likely to participate multiple times. Established memes, by comparison, cluster more tightly at degree 1, suggesting they are more often used in a single merge but less likely to reappear in subsequent ones.

This pattern implies that established memes are often invoked for their recognizability or symbolic "status," but do not persist as resources for repeated recombination or bursts of use. In contrast, emergent memes exhibit a steadier decline across degree categories, with some gaining

traction through multiple merges. This consistency underscores the salience of emergent content in ongoing creative activity: newer memes are easier to adapt and deploy in various merges, maintaining relevance beyond their initial appearance.

Taken together, these patterns highlight the potential role of established memes in the merge network: they function as recognizable cultural anchors brought into the network for one-off merges, while emergent memes circulate more dynamically, sustaining broader participation across merges.

Figure 1.9. Proportional Distribution of Degree by Age Category



H4B proposed that established memes are more likely to be incorporated into the merge network through a single merge event rather than multiple ones when compared to emergent memes. The theoretical motivation here is that established memes function as "classic" cultural resources: they are recognized and thus usable, but not currently salient. As such, their use reflects cultural familiarity rather than novelty-driven virality. This makes them more likely to be selectively pulled into a merge once—often as a symbolic reference—rather than being repeatedly re-used as emergent memes are. In contrast, emergent memes, being highly salient in the moment, are more likely to accumulate multiple merges.

To test this, I ran two multinomial logistic regressions shown in Table 1.7. First, I modeled merge frequency (never merged, merged once, merged multiple times) as the outcome in a multinomial logistic regression with meme age category (emergent vs. established). Degree was converted into the merge frequency variable with degrees of 2-5 combined into the "merged multiple times" category to account for small sample sizes in higher degree groups. The results are shown in Model 4B1.

The results indicate that established memes have significantly higher odds of being merged once rather than never merged (1.1678, SE = 0.4609, p = 0.011) when compared to emergent memes. This supports the idea that established memes are disproportionately involved in single merge events when compared to emergent memes, aligning with the expectation that they are incorporated transiently rather than becoming recurrent parts of the merge network. Conversely, established memes show lower odds of being merged multiple times relative to emergent memes (-0.6080, SE = 0.5434), though this difference is not statistically significant. This pattern is consistent with the notion that repeated merging is not characteristic of older, established memes.

Table 1.7. Multinomial Logistic Regression of Merge Frequency (categorized degree) by Age Category (2- and 3- category)

		Model 4B.1		Model 4B.2	
Degree Category	Predictor	Estimate	Std. Error	Estimate	Std. Error
Merged Only Once	*intercept*	-1.1350	0.3832**	-1.1350	0.3832**
	Established	1.1678	0.4609*	1.2483	0.4717**
	Recent			0.6242	0.8247
Merged Multiple Times	*intercept*	-0.8473	0.3450*	-0.8473	0.3450*
	Established	-0.6080	0.5434	-0.7621	0.5992
	Recent			-0.0690	0.9050
		AIC: 225.24		AIC: 223.57	

†p<0.10; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Because younger memes may experience steep drop-offs in merging likelihood as they age, I next expanded the model to distinguish between recent and established memes (three age categories: emergent, recent, established). The results are shown in Model 4B.2.

Separating recent memes from established ones increases both the magnitude and statistical significance of the established meme effect. Established memes now show even higher odds of being merged once rather than never merged (1.2483, SE = 0.4717, p = 0.008), indicating that memes older than a year are especially likely to participate in single merge events when compared to emergent memes. Recent memes, by contrast, do not differ significantly from emergent ones (0.6242, SE = 0.8247, p = 0.447), suggesting that they occupy an intermediate stage between early salience and long-term recognizability. Established memes also continue to show lower odds of being merged multiple times (-0.7621, SE = 0.5992, p = 0.2025), though this remains non-significant.

Across both models, the intercepts for each merge category are negative and statistically significant, indicating that the baseline likelihood of a meme being merged—either once or multiple times—is low. In other words, most memes in the dataset are never merged at all,

consistent with the highly selective nature of merging activity and the low density of the observed merging network.

Taken together, these models suggest that meme age shapes merge behavior in a non-linear fashion: emergent memes circulate dynamically and may be reused multiple times, while established memes are more often brought into the network for one-off merges that draw upon their cultural recognition rather than their current popularity.

1.5 DISCUSSION

This chapter aimed to identify mechanisms influencing the merging patterns of memes online by examining a merge network of 117 memes. Drawing from prior research on digital remixing and cultural production (Shifman 2014; Milner 2016; Miltner 2018), I focused on three sociocultural dimensions theorized to shape cultural mixing patterns—accessibility/mutlimodality, salience, and established recognizability/status. These dimensions capture how users differentially encounter and mobilize memes as semiotic resources, and how cultural forms travel, transform, and persist across the online attention economy.

Key Findings

The first set of hypotheses examined the role of accessibility through multimodality and medium. While H1A and H1B both address the role of multimodality in meme merging, they capture different dimensions of the concept. H1A proposed that merges would tend to occur between memes of different typical mediums (e.g., text–image combinations), yet this was not supported—the ERGM showed no significant tendency toward heterophily by medium. This suggests that differences in format alone do not inherently drive creative combinations.

However, H1B argued that memes with flexibility in medium (i.e., the ability to appear across text, image, or video formats) would be more likely to merge, and this hypothesis was supported. Memes coded as flexible were significantly more likely to merge, indicating that versatility across communicative modes facilitates recombination. This finding echoes the idea that multimodal adaptability underlies memetic success (Miltner 2018; Scott 2021). Flexibility enables memes to bridge formats across otherwise disparate formats, reinforcing accessibility as a condition of creative mixing of cultural objects (Leppänen et al. 2015).

The next set of hypotheses explored the effects of saliency, operationalized through platform origin and meme age. H2 proposed that memes originating on Twitter/X would be more likely to merge, given their visibility and recirculation within that platform's attention infrastructure (Burgess and Baym 2020). H3 addressed salience temporally, proposing that younger memes—by virtue of their novelty and relevance—would be more likely to merge. ERGM results for both hypotheses showed no statistical significance, indicating that relative availability and exposure to a meme does not increase the likelihood of that meme being merged within this context. However, the non-significant patterns still suggest that salience operates non-linearly: the ERGM results hinted at a curvilinear trend, with a steep decline in merge likelihood early in a meme's lifespan followed by a leveling-off or potential bounce-back among older memes that remain in circulation. This aligns with prior work emphasizing the fleeting nature of digital attention (Marwick 2013) and the "burstiness" of meme diffusion cycles (Shifman 2014). The lack of linear association may reflect how creative remix tends to occur at moments of peak engagement—when memes are both accessible and meaningful—but fades quickly as new formats replace them.

The final hypotheses examined status and recognizability through meme longevity. Here, "established" memes function as enduring cultural signifiers—formats that have achieved recognition beyond their moment of emergence (Gal et al. 2016). As such, both hypotheses looked at older memes in the sample which could be understood as high-longevity "classics." H4A proposed that established memes would tend to merge with younger memes, resulting in heterophilic mixing patterns on age category. While not statistically significant, the model suggested that merges involving established–emergent pairs were more likely than merges between two established memes. This pattern is consistent with the idea that older memes are drawn upon as symbolic anchors, complementing newer, contextually salient content. Interestingly, the emergent–established pair remains borderline significant while the emergent–recent pair showed significant results.

H4B proposed that established memes would be more likely than emergent ones to be used in fewer merges during the sampling period, reflecting symbolic rather than functional use. This hypothesis was supported: established memes showed significantly higher odds of being merged only once during the sampling period than emergent ones. This supports the notion that established memes circulate more as recognizable references invoked for their cultural status—a pattern consistent with the symbolic economy of "classic" meme formats (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017). Though, it is important to note that some of these high-longevity memes have been circulating much longer than the sampling period and thus may be merged at slower rates rather than lower rates.

Across models, the intercepts were consistently negative and significant, indicating that the baseline likelihood of any meme merging—even once—is low. This underscores that memetic merging is a rare and selective act rather than a routine part of meme circulation. Most

memes remain unmerged within the observation window, reinforcing that recombination requires more than exposure or popularity; it also depends on interpretive fit and creative opportunity (Miltner 2018). In this sense, the low base rates of merging parallel the broader asymmetry of online creativity, where only a small fraction of cultural forms become sites of active transformation (Bishop 2012). However, it should be noted that due to a limited observation window, I cannot claim that all memes do not eventually merge if observed for a long enough period of time. One could evaluate this with data comparing rates of new meme creation with rates of merges.

Interpretation and Theoretical Implications

Taken together, these results suggest that meme merging is driven less by visibility or network position and more by cultural adaptability and symbolic resonance. Flexible memes succeed because they can operate across communicative registers and are more accessible to meme creators. Similarly, established memes persist not just as templates for ongoing participation but as cultural touchstones–objects whose established recognizability grants them value in one-off acts of creative reference. These findings contribute to sociological understandings of online culture by highlighting how symbolic capital, rather than purely structural exposure, shapes the dynamics of digital creativity.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The most important limitations of this analysis are (1) the sparsity of the merge network and (2) the short sampling period. The sparsity of the observed merge network limits the ability to make inferences about merging patterns.

A more precise measure of meme age at the time of merge—potentially via time-stamped merge data—would allow finer modeling of salience decay and reuse trajectories. Additionally,

expanding beyond Twitter/X to include TikTok, Reddit, Tumblr, and other popular social media platforms would enable cross-platform comparisons that better account for ecosystem-specific dynamics (Highfield and Leaver 2016). Doing so could help determine whether patterns of one-off versus recurrent merging reflect intrinsic meme properties or norms of meme culture that differ across platforms as a result of structure

Another important question to consider the dynamics of how emergent memes transition into established ones. This is a significant process because there is a high rate of emergent memes but relatively few remain relevant over time. Future work should extend this approach across a longer time frame to capture how emergent memes either fade or transition into established forms.

Despite these limitations, the findings underscore that meme merging offers a productive lens into the stratification of online creativity. Merging is not simply random recombination but a socially structured process where some cultural forms—flexible, recognizable, or symbolically "classic"—serve as building blocks of participatory culture, while others fade without entering into further creative circulation.

1.6 CONCLUSION

This study examined how memes merge and recombine within online spaces, revealing that the process of memetic merging is shaped less by exposure or platform effects and more by the symbolic and formal properties of the memes themselves. Across analyses, flexibility in medium emerged as the strongest and most consistent predictor of merging, underscoring that memes capable of operating across multiple communicative formats are more likely to be adapted and reused. By contrast, variables tied to salience—such as platform of origin and age—

did not significantly predict merging, suggesting that visibility alone does not drive recombination. Instead, meme merging appears to depend on interpretive accessibility and adaptability: the capacity of a meme to fit different communicative contexts and be recognized as a usable symbolic resource. The findings further indicate that established memes function differently within this ecology—not as ongoing templates for creative reuse but as recognizable cultural references invoked selectively for their symbolic weight.

Taken together, these results advance a sociological understanding of digital creativity as stratified, interpretive, and culturally mediated. Memes do not simply spread through networks—they accrue meaning and status through users' shared literacies, symbolic distinctions, and creative judgments. In this sense, meme merging reveals how cultural fluency operates in the digital field: those who can fluidly mobilize recognizable formats demonstrate belonging and aesthetic competence within platform-specific communities. By foregrounding how accessibility, salience, and established recognizability interact to shape which cultural forms become recombinable, this study contributes to broader discussions of symbolic production, attention, and distinction in online culture. Future research should build on these findings by tracing merging longitudinally and across platforms, offering a more dynamic view of how memes move between categories of emergence, recency, and establishment as they circulate through the ever-shifting terrain of digital media.

CHAPTER 2

Rethinking Meme Categorization: Dynamics, Semantics, and Social Experience

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines a category of internet memes that challenges conventional assumptions about recognizability, coherence, and shared meaning: the "reduced meme." Unlike standard meme formats, which retain consistent visual or textual elements and facilitate broad comprehension, reduced memes undergo extensive unstructured manipulation, often resulting in the loss of referential meaning and minimal visual cues. Using the high-longevity example of *loss.jpg*, this chapter compares reduced memes to more traditional, non-reduced memes across three dimensions—alteration patterns, semantic stability, and contextual presentation—highlighting how variation within and between meme families influences social experience. The analysis demonstrates that reduced memes foster exclusivity, in-group signaling, and meta-ironic interpretation, creating social dynamics not captured by existing classification frameworks. The chapter argues for an expanded approach to meme categorization that accounts for shifting forms, deteriorating or abstracted meaning, and user interactions, emphasizing the interplay of play, ambiguity, and cultural knowledge in digital communities. By doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how memes operate as social objects, not only through shared symbolic reference but also through context-dependent recognition, insider knowledge, and participatory engagement.

Keywords**:** internet memes; reduced memes; meme classification; digital culture; in-group signaling; meta-irony; social experience; participatory culture; *loss.jpg*

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Internet memes are an important subject of study because they offer insight into how individuals and groups create meaning, establish solidarity, and reproduce social status in digital spaces. Much of the existing research on internet memes has largely focused on epidemic dynamics of spread, semiotics of communication, and norms governing their manipulation– particularly in cases where memes follow predictable formats, such as through altering text on standard image macros or re-labeling parts of an image (Bauckhage 2011; Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017; Weng et al. 2014; Xu et al. 2016; Shifman 2014). This emphasis suggests a common assumption that memes function primarily as recognizable, replicable units whose meaning is preserved across iterations. However, this focus on standard meme formats overlooks a growing category of memes that challenge what is often treated in the literature as a core feature of memes: the persistence of a recognizable image or text across iterations. These memes often rely on layers of irony, abstract remixing, and niche community in-jokes. Rather than following familiar templates, they require viewers to actively identify and interpret them within specific contexts, reflecting diverse social experiences and shaping how individuals communicate and connect online.

By identifying and studying memes which deviate from the norm of recognizability and coherence, we can uncover how individuals and groups create meaning, form solidarity, and reproduce social status in ways that defy traditional media formats. Previous research on culture has consistently emphasized the importance of shared cultural meaning and symbols in fostering social cohesion and collective identity. Berger and Luckmann (1967) argue that shared symbols and meanings form the foundation of human interaction, encouraging individuals to interpret and navigate the world collectively. Geertz (1973) expands on this by describing culture as a system

of inherited symbols that are deeply embedded in social life, providing frameworks through which people understand their experiences and communicate with one another. In digital spaces, scholars like Shifman (2014) highlight how internet memes then operate as modern cultural symbols, enabling communities to establish shared norms, values, and humor through recognizable templates and formats. Similarly, Milner (2016) notes that memes act as multimodal artifacts that help people negotiate social boundaries and build solidarity by circulating ideas, identities, and ideologies in participatory ways. These studies underscore the centrality of shared cultural symbols in creating a sense of belonging and facilitating meaningful social interaction, whether in face-to-face or digital contexts. Yet this emphasis on shared meaning may obscure other mechanisms of social bonding and boundary-drawing—ones that operate not through recognition but through exclusivity, ambiguity, or even confusion. If we then consider this in the context of memes which do not adhere to typical meme norms, we may see different social experiences for users who engage with them.

One method for studying memes has been classification schemes, which categorize memes based on their appearance, structure, and modes of alteration. Scholars from fields such as linguistics, media studies, and cognitive science have proposed various frameworks for categorizing internet memes. Some models, such as Ambrus (2017) and Baurecht (2020), focus on structural elements like format, medium, and textual components, while others explore meme context and multimodality. These approaches largely treat memes as static objects that remain in a categorization group over time. Most recent discussions, such as Markowski (2022), emphasize the role of irony, narrative, and audience interpretation, highlighting the way in which memes can be used to communicate differently and how this communication is influenced by form.

Despite their contributions, existing classification schemes are limited in scope and are fragmented. These categorizations also rely on rigid descriptions of meme appearances and alteration norms and fail to incorporate the dynamic ways in which creators and viewers engage with memes, thus lacking a more social dimension of memes. They do not account for meme dynamics and shifts between descriptions in different iterations and instead deal with meme families as static. As a result, these frameworks are insufficient for identifying and describing memes that deviate from traditional formats. A growing category of internet memes, characterized by increasing abstraction, obscurity, and manipulation beyond recognition, challenges existing categorizations–or "digital memetic nonsense" that is "devoid" of "referential meaning" (Shifman 2019: 47). Studying these memes not only calls for new classification strategies but also opens up broader questions about how cultural objects operate socially—not just through shared meaning, but through insider knowledge, social play, and the boundaries of intelligibility. Without a more comprehensive and flexible approach to categorization, the nuances of meme-based communication and its broader implications for social dynamics risk being oversimplified or overlooked. The "reduced meme" is a key example of a meme inadequately encompassed by current categorizations and highlights where these current approaches are insufficient as well as where additions to categorization schemes are needed.

The Reduced Meme

To address these limitations, this chapter introduces the concept of the "reduced meme," a type of meme that undergoes unstructured manipulation to the point where communicative meaning is lost and visual elements are minimized to the threshold of recognition. These memes are not manipulated in the ways typically discussed in the literature and are not easily

categorized with other memes. Unlike typical memes, which retain a degree of consistency and recognizability, reduced memes become increasingly obscure through their alterations. A key example is the "loss.jpg" meme, which is represented differently each time it is reproduced while retaining only a vague structural reference to the original. These memes foster new forms of interaction, meaning-making, and social boundary-setting that differ from those associated with more traditional memes. They create forms of exclusivity and in-group signaling that influence how individuals participate in digital communities—not by instantly recognizing a symbol, but by learning to decipher it across contexts.

In this chapter, I identify the key differences between the reduced meme and previously-studied memes based on prior meme categorization attempts and highlight the importance of including interaction from social actors in those categorizations. Following the approach of Keidar et al. (2022) to examine slang versus non-slang language, I will use a key case of a high-longevity reduced meme (loss.jpg) and compare it to other high-longevity more typical, non-reduced memes. First, I discuss previous attempts to categorize and describe memes in the literature. Then, I use these to form three broad dimensions that these categorizations cover and compare loss.jpg to a group of more traditional memes using these dimensions to identify limitations to existing classification approaches. Finally, I examine the differences in how creators and audiences interact with these memes in distinct ways, contributing to differences in social experience.

This chapter will explore how a reduced meme compares to non-reduced ones across alteration patterns, meaning stability, and contextual presentation as well as how these factors contribute to differences in social experience for both creators and viewers of these memes. Through this comparative analysis, I demonstrate the need for a more comprehensive approach

to meme categorization—one that accounts for variation both within and between meme families and recognizes the social interactions that different meme forms generate. In doing so, this chapter also contributes to a broader understanding of how cultural forms participate in the construction of social meaning—not only through clear symbolic reference, but through play, disruption, and contextually-dependent recognition.

2.2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Memes are understood as "user-driven" pieces of "participatory culture" in which people remix and copy images, videos, dances, etc. on social media and sometimes in the real world (Shifman 2014: 2, 4). In a participatory culture, people are not just consumers of information but also contributors, producers, and distributors–a phenomenon at the core of meme culture online (Jenkins 2006). There is literature on memes exploring how they replicate and diffuse, but memes are increasingly diverse and there are types we do not understand yet that cannot be fully explained using just what we know about the superimposed-text memes that are typically examined in past research. Prior work also tends to examine the virality aspect of memes–how far it is diffused or how a network is leveraged to increase probability of virality; however, we know very little about how meme cultural objects change in form to be increasingly obscure and may lose meaning in the process–a shift that is significant when we consider the role of symbols in culture and social interaction. While all memes experience alterations, they are typically still easily recognizable and largely intact. However, there are cases where memes do not maintain the original cultural symbol in transmission.

Following the distinction highlighted by Lymarev (2023), I will discuss a specific meme template as the "meme family" and the individual iterations of that meme as "meme tokens" throughout the paper in order to clearly distinguish between the group of meme versus one version of that meme from a single user.

Memes in the Literature

Two types of memes typically examined in the literature are image macros and object-labeling memes. Image macros is a broad term to describe internet memes which consist of an image with some superimposed text on it. These memes were most popular beginning around 2006 when images captioned in bold Impact font with white letters and a black outline superimposed were most widespread. They led to the rise of websites such as MemeGenerator in 2007 which facilitated the creation of new uses of each image macros meme by allowing users to select the base image they want to use and then input the correct style of superimposed text to that image. Eventually, the definition expanded to encompass any meme consisting of an image with superimposed text added to it.

Object-labeling memes are those in which parts of some visual meme are re-labeled either with text or with a superimposed image. They differ from image macros in that the superimposed text is not applied to the overall image but rather to specific objects or actors in an image/GIF/video in which their individual actions are related to one another and are a part of the overall interpretation. Here, there is a bit more complex of a re-contextualization occurring in the process of meme transmission.

Previous literature has not explored how the differences between these two meme types may contribute to differing transmission or communication. Additionally, there are many memes

that do not fit into these groups and some are difficult to fit into any preexisting framework, as seen through various meme categorization models.

Prior Attempts to Categorize Internet Memes

There have been several attempts at forming methods of categorizing memes with varying degrees of success. It is important to note here that there is incredibly difficult to form a comprehensive list of characteristics and a formal typology due to the ever-changing, ephemeral nature of internet memes and the fluid boundaries between current attempts at categories; however, there is still a need to set up some group of characteristics necessary to understand how memes work. My later discussion and application of meme categorizations attempts to break away from conceptualization of memes as somewhat static objects that are passed between online audiences but instead understand them as a more dynamic artifact of social interaction created by social actors.

Ambrus (2017) argues that memes cannot be categorized using only norms of prototypicality, a characteristic of image macros memes. Instead, they propose a meme categorization guided by factors they refer to as form, lifetime (relational topic), and quantity of figurative operations used with a cognitive linguistic perspective which results in three broad meme groups: template-based memes, ad-hoc memes, and peripheral memes. Here, an image macros would be considered a templated-based meme since it is prototypical in its replications– an image macros maintains its visual form with only the superimposed text changing, making it very conventionalized. These memes tend to have longer lifespans due to their template-based nature which "carries a frame based meaning" with it (Ambrus 2017: 154). Alternatively, ad-hoc memes may be more or less prototypical and tend to have shorter lifespans due to their connection to popular culture or current event topics. Ambrus (2017) argues that these ad-hoc

memes need to use more figurative devices than template-based memes in order to survive. Finally, peripheral memes are those which either only contain text or only contain image.

While this categorization takes important factors such as how prototypical a meme is in replication and how memes may be made more ephemeral through ties to current events into account, it is limited. Ambrus only considers pictorial and textual-pictorial memes and does not account for the dynamics of meme medium. We know that memes take on a variety of other forms including video memes and auditory memes, particularly relevant with the prevalence of the video-based social media platform TikTok. Additionally, memes tend to not stay in one of these medium groups over time–video memes often shift to image memes or even text memes as they are used over time. It is simpler for a user to make a meme token with an image or text reference, creating a trend towards simplification. In other words, there is a tendency towards lower "buy-in"–or less laborious production–for meme creators.

Two other aspects missing from Ambrus' (2017) categorization are how the meme is created and what the context around that meme is. These appear in Baurecht's (2020) discussion of four categorization frameworks that have been proposed in order to form their own categorization method. Baurecht briefly discusses the "creation approach" from Reddit user u/chaogomu on a post titled 'Meme Classification' (2017) under the subreddit 'Meme Economy'. This classification approach focuses on steps in meme creation such as "how the medium [is] incorporated in the process of the construction of the finished product" (Baurecht 2020: 143). The first group of these memes is "pure" memes which are not altered at all; these would encompass reaction image memes. The next group of memes is "template" memes which act like those discussed by Ambrus (2017). The final group is "variant" memes which take more effort to create and combine memes of various mediums or even topics. This highlights the idea

of effort required for meme creation which relates to the previously-noted "buy-in" of creators, both of which are significant to understanding memes socially. However, this categorization does not encompass creation in which a meme token is constructed completely by a user or a meme token is identified in a non-creation context. What I mean by this is (1) reduced memes do not use any established visual as the basis of creation but rather are created completely from the user and (2) reduced meme tokens may also be "found" in other contexts which are not actually meme token creation attempts. I will discuss these distinctions in more detail in the analysis section of this paper.

The issue around meme context is then explored by Deza and Parikh, whose model included the difference between memes with "intrinsic context" versus "textual context" (2015:1821). Memes with intrinsic context have meaning attached to the image itself while those with textual context rely on some caption or title. This model highlights the way in which meme content is recontextualized into different settings. While the intrinsic context and textual context of a meme may not be clearly separable and independent, these are important aspects of memes related to how an audience interprets them. We may also want to consider context in terms of how the meme relates to broader contexts such as where it is posed and how it is presented to viewers.

Expanding on meme context, the concepts of explicature and implicature, traditionally linked to verbal language, also apply to visual content. Yus (2019) argues that visual objects, digital or otherwise, generate visual explicatures—explicit, denotative elements that directly identify a referent—and visual implicatures, which rely on contextual inference to convey implicit meanings. This distinction is especially relevant for memes, where viewers must determine whether an image serves a straightforward communicative function or carries deeper,

context-dependent meanings. This distinction is particularly pertinent in the interpretation of internet memes, where users must inferentially determine whether the visual component serves a straightforward, explicit role or conveys subtler, implicit messages that contribute to the meme token's overall communication. While this framework has not yet been widely applied to meme categorization, it offers valuable insight into how memes function as nuanced forms of visual communication between creators and viewers.

Baurecht (2020) then presents four aspects of internet meme transmission as the most important: medium, format, content, and type. Medium of transmission refers to whether the meme takes the form of an image, video, GIF, etc. Again, we need to consider the dynamics of meme medium over time as memes shift mediums. Format of transmission refers to the ratio of visual aspects of the meme to text accompanying that image. This draws on ideas from Ambrus (2017) as well as Deza and Parikh (2015) to consider the role of visual versus textual usage. Content of transmission refers to the type of information being engaged with such as current events, politics, pop culture, and relatability. While these are not necessarily independent categories, they allow for the consideration of how meme content may influence ephemerality of the meme and its ability to replicate in different contents. Finally, types of transmission refers to which method of meme creation was used. This is where the types of memes such as image macros and object-labeling fall. It also deals with panel memes, description memes, screenshot memes, crossover memes, and meta memes. However, these types are not completely distinct from one another–a screenshot meme may be used as a panel meme such as the case with the *For the Better, Right?*[5] meme or an object-labeling meme may become a crossover or meta meme

[5] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/for-the-better-right

such as with the *Distracted Boyfriend*[6] meme. We see once again that forming clean, independent categorizations is difficult. Instead, descriptions of memes need to be more flexible.

Another recurring issue with categorizing memes is medium–memes tend to appear in various mediums. They may shift between video, image, and text based on application context, particularly when they are made more complex through merging together. Perhaps one way to address this is to consider the multimodality of memes–the combination of multiple forms into one communication such as the combination of text with image within one meme token (Lankshear and Knobel 2005). Cochrane et al. (2022) discuss the multimodal quality of a meme to describe the way in which text and image may interact with one another in a meme. This sounds somewhat similar to Deza and Parikh's (2017) intrinsic versus textual context and Baurecht's (2020) format of transmission. This is also similar to the five-type classification of memes from Moritz (1995) which consisted of linguistic L-memes which are language-based, visual V-memes, musical or auditory M-memes, procedural/behavioral B-memes, and complex C-memes which integrate L, V, M, and/or B memes together in different ways. However, multimodality should also include the way in which a single meme may shift categorization groups of mediums in its various tokens, not just through combination. We are limited by conceptualizations of memes as fitting into one category when different tokens of a given meme may actually result in varying representations and thus categorizations.

These attempts to categorize memes, while important, only deal with describing memes as static objects. They do not consider dynamics or meme tokens as something created by individual users with social motivations or approaches to communication. This leads me to the role of narrative and irony in memes. While the above conceptions of meme categorization

[6] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/distracted-boyfriend

address the forms memes take on, how they are structured, and how replication is done, they all lack some sort of connection to traits around meaning and humor as they relate to one another. Markowski argues that the most important traits would be "context dependence, absurdity, and (post-)irony" (2022: 10). Context dependence is considered in the above conceptions of memes but absurdity and irony are not and this is perhaps where much of the inside joke nature and humor of a meme comes from.

Pre-Irony, Irony, Post-Irony, and Meta-Irony

Markowski (2022) describes irony as a rhetorical device that conveys a meaning opposite to what is explicitly stated. In the context of memes, traditional irony involves the deliberate use of humorous incongruity, where the creator's intent is to highlight the absurdity of a particular situation or idea. Memes or meme tokens employing irony often rely on a shared cultural understanding, where the audience recognizes the gap between the literal message and the implied meaning. This form of irony maintains a degree of subtlety and indirectness, often requiring the viewer to read between the lines to grasp the humor. Markowski argues that ironic memes look like traditional memes but do not act the same way due to this "[subversion] of narrative" (2022: 72).

Markowski (2022) argues instead that traditional memes would fall within a pre-irony categorization. Based on Her's (2016) conception of pre-irony, traditional memes have clear narrative as well as maintained structural standards. Narratively, traditional memes are described as "acting as either canned jokes or relatable short stories" that are self-contained or relatable to the audience (Markowski 2022: 73). Structurally, they adhere to some common aesthetic visual or structural standard of image macros and reaction image memes. This is where memes

typically discussed in the literature typically fall. While previous descriptions of meme categorizations deal with this structural aspect of memes, they do not deal with the narrative or more communicative differences or meaning and narrative.

Post-irony, then, blurs the line between sincerity and satire, making it challenging for the viewer to discern whether a meme is earnest or mocking. This style often layers multiple levels of meaning, combining genuine emotion with absurd or exaggerated elements, making it more difficult for viewers to identify meaning than for ironic memes. The ambiguous nature of post-irony allows it to subvert traditional irony by merging sincerity with parody, thus creating a more complex and multifaceted meme (Markowski 2022). As a result, post-ironic memes can be interpreted in various ways, depending on the audience's perspective, leading to an interplay of humor, confusion, and introspection (Her 2016).

Finally, meta-irony takes self-awareness to an even higher level by acknowledging the irony of employing irony itself. Markowski argues that meta-ironic memes “present a subversion in both style and meaning, playing with the medium,” and become “conceptual rather than comprehensible” (2022: 73). These memes acknowledge their own absurdity while simultaneously critiquing or mocking the act of using irony. Meta-irony, therefore, engages the audience in a loop of self-awareness, where the humor lies not only in the content but also in the act of deconstructing the layers of meaning behind it and, at times, pattern recognition. These meta-ironic memes, as described by Markowski (2022) and Her (2016) are the closest the literature comes to describing reduced memes. Manipulations of meaning and communication of a creative user to an audience thus draws attention to the more social aspects of memes that are not present in other categorization attempts. This leads to the need to explore the social functions of memes.

Social Functions and Outcomes of Memes

While prior research has primarily focused on categorizing memes based on their more structural features and degrees of irony as described above, there has been limited attention on describing memes based on how they shape social experience. Categorization efforts have helped distinguish memes by form, content, application, and irony type, yet these classifications remain largely structural, overlooking how these may contribute to the ways in which different memes function as communicative tools that shape creator practices, user interactions, and viewer engagement. Expanding meme classification beyond descriptive traits to also include their social functions and user experience around them would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of their role in digital culture.

Building on this, examining how memes contribute to social experience—both from the creator and viewer perspectives—offers valuable insights into the ways digital communities engage with and interpret these cultural artifacts. As discussed by Milner (2016) and Shifman (2014), memes facilitate social bonding, identity expression, and public discourse. In political contexts, for example, memes have been seen to adhere to different norms based on political groups using them and have been used to mobilize support and shape public perception, demonstrating their role as both political tools and elements of digital folklore (Donovan et al. 2022; Ross and Rivers 2017). Additionally, memes enable communities to reinforce shared values and signal in-group membership, making them integral to online cultural participation (Gal et al. 2016). Scholars have further explored how memes function in processes of collective identity formation, boundary-setting, and ideological reinforcement, particularly within digital subcultures and politically polarized environments (Highfield and Leaver 2016; Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017; Phillips and Milner 2017). While these studies highlight the role of memes more

generally in shaping community dynamics and communication strategies, there has been less attention to how different meme formats—especially those that diverge from conventional templates—may structure these interactions differently or facilitate specific types of interactions. The extent to which different meme families foster varying modes of engagement and thus social experience of creators and viewers of memes remains underexplored.

While standard image macros are designed for broad accessibility and immediate recognition, more abstract forms challenge conventional expectations by demanding deeper contextual knowledge and pattern recognition from audiences. This distinction suggests that different meme structures not only shape how they are shared and understood but also influence the kinds of social interactions they generate. Non-normative memes may both align with and augment these social functions. They require a more nuanced engagement from both creators and viewers, as creators distill meaning into subtle cues while viewers must recognize implicit references to grasp the intended humor or message. This process can enhance social bonding among those who "get the joke," reinforcing a sense of exclusivity and in-group identity, while potentially alienating those unfamiliar with the meme's origin or evolution. However, patterns of user labor needed for meme token creation across different meme families is not considered in the literature beyond basic levels of effort; these discussions do not include how meme tokens are created by users and how these create different social experiences of both creators and viewers.

By adding focus to the social functions of memes, particularly those that diverge from normative, prototypical formats, we can better grasp how digital communication fosters inclusion, exclusivity, and cultural cohesion. This also integrates the sociological perspective into conversations with other disciplines. Examination of reduced memes challenges the

assumption that memes primarily function as widespread, easily accessible cultural markers, revealing instead that some rely on more selective modes of engagement. Here, I aim to explore how meme categorization can integrate not only formal traits and irony levels but also the varying ways in which memes structure social participation, meaning-making, and digital interaction. By applying prior categorization attempts to the reduced meme, I highlight where current categorization frameworks are insufficient.

Applying Prior Categorizations to an Anomaly

While prior categorization attempts and descriptions of meme social functions focus on more traditional meme families, attempting to apply them to non-traditional, anomalous memes proves difficult. Here, I use what I call "reduced memes" as a key case of an anomalous meme to highlight where our approach to categorize and describe internet memes needs to be revised.

Reduced memes tend to lose all typical meme meaning and instead become a game of pattern recognition where the humor is the result of recognition of the meme but not of any meaning being explicitly communicated; the structure of the meme is inconsistent and lacks a standard. However, this reduction of a meme to incomprehensibility and reliance on pattern recognition is just one type of meta-ironic meme. These reduced memes employ pattern recognition as their primary communicative function, so they have potentially distinct social experiences surrounding them. Additionally, simply labeling reduced memes as meta-ironic does not consider all of the factors of memes described in the previous section such as medium, form, and topic. We do not know how these reduced memes are altered in form and type over time, experience potential meaning shifts, and are applied to different contexts as well as how these factors may be distinct between reduced memes and more traditional non-reduced memes. Additionally, memes may move between irony categorizations in each iteration, similar to how

they may move between other descriptive categorizations discussed previously. By looking at an exclusively reduced meme across these different conceptions of categorization, we will be able to understand where they are insufficient in capturing the full breadth of meme representations and which dimensions of memes need to be rethought in attempts to describe them.

Approach to Categorization Restructuring and Additions

Here, I take the various factors that have been considered in the literature when attempting to categorize memes and apply them to a specific class of meme, the reduced meme, that is not explored in the literature and introduce a more sociological dimension to consider. Currently, the only discussion of a meme similar to this is in work related to irony and narrative use in memes–communicative factors. This literature focuses on the narrative and subversion of narrative in memes but does not explore the factors discussed in the broader categorization of memes literature or how this may affect the social experiences of meme creators and viewers around them. While understanding the reduced meme as perhaps a type of meta-ironic[7] meme in terms of subversion and what is communicated, I use the categorization factors discussed in the literature above to explore differences in how a reduced meme acts when compared to more traditional, "pre-ironic" memes that are more typical in the literature on digital memes.

I explore these factors across four broad aspects of categorization dimensions: alteration, meaning shifts, application context, and resulting social experience[8]. These each integrate some aspects of categorization attempts from the literature while building on them and considering

[7] I will note that while there are many other meme families or tokens that fall between the pre-irony and meta-irony groups as well, I will look at the extremes on each end here–primarily pre-ironic memes and an exclusively meta-ironic meme–the reduced meme.

[8] These four broad aspects are largely interrelated and may influence one another, particularly with regard to social experiences since they are partially the result of these other factors. I discuss social experiences as the last broad group of categorization differences in order to highlight how the previous three influence it, further exploring why it is important that we account for non-typical memes in research related to internet memes and include examinations of these varying social experiences that result from different meme families.

memes as more dynamic cultural objects. I use "alteration" to refer to the the way memes may change medium/form and what typical memetic reproductions look like for that meme, drawing on medium and multimodality conceptions from Ambrus (2017), Baurecht (2020), Cochrane et al. (2022), and Moritz (1995). I use "meaning shifts" to refer to potential changes in communicated meaning of a meme over time or through various iterations. While Baurecht (2020) discusses content of memes related to the type of information they engage with, there is a general lack of discussion about meme meaning changes and fidelity aside from arguing that meaning fidelity is important for meme longevity (Davidson 2012). I then use "application context" to describe the way in which a meme is used via which contexts it is shared in and how explicitly it is presented to an audience. Deza and Parikh (2015) and Markowski (2022) discuss the importance of context for memes and how this ties to meaning. Baurecht (2020) also touches on this in his categorization based on what content is being engaged with.

Finally, I use "social experience" to refer to the way in which users approach creation of a meme token, how meme narrative or communication is presented, and how users interact with these memes. I draw on Reddit user u/chaogomu's (2017) outline of different levels of manipulation needed to create a meme to describe how users approach creation as well as Markowski (2022) and Her's (2016) groupings based on narrative and interpretation to explore communicative meaning and how the meme narrative is presented to audiences. Finally, I examine how viewers interact with these memes in public spaces while drawing on conceptions of memes as modes of signaling social community membership and boundary-setting (Gal et al. 2016; Shifman 2014). This section aims to add a sociological perspective to the current literature on meme categorization to highlight the more social aspects of memes that are not used in

current categorization–namely user creation of memes and viewer interpretation and interaction with it.

2.3 DATA AND METHODS

This paper uses a comparative case study method, analyzing a specific reduced meme alongside more traditional memes to identify gaps and weaknesses in existing meme categorization frameworks. By examining how a reduced meme diverges across alteration, meaning, and application, the paper highlights an anomaly that challenges conventional approaches and may shape distinct social experiences, calling for a reassessment of how memes are classified and understood.

Key Case Selection

This paper uses the widely-recognized internet meme family "Loss"[9] (also referred to as "loss.jpg") as the key case of a reduced meme. This particular meme is selected due to its high longevity and continued relevance, as well as its exclusive usage in a highly reduced or ambiguous form. In the context of internet memes, high longevity is often defined as a meme that remains culturally relevant and widely circulated for months or even years, rather than the typical lifespan of days or weeks (Shifman 2014; Milner 2016; Wiggins and Bowers 2015). Previous literature has argued that longevity–or long-term replication and relevancy–is critical for high meme success and cultural significance; additionally, due to the increase in memes and users engaging with them online, there has been a continual decrease in meme longevity, or

[9] I will note here that another high-longevity reduced meme is "Piper Perri Surrounded." It is excluded from this paper since it is much more difficult to track online (due to not having a well-established name) and is not primarily reduced. This meme is also still manipulated in a more typical way–re-labeling individuals in the image with either text or another image.

lifespan, in recent years (Davidson 2012: Dawkins 1976; Ford et al. 2021). High-longevity memes often span multiple platforms, communities, and contexts, transcending the ephemeral nature of typical meme cycles, making them more widely engaged with.

Additionally, this meme family case does not show fidelity in the same way that it is typically thought about with memes. Fidelity in memes refers to the degree to which a meme retains its recognizable structure, meaning, or core elements as it is replicated and shared across digital platforms. Shifman (2014) emphasizes fidelity as a key factor in meme transmission, with higher fidelity ensuring broader intelligibility and cultural continuity. Milner (2016) further discusses how meme fidelity affects participatory media practices, arguing that memes with consistent, recognizable forms facilitate widespread engagement, while those with lower fidelity—such as abstracted or highly altered memes—require deeper cultural literacy for recognition and result in shorter lifespans. The level of fidelity influences meme longevity, accessibility, and social function, shaping how communities use memes to communicate, reinforce in-group identity, and establish digital discourse norms (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017). However, it does not seem to have reduced longevity in this case.

Originating from a webcomic series titled *Ctrl+Alt+Del*[10], which primarily focuses on video game culture, the "loss.jpg" meme is derived from a four-panel comic strip published by creator Tim Buckley on June 2, 2008. The comic, titled *Loss*, marked a sudden tonal shift from the series' typical humorous content to a somber depiction of a couple experiencing a miscarriage. The absence of dialogue and the stark contrast to the usual crude gaming jokes were met with significant backlash from the comic's audience, leading to quick and widespread online

[10] https://cad-comic.com/comic/loss/

mockery. A trend arose in which the comic would be abstracted in different ways–typically, these would attempt to be as minimalistic or obscure as possible.

Figure 2.1. Original Loss Comic from Ctrl+Alt+Del

Comparison Group Selection

In order to show that what I call "reduced memes" are distinct from the way that more typical memes operate and to show where current categorization frameworks are insufficient, I then took a sample of 11 non-reduced memes as a comparison group. These non-reduced memes needed to be similar to the reduced one, *loss.jpg*, in terms of age to control for longevity to some extent since *loss.jpg* is from 2008 but still relevant. As a result, these will be other high-longevity memes from similar time periods that are also still used today. To account for continued

relevance, I selected memes from the dataset collected in Chapter 1 that fit the criteria that they are within 7 years of age from *loss.jpg*. This way, we know that they are still used in typical meme-sharing settings and we can verify their age from KnowYourMeme.com, a website that chronicles memes which and has been used in previous research to verify visual memes and obtain additional historical data on them (Zannettou et al. 2018). I make the cutoff 7 years to make sure that memes are close enough in age but also to ensure that there are enough non-reduced memes in the sample. This provided a group of 11 non-reduced memes listed with examples in Appendix C. With this comparison group of high-longevity memes, I then systematically examined the alteration norms, meaning shifts, and application contexts of them in comparison to *loss.jpg* as a comparative case study. Finally, I discuss how these contribute to differences in social experiences around them. This comparison shows which factors are most significant to consider when identifying and categorizing memes so that anomalies can be better understood in the context of digital communities and so that we are able to better understand how this has social impacts.

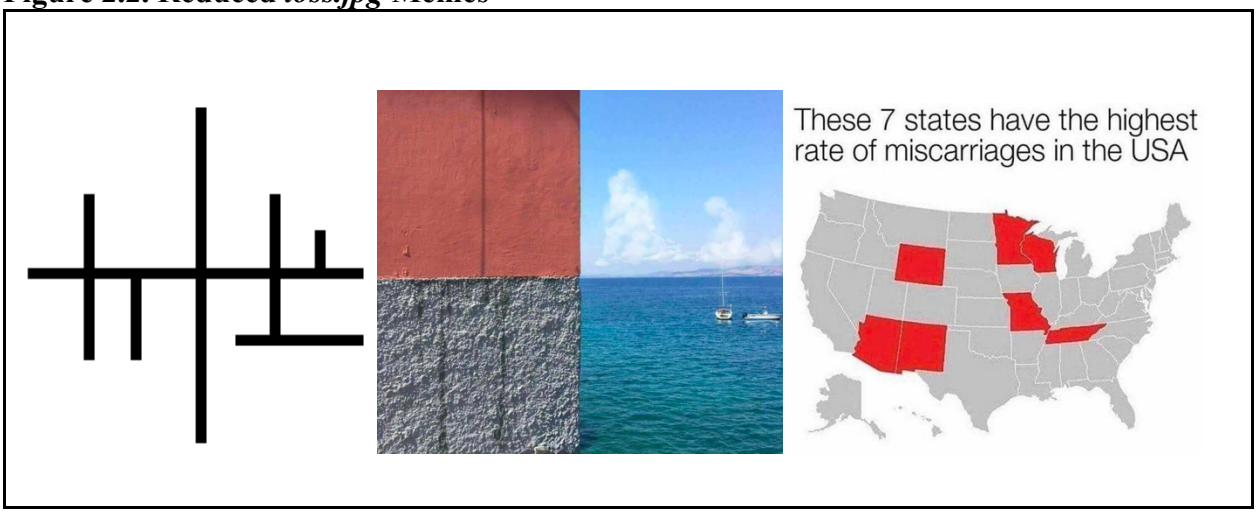
2.4 ANALYSIS

loss.jpg as a Reduced Meme

After *Ctrl+Alt+Del* posted *Loss* and it became the subject of mockery online, the comic was quickly reduced to its most basic parts and was made into a minimalist form containing only seven straight lines. This reduced version was then used in multiple unrelated contexts, gradually losing any relation to the original mockery of the comic strip. Increasingly obscure renditions of the comic were created, such as simply typing “1;11/11;1_” or sharing four empty panels. Even commenting “Is this loss?” under any image that even vaguely resembled the comic or its

reduced form became a meme itself. As a result, the comment “I don't get it” also became a meme, whether or not the commenter meant it ironically or in earnest. The meme around *loss.jpg* has become a game of reducing the comic as much as possible to the point of incomprehensibility and then sharing it online in typically unexpected places and not explaining the reference. Here, we can see how this meme employs meta-irony and pattern-recognition. Despite being published over fifteen years ago, references to and parodic adaptations of *Loss* continue to circulate widely in digital culture. Some examples of reduced forms of *loss.jpg* are provided below.

Figure 2.2. Reduced *loss.jpg* Memes



In order to fully examine how *loss.jpg* is different from other memes, it must be compared to others along key meme characteristics: alteration, meaning shifts, application context, and resulting social experience of creators and viewers. I use these to identify the manner in which reduced memes deviate from more typical memes to highlight the limitations of current meme categorization frameworks.

Alteration

I use "alteration" to refer to the way in which memes may change medium/form (such as from video to image, video to text, image to text, etc.), the type of meme it is which informs memetic changes (reaction image, exploitable, object-labeling, etc.), and what the typical memetic reproductions look like for that meme (or how someone using the meme may manipulate it during transmission). Discussion of meme type and typical memetic changes are combined since they are inherently tied. This section discusses characteristics of memes discussed in prior work such as medium, type, and format but also considers the constant change that a meme undergoes.

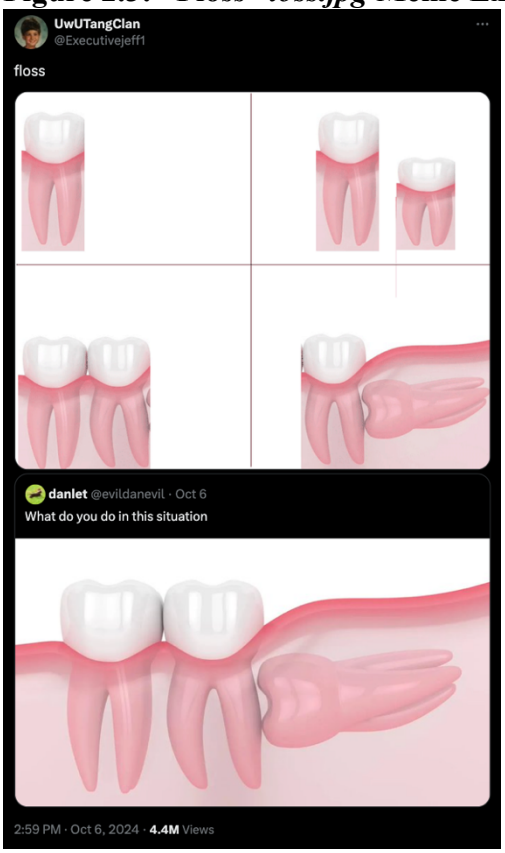
Medium and Form Change

As described above, the meme *loss.jpg* is altered so dramatically that nearly the entire original form is lost. The only aspects of the original form is a pattern of vertical and horizontal pieces of various lengths appearing in four panels or sections. While the meme remains largely visual, or imaged-based, the source image is never used. Examples showing this deviation are shown in Figure 2.2. This is significant because visual memes explored in the literature typically maintain the original source image while only changing minor characteristics.

This meme also moves away from the original visual medium with the use of name-dropping the meme by commenting "is this loss?" or slipping the word "loss" into a caption/comment on an image. In both cases, this text is applied to some image, but that image may or may not have been originally posted as a reference to *loss.jpg* and the user leaving the comment is typically not the one who posted the image. This works to make the meme even more ambiguous or obscure. An example of a *loss.jpg* meme subtly hinting at its identity is shown in Figure 2.3 below. User *@evildanevil* posted a photo of a tooth oriented incorrectly and

asked “What do you do in this situation” to which *@Executivejeff1* replied with a four-panel altered version of the image following the *loss.jpg* pattern with the caption “floss.” Here, we see the use of name-dropping the meme in a way that is subtle. “Floss” fits with the overall theme or topic of the posts while also signaling that *loss.jpg* is present in the image.

Figure 2.3: “Floss” *loss.jpg* Meme Example[11]



The 11 non-reduced memes, or more typical memes, do not show this same dramatic deviation from source material. While there are some shifts in form and medium, these shifts all appear to be directly related to ease of transmission or lower “buy-in” to creation. In other words, the medium shifts move towards lower complexity. A video meme may shift to an image meme that uses just one frame of the video; a meme consisting of a series of images may start to appear

[11] https://x.com/Executivejeff1/status/1843048375882826203

as only one of the images; a video or audio meme may become just text based on dialogue. Despite this, the original meme remains easily recognizable and these shifts in medium become just another option for presenting the meme, not the only way that the meme is represented. This is why we must consider the dynamics of meme medium and form if we use it to examine or categorize memes–a meme's medium and form are not constant but change over time and become additional options for meme alteration. An example of this dynamic is shown in Figure 2.4 below using the *Epic Handshake* meme.

In this case, the *Epic Handshake* meme was originally a video-based meme which was a parody on YouTube where users would edit the video itself and the audio to make new versions of the meme. Then, DeviantArt user *MILOSLAVvonRANDA* uploaded a hand-drawn version of the handshake in the video titled "EPIC handshake by Dillon and Dutch" which became used as a template for object-labeling memes[12]. Thus, we see a shift in medium which also changed meme type which will be discussed in the next section. It is no longer a video meme, but becomes an image-based object-labeling meme instead.

Figure 2.4: *Epic Handshake* as a Video, Then Moving to Image Format[13] [14]

[12] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/epic-handshake
[13] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L-6ugLM3ARw&t=1s
[14] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/epic-handshake/photos/page/9

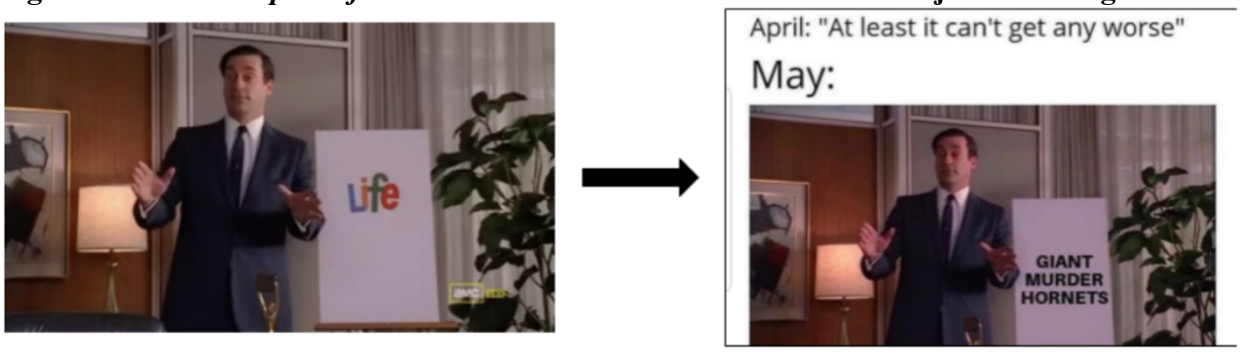
Among these 11 memes, there are also some that never change medium or form. These are typically reaction images or object-labeling memes, discussed in Baurecht's (2020) exploration of transmission type. An example of each is shown below. Reaction images are usually used alongside a caption or added in reaction to some other post. The image itself does not need to be changed, it is the context it is posted in that changes. Figure 2.5 shows the consistency of the *Reaction Guys* reaction image meme from original image to memetic use. Here, the original images remain unchanged but are paired with other images to show emotional response.

Figure 2.5: *Reaction Guys* as a Consistent Reaction Image Meme[15] [16]

[15] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/reaction-guys-gaijin-4koma
[16] https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/15555-reaction-guys-gaijin-4koma

Object-labeling memes, as discussed previously, have text or images superimposed on an original image. Because of this pattern of meme creation, the original image is typically maintained. An example of this is shown in Figure 2.6 below with the *Don Draper Life Cereal Pitch Parodies* meme. The image on the left depicts the screenshot from the video that is used to create this meme and the image on the right is an example of one of these memes. The image itself remains consistent with the source, but only the poster the character is presenting is altered or re-labeled. In some cases, the man himself is labeled or, as seen here, the entire image is labeled. The object-labeling meme remains consistent in form.

Figure 2.6: *Don Draper Life Cereal Pitch Parodies* as a Consistent Object-Labeling Meme[17]



Meme "Type" and Typical Memetic Changes

The meme *loss.jpg* exemplifies a unique form of memetic evolution that diverges from typical patterns of viral dissemination and manipulation seen in other memes. Unlike many internet memes, which undergo visible, standardized transformations through recognizable formats or textual changes, *loss.jpg* operates through a process of abstraction and ambiguity. The core structure of the original comic—four panels depicting a sequence of events marked by the positions of characters—becomes a flexible framework for reinterpretation, where its visual or

[17] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/don-draper-life-cereal-pitch-parodies

conceptual elements are subtly hidden, decontextualized, or stripped to their most minimal forms. These minimal forms may take on visual representations in which the structure of the image only relies on having seven objects at varying orientations or may even take on textual references using the word “loss” in a comment or using a word ending in “-oss” in a caption of comment. The creativity is driven by goals of obscurity while also maintaining some level of recognizability for a small(er) group of people.

While the majority of *loss.jpg* memes follow some sequence of four patterns of objects of various orientations and lengths, the breadth of representations is so wide as not to help with immediate recognition. There is no underlying image that these objects are attached to. Instead, the memetic structure is variable and minimal. Rather than operating within some standardized alteration of one object, *loss.jpg* is completely reimagined in various ways and is not explicitly presented to the audience through this abstraction.

In contrast to this obfuscation seen with *loss.jpg*, the majority of internet memes tend to follow a standard expectation for alteration into new contexts which allows them to be immediately recognizable and accessible for wider audiences. These modifications often involve clear visual or textual changes applied to the original image, video, or phrase, adhering to established formats or templates that are widely understood within target audience communities– as seen with reaction images and object-labeling memes discussed previously. These alterations rely on explicit humor, parody, or commentary, achieved through captions, image overlays, or recontextualization within culturally-relevant scenarios. The standardized nature of these manipulations creates a shared memetic grammar that facilitates participation, as users can easily reproduce or remix the content while retaining its recognizable structure.

The memes in this sample adhere to categorizations of well-known types of memes including object-labeling memes, image macros, reaction images, and exploitables, as identified by KnowYourMeme.com (KYM). Object-labeling and image macros memes, as discussed previously, are the most common in the literature. They are applied in predictable and standardized ways that make them easily identifiable. Reaction images are used to portray some emotion as a response to something said in a way that KYM identifies as similar to the use of emoticons[18]. They are typically posted in response to another user's post or paired with other images in a sequence to indicate some emotional response to that image or images. Exploitables are described by KYM as meme templates in which a memetic image may be manipulated in a variety of ways such as replacing words, adding words, or altering objects in an image[19]. This essentially combines aspects of alteration seen in other meme types such as object-labeling and image macros to make a more multifaceted alteration that may, in some cases, deviate from typical meaning attached to that meme.

An example of a non-reduced meme undergoing standardized memetic changes is shown in Figure 2.7 below with the *Spider-Man Pointing at Spider-Man* meme. As an object-labeling meme, we see that the image remains the same while characters in the image are re-labeled using text or images. This general structure remains the same across various versions of the meme. Thus, we see that unlike more ambiguous or reduced memes such as *loss.jpg* discussed above, these conventional iterations prioritize clarity and inclusivity, ensuring that the altered version maintains an immediate relationship with the source material.

[18] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/reaction-images
[19] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/exploitables

Figure 2.7: *Spider-Man Pointing at Spider-Man* as a Standardized Meme[20] [21] [22]

Meaning Shifts

"Meaning shifts" refers to any potential changes to the meaning of the meme family through different meme tokens. Memes typically have some meaning they are communicating to their audience and these may vary in consistency over time. This first may refer to the shift between the original meaning of the source video/image/text and the meme family's meaning, but may also refer to the shift in meaning from the first meme using that source to various sequential meme tokens.

Meaning Shifts from Original Source

As previously discussed, the *loss.jpg* meme exhibits no substantive connection to the original narrative meaning conveyed in its source material. While the original comic "Loss" sought to depict the emotional devastation of a couple experiencing a miscarriage, subsequent iterations of *loss.jpg* memes do not communicate this same meaning. Instead, the meme functions primarily as a parody, originating as a deliberate mockery of the comic's perceived tonal dissonance and narrative shortcomings. Though rare instances exist in which *loss.jpg*

[20] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/spider-man-pointing-at-spider-man/photos/page/2
[21] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/spider-man-pointing-at-spider-man/photos
[22] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/spider-man-pointing-at-spider-man/photos/page/3

makes an explicit reference to the source material's depiction of miscarriage—such as the third meme presented in Figure 2.2—this remains an exception rather than the norm and does not utilize the same emotional tone.

Of the 11 non-reduced memes, only the *Piracy is a Crime* meme exemplifies the same parodying shift from the source's original serious tone to a meme with a mocking tone. An example of this is shown in Figure 2.8 below. However, the meaning of stating something that one would (hopefully or jokingly) never do remains and it follows a memetic structure change that is recognizable; the difference is that these statements are increasingly extreme. With *Piracy is a Crime*, the original image made into a meme comes from a video included as a non-skippable PSA played in the opening sequence of DVDs as part of an anti-piracy initiative. A screenshot of the original video is included in Figure 2.8. Immediately after release, viewers began to make parodies of the video like the photo on the right in Figure 2.8. This is the typical structure of the *Piracy is a Crime* meme and illustrates a dramatic shift from the source's intention.

Figure 2.8: *Piracy is a Crime* Shift from Serious to Parody[23] [24]

[23] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_vHwfDNGdg
[24] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/piracy-its-a-crime/photos

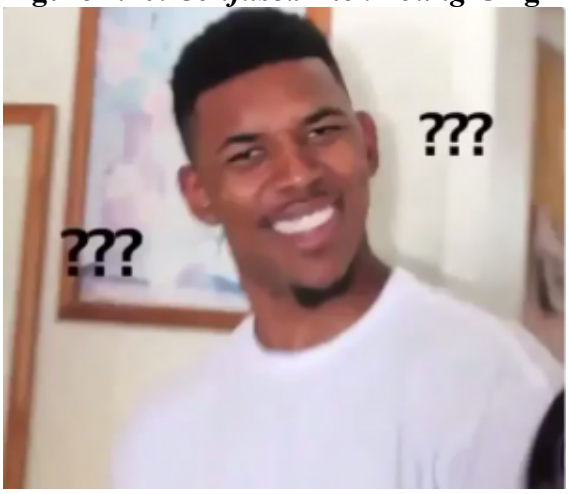
The remaining non-reduced memes are all either originally jokes and thus have a well-maintained meaning from the source (*I Know That Feel Bro*[25], *Are Ya Winnin' Son*[26], and *Graphic Design is My Passion*[27]) or the original context/situation is part of the meaning of the meme (*Reaction Guys*, *Epic Handshake, Spider-Man Pointing at Spider-Man, Don Draper Life Cereal Pitch Parodies, Wolverine Crush*[28]*, This is Fine*[29]*, and Confused Nick Young*[30]). In both cases, the original source meaning is an important aspect of the subsequent meme's meaning. Figure 2.9 shows an example of a meme being originally created as a joke and thus maintaining its source meaning. This image was originally used by Tumblr user *Yungterra* to respond to Tumblr's design update that included the phrase "graphic design is our passion." Tokens of the meme use the original image as a reaction image, use the text "graphic design is my passion" as a response, or make similarly-structured poor graphics that mimic this one. In all cases, the meme remains one which pokes fun at poorly executed graphic design, just like the original meme image did.

[25] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/i-know-that-feel-bro
[26] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/are-ya-winning-son
[27] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/graphic-design-is-my-passion
[28] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/wolverine-crush
[29] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/this-is-fine
[30] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/confused-nick-young-swaggy-p

Figure 2.9: *Graphic Design is my Passion* Original Post

Figure 2.10 shows an example of a meme in which the original context/situation is part of the meme's meaning, contributing to the consistency of meaning over time. The *Confused Nick Young* meme is based on a screenshot from a video where Young makes a confused facial expression at the camera after his mother says that he was a "clown" in his younger years. In this case, the original situation and resulting reaction that the image comes from becomes a part of the meme's meaning so that all use of the memetic image also uses this confused reaction as the meaning of the reaction image meme.

Figure 2.10: *Confused Nick Young* Original Post



Memetic Meaning Shifts

Memetic meaning shifts refer to changes in the message or interpretation conveyed to the viewers by a meme. In the case of *loss.jpg*, any original "meaning" has been effectively erased. Rather than conveying a specific narrative or thematic content, the humor and engagement with the meme rely entirely on the audience's recognition of it as a parody of the *Loss* comic. These meme tokens lack inherent meaning or communicative intent and instead function as a playful exercise in recognition and obfuscation, where the act of identifying the meme itself becomes the core of its significance.

In sharp contrast to this, the original meaning or communicative norm of the meme is preserved across all 11 non-reduced memes examined. These meme tokens retain a clear and direct relationship with their source material, either through explicit visual, textual, or structural fidelity. Unlike *Loss.jpg*, where meaning is intentionally abstracted or erased, these non-reduced memes maintain the integrity of the original message or humor, ensuring accessibility and interpretive clarity for viewers. Whether through the faithful reproduction of key visual elements, recognizable captions, or direct references to the original context, these memes prioritize continuity over abstraction. This preservation of meaning fosters a more conventional memetic interaction, where humor, commentary, or shared cultural references are immediately apparent and serve to reinforce communal understanding and participation. In this way, the non-reduced memes demonstrate the more traditional trajectory of memetic evolution, wherein the source material remains central to the meme's communicative function.

In this aspect of meaning, all 11 non-reduced memes show consistent meaning over time in their usage. As discussed in the previous section, the *Graphic Design is my Passion* meme

consistently mocks what is viewed as poor design and the *Confused Nick Young* meme signifies confusion.

Application Context

"Application context" refers to the way in which the meme is used through factors such as what contexts it is shared in and how explicitly it is presented to viewers. Since these tend to go hand-in-hand, they are discussed together in this section. This aspect of memes considers the broader environment and viewer factors that have been largely overlooked in the literature that attempts to categorize memes.

Context Shared in and Explicitness to Viewers

With a reduced, recognition-based meme like *loss.jpg*, we see that there is a wide range of contexts in which the meme is shared. In many cases, references to the meme or re-creations of the meme are essentially "snuck" into contexts which are more serious in tone. Users use the meme to respond to some post or to contribute to some more serious discussion in a way that is not overtly explicit and does still contribute to the discussion in some way. In other cases, users are able to identify some visual pattern that appears similar to that of *loss.jpg* in some image and use visual or text-only responses to subtly signal that this resembles *loss.jpg* when the image in question did not intend to do so. Users thus begin to also bring *loss.jpg'*s game of pattern recognition outside of the intentional humor context and allow it to be applied in any context. This then contributes to explicitness of the meme to viewers.

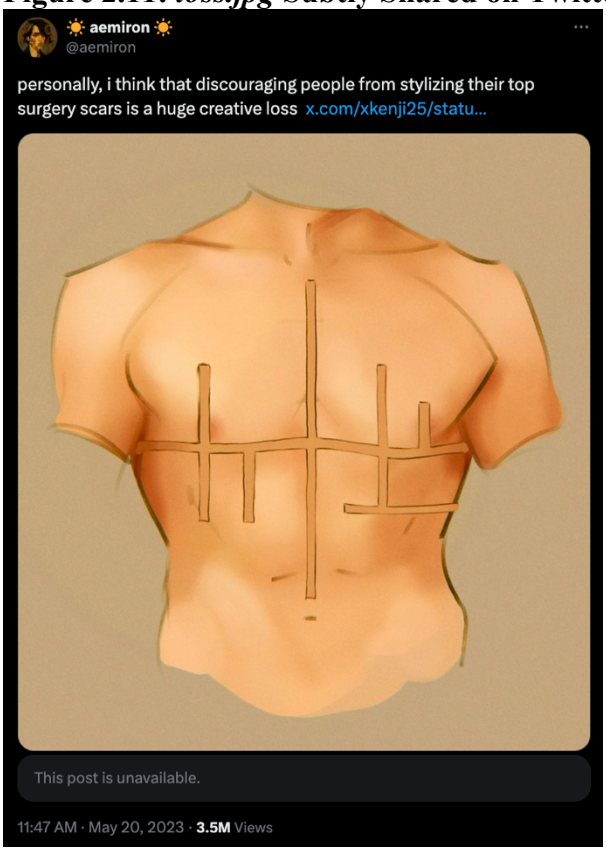
For *loss.jpg*, a significant portion of the "play" that users engage in is a game of recognition despite obfuscation. Thus, users posting *loss.jpg* memes attempt to make it as non-explicit and ambiguous as possible, prioritizing more advanced pattern recognition and applying their meme to unexpected contexts to raise difficulty.

An example of *loss.jpg* being used subtly in a more serious discussion is shown in Figure 2.11. Here, user *@aemiron* on Twitter/X replies to a serious post from *@xkenji25* where they suggest that transgender persons who undergo top surgery should be able to design their surgery scars as a creative outlet. Other Twitter/X users replied to *@xkenji25*'s post with their own opinions and *@aemiron* replied with their own input which included a piece of art they drew which depicts an example of creative top surgery scars. In this image, the scars follow the *loss.jpg* pattern of lines shown in Figure 2.2 previously. The caption also subtly references the *loss.jpg* meme by saying "personally, i think that discouraging people from stylizing their top surgery scars is a huge creative loss." The user uses the word "loss" in their caption as a subtle nod to the meme and a hint to the audience as to what their post really is. This is an example of how users insert the reduced memes into various contexts in inexplicit ways that allow it to be hidden in plain sight.

Markowski's (2022) discussion of meta-irony, which describes memes that rely on layered, self-referential, and often contradictory meanings, aligns with the way *loss.jpg* memes function. The game of recognition inherent in *loss.jpg* mirrors meta-irony's emphasis on viewer interpretation, where meaning is obscured, subverted, or only accessible to those with the requisite cultural knowledge. However, while meta-irony captures the detached and self-aware nature of these memes, it does not fully account for how recognition-based play operates as a social mechanism. Unlike many meta-ironic memes that rely on absurdity or deliberate incoherence, *loss.jpg* maintains an underlying structure that invites users to test their ability to detect patterns, making these meme tokens distinct in how they engage both creators and viewers. This suggests that while meta-irony provides a useful framework, it may need to work

in conjunction with other factors in order for us to fully address the participatory and recognition-based dynamics of reduced memes.

Figure 2.11: *loss.jpg* Subtly Shared on Twitter/X[31]



Alternatively, non-reduced, typical memes maintain more consistency and are explicitly presented to viewers. The context that they are shared in tends to be consistent with the meme type and how that meme is typically altered–reaction images, for example, are shared as a response to some other post as a reaction to it. These are easily-recognizable and the images are unaltered, it is the context that changes in this case. In some cases, the meme's original sharing context shifts but not in a way that makes the meme unrecognizable. The *Epic Handshake* and

[31] https://x.com/aemiron/status/1659994326326460416?lang=en

Piracy is a Crime memes, for example, were both originally shared on YouTube as video memes altered in various ways; however, they both eventually shifted to an image format which allowed for easier sharing as well as a movement towards various other social media contexts which is could then be more easily shared in.

In terms of overall explicitness, non-reduced memes in the sample are very explicitly shared to viewers. The goal is that more typically held by memes as they are discussed in the literature–to be easily recognized so that the joke of the meme is well-received and shared. Part of why they appear as explicit to their audiences is that their visual representation does not change, in line with the findings from form and meaning change discussions. The memes are recognizable because they remain consistent in what they look like and how they are used. Here, users have a tendency to more normative goals of having their joke understood and appreciated by as wide of an audience as possible. As discussed previously with regard to Markowski's pre-ironic memes, these memes are more structurally-consistent and have clear communicative meanings behind them.

Social Experience of Creators and Viewers

The distinct characteristics of reduced memes—particularly their alteration practices, attached meanings, and application contexts—shape different social experiences for both creators and viewers. This section builds on the distinctions identified in the previous three sections to explore how these factors influence the processes of meme creation, recognition, and interpretation. By examining how reduced memes operate within digital culture, this discussion highlights the ways in which they challenge conventional meme structures and engage both creators and viewers in unique, often subtle, forms of interaction.

The Creation Process and Creator Goals

The creation of reduced memes differs significantly from the conventional production of internet memes, which often rely on recognizable templates, explicit labeling, or structured alteration processes–as discussed previously. These deviations from conventional or predictable representations necessitate a unique approach to creation. Previous literature has not explored how meme tokens are created by users outside of discussions of the need for fidelity and effort required to produce one (Milner 2016; r/chaogomu 2017).

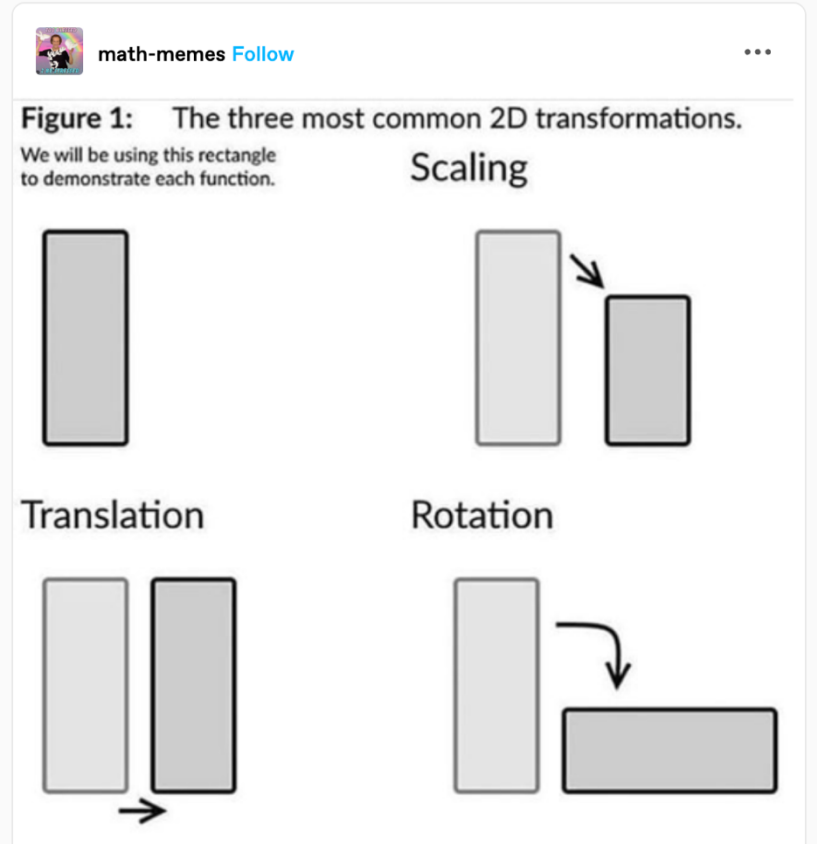
Creators of reduced memes engage in two primary methods of meme production: (1) constructing the meme in its entirety from scratch, often by manipulating some other unrelated image or creating one themselves that draws on the basic structural elements of the original, and (2) "finding" the meme in unintentional, naturally occurring instances that align with the established pattern of a that reduced meme. This second method diverges from standard meme creation, as it requires an observational, rather than manipulative, approach to meme production. It is, as a result, also much less common.

The *loss.jpg* meme showcases how creators either intentionally reconstruct the meme from minimal elements or identify it in unexpected contexts, blurring the line between deliberate authorship and emergent cultural phenomena. Previously discussed examples of the *loss.jpg* meme (Figures 2.2, 2.3, and 2.11) show how intentional reconstruction of other elements into the basic pattern of the meme may appear. In these examples, the creator is manipulating some unrelated image (Figure 2.3) or creating their own (Figure 2.11) to make a reduced meme.

Figure 2.12 then shows an instance in which the basic structural patterns of *loss.jpg* were identified within an unrelated image. User *@math-memes* on Tumblr shared an image from a math lesson (though incorrect on the concept of scaling transformations) that resembled the

meme without any text accompanying it; the only indication that this may be a meme or joke, then, is the username of the user who posted it. While this may seem outside of a normative idea of meme creation, the "creator" in this case still needs to identify this pattern outside of the meme context and recontextualize it to make it into an instance of this meme.

Figure 2.12: *loss.jpg* Identified in Pre-Existing Image on Tumblr[32]



The goals of creators engaging with reduced memes also differ from those producing more conventional memes. One key objective is to test the threshold of recognizability—subtly embedding the meme within another context to assess whether the audience can discern the

[32] https://www.tumblr.com/math-memes/182927915781

reference. This contrasts with the typical goal of meme creation, which is to maximize recognizability and engagement through clear, reproducible imagery and text.

Additionally, creators of reduced memes may aim to conform a meme to different contexts by applying the foundational structure in novel ways, as seen in Figure 2.11. The act of creating and disseminating a reduced meme, therefore, operates as an implicit challenge to the creators as well as the viewers, sometimes inviting interpretation rather than straightforward recognition.

On the other hand, more traditional memes undergo predictable manipulations and creators follow a stricter set of norms around creation of new meme tokens. Their goals are for their meme to be easily recognizable and for a larger viewership to interact with it–a sharp distinction from the approaches of *loss.jpg* meme creators.

Viewer Reception and Interpretation

Viewer interaction with reduced memes presents a markedly different experience from traditional meme engagement. Unlike standard reaction images or macros, which are easily recognized as memes even by those unfamiliar with their specific meanings, reduced memes demand a more nuanced pattern recognition process. Because these memes do not adhere to prototypical meme structures, their identification as memes is contingent on the viewer's prior exposure to both the original source material and its typical reductions.

Understanding a reduced meme requires a distinct form of cultural knowledge. Viewers must be familiar with both the source material and the common ways in which it has been abstracted or reinterpreted across different iterations. This differs from more typical meme engagement, where a meme's structure often provides explicit contextual clues. The interpretative process of reduced memes may, then, be likened to a form of “dog-whistle”

communication, where those lacking the requisite cultural knowledge may not even recognize that a joke or reference is present in the first place.

The *loss.jpg* meme illustrates how a viewer unfamiliar with the meme's history might overlook its intended meaning or even its existence at all, whereas those within the relevant subculture immediately recognize its significance. For instance, the third *loss.jpg* meme in Figure 2.2 with the caption "These 7 states have the highest rate of miscarriages in the USA" may be interpreted by a more general audience as an actual representation of miscarriage rates. Instead, those who are familiar with *loss.jpg* reduction representations and the meme's original image would be able to identify the image as a meme and the caption as not necessarily true but rather a hint that the meme was present by drawing on the topic of miscarriage present in the original comic. This highlights how recognition depends not just on its visual format but also on the pre-existing knowledge shared by those engaging with it that isn't always necessary for audiences of more traditional memes.

This characteristic of identification places reduced memes within the broader category of meta-ironic memes described by Markowski (2022) and Her (2016), which often subvert conventional joke structures and instead rely on self-referentiality and implicit recognition as the core of their humor or meaning. *Loss.jpg* tokens have a different base structure than more typical memes and their communicative meaning is not an explicit joke.

Unlike traditional memes that communicate a clear punchline or idea, *loss.jpg* in its meme tokens functions as a test of recognition, where the "joke" is not the content itself but the audience's ability to perceive that the meme exists at all. This dynamic challenges conventional notions of narrative by stripping away explicit storytelling elements, leaving behind only a skeletal framework that carries meaning solely through shared cultural literacy. In this way,

loss.jpg exemplifies how reduced memes do not just subvert traditional humor but also play with the very structures of communication and interpretation in online spaces.

Ultimately, reduced memes shift the focus of meme engagement away from explicit communication toward an interpretive exercise in pattern recognition and insider cultural literacy. The experience of both creators and viewers in this space demonstrates how memes can function as more than just vessels for humor—they also operate as markers of cultural in-group membership and evolving digital literacy that shape social experiences with others online.

2.5 CONCLUSION

Based on this comparative case study of *loss.jpg*, I contend that current approaches to meme categorization are insufficient. More effective frameworks must account for the dynamic and evolving nature of memes within and across categories, while considering viewer experiences and interpretations as well as creator approaches, highlighting variation of social functions of different meme families.

The *loss.jpg* meme represents a drastic departure from the conventional trajectory of meme use and evolution, offering a case study of how minimalism, abstraction, and obscurity can transform a digital artifact into a self-referential meme that operates similar to a cultural game. Unlike non-reduced, typical memes that retain recognizable visual and textual features tied to their source material, *loss.jpg* thrives on obfuscation, requiring advanced pattern recognition and cultural literacy from its audience. This reliance on the meta-ironic ambiguity explored by Her (2016) and Markowski (2022) and playful recognition highlights a shift in how internet users engage with memetic content, moving beyond humor alone to incorporate elements of insider knowledge, context disruption, and hidden meanings. By overlooking this

dimension of memes, anomalies such as *loss.jpg* become underexplored in the literature and different social functions of memes may be overlooked. The deconstruction of *loss.jpg* into its most reduced forms—seven lines, typographic abstractions, or even empty panels—demonstrates how memes can prioritize recognition over clarity, fostering a unique pattern of participatory culture that challenges traditional understandings of accessibility and communication in digital memes.

In contrast, the comparative sample of 11 non-reduced memes examined in this study reveals a more consistent and standardized approach to memetic alteration, meaning, and application. These memes, such as reaction images, image macros, object-labeling formats, and exploitable templates, are explicitly presented to audiences and tend to retain strong fidelity to their original visual and communicative intent. Their recognizable structure ensures accessibility, enabling a broader range of users to engage in remixing, resharing, and recontextualization without losing the intended humor or commentary. This accessibility, in turn, reinforces the communal function of memes as shared cultural artifacts, fostering participation through predictable formats that prioritize clarity and inclusivity.

However, as discussed in the previous section, not all memes remain static in their format or structure over time. An important consideration for meme categorization is the fluidity with which memes shift across formats and categories as they circulate online. A meme that originates as a video, for instance, may be transformed into a static image, a text-based post, or even a hybrid format depending on how it is reinterpreted and reshared by users in different contexts. These shifts highlight the adaptive and dynamic nature of memes, as creators and audiences continuously reshape their form to suit new contexts, platforms, or trends. Such transformations challenge rigid classification systems like those explored in the first section of the paper which

often rely on fixed definitions of meme types, and call for more flexible approaches that can account for the multimodal evolution of memes. Moreover, the medium in which a meme appears can influence its meaning, interpretation, and overall impact, further emphasizing the central role of audience interaction and reinterpretation in meme culture.

The comparative analysis of alteration, meaning shifts, and application context and a final exploration of distinct social experiences associated with reduced memes underscores a fundamental divergence of the memetic functions of *loss.jpg* from traditional memes. While traditional memes rely on explicit humor, visual fidelity, and immediate interpretability, *loss.jpg* engages users in an implicit process of discovery and pattern recognition, often embedding itself into unexpected or serious contexts. Its success relies on a tension between visibility and invisibility—an ongoing challenge to the audience to "get the reference" and uncover the meme's hidden presence. This phenomenon redefines the boundaries of digital culture, illustrating how memes can act as both playful communicative tools and exercises in cultural literacy that reward those who are "in the know." The way these reduced memes function in digital spaces suggests that their social experience is more participatory and cognitively demanding than more overt meme formats, reinforcing the idea that meme culture is not static but continually evolving in its communicative strategies.

While *loss.jpg* represents an extreme example of memetic reduction—where the act of reduction itself becomes a defining feature of the meme—there has been a growing trend of applying similar reductions to more traditional memes and repurposing them in comparable ways, though these tend to appear as singular instances of reduction (in singular meme tokens). The rise of memes similar to *loss.jpg*, or those that emerge as variations of traditional memes, underscores the evolving complexity and creativity within meme culture. These memes often

begin as recognizable formats or references but are subsequently altered, abstracted, or parodied to such an extent that they become distinct cultural artifacts in their own right. A meme may initially rely on clear visual or narrative structures, but as it is reinterpreted by various users over time, there may emerge increasingly subtle and layered variations, such as minimalist reductions, text-only adaptations, or even meta-commentary about the meme itself. This process reflects a broader trend in online meme culture where traditional formats serve as foundational building blocks for newer iterations, blending humor, irony, and self-referentiality–a trend that is the result of a rejection of memetic norms as memes become more widespread and understood (Gal et al. 2016; Castelfranci 2001; Hechter and Opp 2001). This provides a new way for boundary-setting to take place despite growing accessibility.

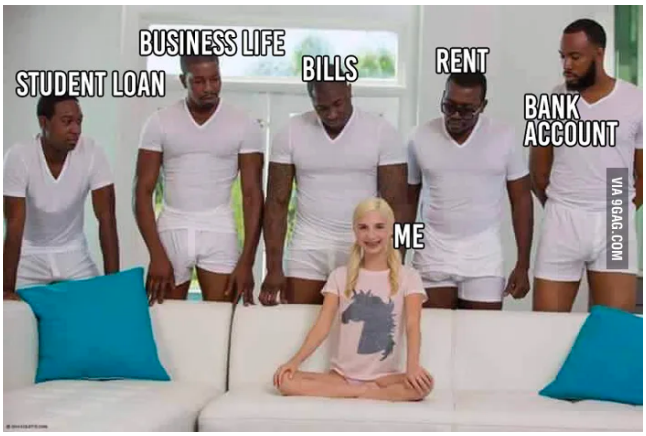
For example, the *Evil Kermit* meme family is one that is more typical in pairing with captions or object-labeling practices. However, it has also experienced reduced tokens as it becomes more widespread. Its most typical token form is shown in Figure 2.13 alongside a reduced token. The typical alteration, meaning, and context is distinguishable in prior meme categorization attempts, but the emergence of tokens that do not fit these frameworks such as the reduced one highlights the need for more dynamic frameworks that consider shifts over time and discussions of social experiences around them.

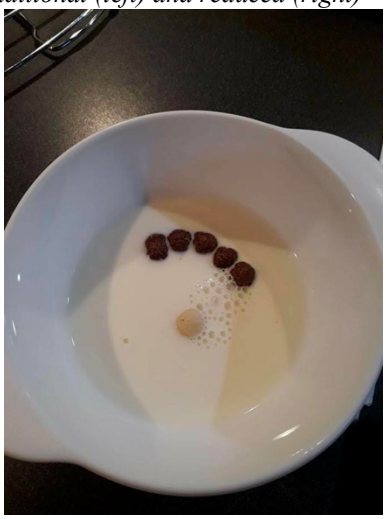
Figure 2.13. Evil Kermit Meme[33] [34] - *traditional (left) and reduced (right)*

Another example of this is shown using the *Piper Perri Surrounded* meme in Figure 2.14 below. This meme originates from a screen capture of a pornographic video. On the left, there is a more traditional memetic representation that is based on object-labeling norms. The meme is easily recognizable and widely understood within online communities. However, as seen on the right, it experiences instances of reduced tokens. Unlike the *Evil Kermit* meme, *Piper Perri Surrounded* has many different reduced tokens, though it is still not exclusively reduced like *loss.jpg* is. This highlights the way in which meme families consistently undergo shifts through different tokens. These different token forms may then result in different creator and viewer interactions.

[33] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/evil-kermit
[34] https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1191110

Figure 2.14. Piper Perri Surrounded Meme[35] [36] - *traditional (left) and reduced (right)*





Such variations demonstrate how meme creators not only remix existing cultural symbols but also innovate upon them, contributing to the continual evolution of internet discourse. As these memes transform, their meaning can become more ambiguous and reliant on shared cultural knowledge, highlighting the importance of viewer familiarity and participation in decoding their significance.

The rise of *loss.jpg* and other recognition-based, meta-ironic memes necessitates a reassessment of existing frameworks for meme categorization and analysis. Traditional approaches tend to focus on visual and textual fidelity, humor, and accessibility as defining characteristics of memes. This approach works well for these memes but falls short when applied to more abstract and self-referential content. Reduced memes like *loss.jpg* complicate these frameworks by prioritizing obscurity, insider recognition, and meta-irony over clarity. They function as puzzles or games, challenging audiences to identify underlying references through minimalistic or distorted representations. As such, meme categorization frameworks must

[35] https://9gag.com/gag/aDo1qrZ
[36] https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1383511

expand to account for the role of abstraction, creator and viewer participation, and cultural literacy in the memetic process.

Moreover, meta-irony plays a critical role in the interpretation of reduced and recognition-based memes. Unlike traditional memes that rely on easily understood jokes or commentary, meta-ironic memes often operate on multiple layers of meaning, requiring audiences to navigate between sincerity, irony, and self-referential humor. This layered approach to interpretation reflects a broader cultural shift in digital spaces, where meaning may also not be fixed but continually renegotiated through shared references and subtext.

Ultimately, *loss.jpg*'s evolution into a reduced meme challenges existing frameworks for analyzing memes and highlights the need for more nuanced approaches to studying digital culture. By prioritizing abstraction, meta-ironic interpretation, and recognition-based participation, *loss.jpg* reflects a shift in how internet users engage with memes as both cultural products and intellectual exercises. While current approaches to meme categorization may work for more traditional memes that are consistent over time, they are insufficient to describe more dynamic memes that may move within those categorization frameworks over time. These approaches also lack a discussion of how variation of memes may contribute to different social experiences around them. Based on this exploration, I suggest the following adjustments be made to our approach to meme categorization and description, and our understanding of them as social objects:

- **Dynamics:** consider shifts in previous categorizations of memes as different meme tokens from a given meme family evolve over time as well as how variable meme tokens are despite being a part of the same meme family

- **Semantics:** account for deterioration of meaning or lack of discourse around a meme family or token; note parody; integrate narrative and irony perspectives
- **User Experience:** explore social factors such as how a user creates the meme token, viewer accessibility and recognition (inclusion/exclusion), and level of cultural knowledge needed for interpretation

Future research on memes would benefit from a deeper exploration of such reduced and recognition-based formats, which highlight how internet users engage with digital culture not just as consumers but as active participants in a complex, evolving language of shared references and hidden meaning. There should also be a greater emphasis on varying social experiences around these memes as well as varying social function–particularly discussions of creator processes, creator goals, viewer barriers, and viewer interactions. This expanded approach to meme analysis will better capture the richness and complexity of contemporary digital culture, where ambiguity, playfulness, and insider knowledge are central to the communicative process.

In the next chapter, I will revisit *loss.jpg* as a case study to examine how users engage with this more obfuscated form of meme, focusing on their reactions, interactions, and participation in the broader cultural game of recognition in internet memes.

CHAPTER 3

The Right Way to Feel Wrong: Affective Performance, Cultural Competence, and Belonging on Tumblr

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines how performing affect operates as a marker of cultural status and belonging in digital spaces. While existing research has explored affective publics (Papacharissi 2015), memetic circulation (Shifman 2014; Milner 2016), and digital distinction (Zulli and Zulli 2022), less attention has been paid to how interactional affordances within a single platform shape affective expression and social differentiation. Focusing on the loss.jpg meme—a highly reduced and self-referential format that rewards recognition and interpretive fluency—this study analyzes hashtags, replies, and comments to reveal how users perform emotion across varying degrees of visibility and audience reach.

I argue that affect on Tumblr operates as a form of social performance structured by visibility, interpretive labor, and symbolic status. Users display affective literacy—the capacity to express the right feeling in the right register toward a meme—as a form of cultural fluency and subcultural capital (Ahmed 2004; Illouz 2007; Bourdieu 1986). Expressions of ironic enjoyment and playful hostility reveal how exaggerated negativity can serve affiliative functions, while confusion and boundary-setting interactions expose ongoing negotiations of interpretive hierarchy.

Tumblr's layered affordances further organize these affective practices: tags function as semi-private, reflexive spaces; replies as dialogic, interactional spaces; and comments as highly public, performative ones. Together, these layers constitute a stratified affective economy in which emotional tone becomes a proxy for cultural capital. By situating these findings within scholarship on digital affect, platform vernaculars, and status signaling, the chapter demonstrates that affect is not merely a byproduct of online communication but a key medium through which social hierarchies and communal belonging are organized in networked publics.

Keywords: affective economy; affective literacy; cultural capital; subcultural capital; affordances; digital culture; platform vernaculars; social belonging

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Humor and affect have long functioned as powerful mechanisms of social organization. Online, these dynamics are amplified and made visible through the circulation of memes—digital artifacts that both reflect and construct shared cultural sensibilities. Memes serve not only as vessels of humor but also as tools of communication, identity performance, and boundary work. They encapsulate complex cultural references into concise visual or textual formats, enabling users to recognize one another through shared literacy. Yet this recognition is never evenly distributed. The pleasure of "getting" a meme is always shadowed by the possibility of exclusion: not understanding, not belonging, not being in on the joke.

Within contemporary internet culture, this negotiation of belonging takes affective form as well. Users do not simply consume or reproduce memes—they perform emotions through them, signaling irony, detachment, or frustration as markers of social position. These affective displays constitute what scholars have described as *affective publics* (Papacharissi 2015), in which feeling becomes a connective social signal. Tumblr, in particular, offers a rich context for studying these dynamics due to its layered interactional affordances—hashtags ("tags"), replies, and comments—that each foster different forms of visibility and audience engagement. Despite extensive work on memes as cultural and communicative artifacts (Shifman 2014; Milner 2016; Phillips and Milner 2017), little is known about how affective performance varies across these distinct layers of platform interaction.

In recent years, scholars of digital media have turned their attention to how online participation constitutes forms of cultural capital and belonging (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017; Maly and Varis 2016; Abidin 2021). Memes have been recognized as important sites of vernacular creativity, where humor, identity, and affect intersect (Milner 2013; Shifman 2014).

Concurrently, research on affect in digital environments has highlighted the role of emotion in organizing publics and producing forms of alignment and distinction (Ahmed 2004; Papacharissi 2015). Together, these literatures emphasize that affect and humor are not peripheral to digital culture—they are central to how users construct meaning and navigate social structures online.

However, these studies have largely focused on *content*—what memes communicate or symbolize—rather than on *interaction*, or how users perform belonging and exclusion through their engagements with memes. The layered affordances of specific platforms remain especially underexamined. On Tumblr, for instance, tagging systems, replies, and comment threads each carry different levels of publicness, reflexivity, and social risk. Yet the implications of these structural differences for affective expression and social signaling have not been systematically explored. Moreover, while scholars have examined irony and meta-irony in meme culture (Katz and Shifman 2017; Ntouvlis and Geenen 2023), we know less about how these dynamics are enacted through user affect, or how out-group reactions contribute to the cultural life of highly reduced memes.

Understanding how belonging is performed online is crucial because affective participation has become a primary mechanism through which digital publics reproduce social order. As Butler (1990) argues, identity is constituted through repeated performance; in digital spaces, those performances are mediated through affective and aesthetic cues that signal one's fluency within a shared symbolic system. To display the "right" tone—through irony, intentional misspellings, or use of capitalizations—is to enact cultural capital in Bourdieu's (1984) sense, demonstrating mastery of the implicit codes that define group membership. However, we still lack a more detailed account of how affective and interpretive performances of belonging are structured within platformed communication. Drawing from Goffman's (1959) insights into the

presentation of self, this chapter conceptualizes online affect as both an expressive medium and a form of symbolic labor—one through which users reproduce hierarchy, intimacy, and distinction in networked publics.

These performances of belonging are also deeply contingent on the audience—both intended and perceived. Online, users continually calibrate their expressions of irony, enthusiasm, or detachment in relation to imagined publics (Marwick and boyd 2010). Because audiences are often overlapping and only partially knowable, affective displays must negotiate between visibility and risk—being legible enough to signal fluency to insiders while remaining obscure or exclusionary to outsiders. This dynamic produces what Baym (2015) describes as "context collapse," where a single communicative act must address differing audiences with divergent expectations. As a result, affective performances become stratified: they reflect not only who users are but who they imagine might be watching (Phillips and Milner 2017). These subtle shifts in tone, phrasing, or reference mark users' orientation to varying interpretive communities and reveal how digital belonging is never simply about participation, but about the ongoing work of managing recognition across competing social frames.

Yet, while scholars have explored self-presentation and audience management in networked publics, less attention has been paid to how these dynamics shape affective engagement specifically—how users attune not just their words but their expressed feelings to different interpretive communities. Understanding this is essential for grasping how digital belonging operates as a form of social differentiation: affect becomes a way of managing symbolic boundaries when audiences are diffuse and unstable. By examining these layered performances of feeling and recognition, this chapter addresses a critical gap in the literature on

digital interaction, showing how affective calibration toward different audiences functions to signal belonging.

Reduced memes—memes that intentionally obscure their meaning through abstraction or compression—exemplify the stakes of recognition and exclusion in digital culture. These memes rely on intertextual knowledge and cultural fluency to be understood, functioning as forms of subcultural capital. Among the most enduring examples is *loss.jpg*, a 2008 webcomic panel that has been relentlessly remixed, abstracted, and parodied over time. What began as a melodramatic comic about miscarriage evolved into one of the internet's most recognizable yet most obfuscated templates. Over the years, *loss.jpg* has become a metonym for insider humor itself: a format so over-referenced that understanding it signals deep meme literacy, while failing to do so marks one as an outsider. Thus, it provides a unique lens through which to examine affective boundary work.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine how affect is performed to signal social status as an insider or outsider in interactions surrounding the *loss.jpg* meme on Tumblr. Specifically, I analyze the language and tone of tags, replies, and comments to trace how users display recognition, confusion, irony, and exclusion across differing levels of visibility. By comparing these interactional modes, this study investigates how Tumblr's affordances structure affective and social positioning, contributing to broader understandings of how affective performance operates as a form of digital cultural capital.

This analysis addresses the following questions:

1. How do users perform affective belonging to exclusionary humor online?
2. How do Tumblr's distinct interactional affordances—tags, replies, and comments—shape the performance of affect and the signaling of belonging?

To address these questions, I first review relevant literature on humor, cultural capital, and affect in online environments, establishing the theoretical grounding for understanding memes as both cultural and affective currency. Next, I review the literature on platform affordances and constraints and how these relate to user engagement online. I then describe the methodological approach used to analyze interactions with *loss.jpg* on Tumblr, detailing how affect performance and understanding were coded across tags, replies, and comments. The findings section presents comparative findings of affective responses across these interaction types, followed by a discussion that situates these patterns within broader debates about digital status, affective performance, and platform vernaculars. The chapter concludes by outlining how affect functions as a key mechanism through which users perform cultural belonging and negotiate symbolic hierarchies in networked publics.

3.2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

To situate this study within existing scholarship, the following section reviews literature on three interconnected domains. First, I discuss the role of humor as both a bonding mechanism and a boundary-maintaining practice, with attention to the social implications of not "getting" a joke and the rise of meta-irony. Second, I examine research on memes as (sub)cultural capital, exploring how digital artifacts function as markers of in-group knowledge and membership status. Third, I consider scholarship on sentiment, affect, and emotional performance in online communities, particularly in contexts where irony and feigned emotion complicate textual analysis. Together, these literatures provide the theoretical and empirical foundation for understanding how user interactions with memes operate as both status signals and affective performances in Tumblr's networked publics.

Misunderstanding, Humor, and the Out-Group

Humor as Inclusion/Exclusion

Humor reception is never universal. As Billig (2005) notes, humor both unites and excludes, enforcing social norms by ridiculing those who fail to conform and creating social boundaries. Kuipers (2006) similarly emphasizes that humor is stratified along cultural hierarchies, with certain jokes functioning as markers of taste and insider knowledge across different social groups. Thus, audience reception to jokes is guided by principles of exclusion and specialized knowledge–factors that remain central to digital meme culture (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017).

Diverse reactions to humor are tied to knowledge, social norms, and interaction contexts. This humor is in turn reliant on multimodal text-making and digital literacies to construct group

identities and “niche” groups (Jones and Hafner 2012; Blommaert 2018). Not understanding a joke or misinterpreting one may then lead to anxiety or provoke confrontation between social actors, furthering in- and out-group differences.

Sense of humor is also highly influential for one’s social desirability. Consistently, people who are perceived as having an “above average” sense of humor are rated higher on individual social desirability characteristics, generally leading to a more positive evaluation of that person by others and is regularly listed as a desirable characteristic (Cann and Calhoun 2001; Lippa 2007; Polimeni and Reiss 2006). While this does not necessarily lead to higher ratings of interpersonal characteristics, we can see how users creating successful memes online may benefit socially from their displays of humor and insider knowledge. Similarly, understanding certain memes becomes a means of signaling one’s cultural fluency—where social status is not only earned through being funny, but through demonstrating that one ‘gets’ the joke when others do not through interactions with the meme.

Online humor is a key mechanism through which communities define themselves and mark boundaries of belonging. Digital memes, in particular, operate as shared cultural artifacts that condense complex forms of knowledge, humor, and affect into easily circulated visual or textual formats. Yet, as with humor more broadly, the enjoyment of memes is not universally accessible. Their humor often relies on intertextuality, insider references, and niche cultural fluency that privilege those who are already embedded in specific online communities (Shifman 2014; Milner 2016; Phillips and Milner 2017). This selective legibility allows memes to function simultaneously as expressions of collective identity and as tools of exclusion, where the inability to “get it” becomes a social marker of outsider status. As a result, the meme is not only a vessel

of creativity or play but also a site where hierarchies of taste, knowledge, and belonging are continually negotiated.

Out-Group Reactions and Interactions Online

Highly ironic to meta-ironic memes, sometimes considered "digital memetic nonsense," are particularly used to differentiate "superior" in-group members from "unskilled" outsiders (Katz and Shifman 2017; Ntouvlis and Geenen 2023). Considering reduced memes as meta-ironic highlights the purposeful segregation of outsiders from insiders in these posts through outward appearances as nonsensical. This can also be seen as a natural progression of "superdiversity" in a quick-paced online social world with high mobility and translocal social interaction (Deumert 2014; Ntouvlis and Geenen 2023). These memes utilize methods of hybridization, appropriation, purposeful quality reduction, lack of communicative function, and, of course, obfuscation. They are jarring to some users who then struggle to determine where the humor in them is, resulting in clear social divides.

While prior scholarship has examined how irony and meme aesthetics create boundaries of taste and belonging, we know less about how these dynamics unfold interactively—how users perform or negotiate their in-group or out-group positions through their visible responses to memes (Donovan et al. 2022). Understanding these performances is crucial for explaining how digital communities reproduce hierarchy and belonging not just through content, but through the patterned behaviors that arise around it.

Generally, members of the out-group may commonly not engage at all with posts or discussions from the in-group. For example, a person who does not understand a joke made by another in a group may feign laughter to blend in and not draw attention to themselves as someone who does not "get it." Similarly, a user who does not understand cultural references of

members of some in-group may remain silent as not to reveal themselves as not "included." A user who is not a member of a specific fandom online has little reason to seek outposts from users in that social group and interact with them.

However, in meme contexts online, not "getting it" can also produce a range of responses from the out-group that are not just limited to patterns of disengagement. These may range from performative confusion to ironic replies or even defensive retorts–forms of symbolic behavior resulting from a lack of subcultural capital. In some cases, "not-getting-it" becomes its own genre of reply—a form of meta-humor that simultaneously acknowledges exclusion and participates in the cultural performance. These interactions and performances from both the in- and out-group are understudied, especially as meta-ironic memes and reduced memes particular become more commonplace.

Memes as Cultural Units and Social Currency

(Sub)Cultural Capital and Digital Memes

We cannot discuss cultural knowledge, understanding, and interaction without examining Bourdieu's concept of *cultural capital* (1986). Cultural capital refers to non-economic resources that may provide social advantage and are *embodied* through one's dispositions and competencies, *objectified* through use or appreciation of cultural goods, or *institutionalized* by credentials or qualifications certifying competence. However, cultural capital is not intrinsic–it can only exist within relational contexts where it is "perceived and recognized as legitimate" by some other party (Bourdieu 1986: 255). In this way, public and interpersonal interactions influence an individual's cultural capital. This is thus a useful lens for understanding how online users leverage memes as signals of distinction.

In digital spaces, cultural capital often manifests in one's ability to recognize and fluently deploy cultural references, particularly those that are obscure. These performances of recognition allow users to demonstrate their insider knowledge and accrue symbolic power within a digital community (Bourdieu 1991). Thornton builds on this by introducing the concept of "subcultural capital" to discuss the way in which young people use current slang or execute new popular dance moves that is less related to "class-bound cultural capital" (1995: 27). This extension of Bourdieu's cultural capital concept to more niche or micro cultures shows the ways in which social advantage may be gained in broader, non-institutionalized ways. Extending this to digital culture allows us to see how new slang and meme knowledge can serve users both on- and offline. As Nissenbaum and Shifman (2017) have argued, memes function as cultural resources that differentiate in-groups from outsiders, a differentiation mapping closely onto Bourdieu's account of distinction and Thornton's subcultural capital. They are deeply embedded in shared knowledge and interpretive frames that users can leverage for social positioning.

Similarly, Milner (2013) argues that memes function as a kind of "media lingua franca," a shared expressive repertoire that allows users across otherwise disparate communities to communicate through recognizable formats, visual cues, and affective styles. Calling memes a lingua franca does not simply suggest that they are widely understood; rather, it highlights how they enable coordinated meaning-making among participants who may not share demographic backgrounds, political orientations, or offline experiences. As with any lingua franca, the power of memes lies in their ability to create mutual intelligibility—to offer a set of semiotic conventions through which users can signal recognition, alignment, or irony. In other words, internet memes may be used as a common "language" or form of communication across diverse social groups.

Milner (2013) also notes that this communicative system is structured through the interplay of "fixity" and "novelty." Fixity refers to the stable, recurring elements that render a meme recognizable: familiar templates, iconic image–text relationships, and patterned ways of expressing humor, stance, or affect. Novelty refers to the inventive variations users introduce, which allow memes to comment on evolving cultural contexts, index subcultural knowledge, or differentiate in-group members from outsiders. Together, these dynamics allow memes to operate simultaneously as widely legible forms and highly exclusionary signals. This can be seen through the way in which a widely recognized meme may be obscured via methods such as increased intertextuality (merging) or reduction to restrict recognition.

Reduced memes are those which may be used in overly simplified forms and rely on audience pattern-recognition skills. By virtue of their obscurity and specificity, they function as high-context cultural forms that require significant background knowledge to decode. As argued by Hall, the amount of context needed "determines everything about the nature of the communication" and, perhaps most importantly, serves as the "foundation on which all subsequent behavior rests (including symbolic behavior)" (1976: 92). This prerequisite and contextual knowledge operates as a form of gatekeeping, demarcating insider from outsider and reinforcing subcultural boundaries while guiding reactive behaviors. However, we do not know much about how these boundaries may be communicated or reflected in online interactions with these pieces of culture rather than just internally recognized by individual users themselves.

Status Signaling in Digital Publics

The ability to recognize and deploy the right meme at the right moment or to react/engage appropriately to a given meme functions as a form of symbolic power. Digital status can be achieved by demonstrating cultural fluency, which, in turn, reflects an individual's

embeddedness in particular online subcultures (Maly and Varis 2016). This fluency echoes Bourdieu's (1991) notion of linguistic competence as symbolic capital—where mastery over certain communicative codes signals legitimacy and authority.

However, social status in these contexts is primarily rooted in being in some in-group or not. Rather than aiming to have a "higher" status than others, users aim to earn status as a member of an in-group. This may be done by creating memes that are well-received by broad audiences to display one's ability to creatively apply meme structures to various contexts in effective ways. Meme creators may thus gain status through their memes—but what about audience members? These users must shape signal belonging instead through their own interactions with the post.

Affective Economy and Emotional Performance

The Affective Economy of Meme Interaction

The stakes of comprehension are not merely cognitive, but deeply emotional. Ahmed's concept of *affective economies* describes how emotions circulate between bodies and objects, attaching value and meaning to cultural artifacts while "aligning individuals with communities" in meaningful ways (2004: 119). From this perspective, rather than belonging solely to individuals, emotions acquire force as they move, shaping collective attachments and exclusions. This framing is particularly useful for thinking about online memes, which often operate less as stand-alone jokes than as emotional touchstones—objects that mark not only who gets the reference but also who belongs within a particular interpretive community. This is especially important for higher-obscurity memes like reduced memes.

Within digital cultures, affective performances are closely tied to identity and social participation. Scholars of online fan communities–or "fandoms"–highlight the way in which

attachment to communities is signaled through affective labor: investment that is affective, embodied, and relational rather than being purely informational (Abidin 2021; Jenkins et al. 2013). In other words, engagement here is driven by user passion and identity work rather than purely informational exchange.

The concept of affective economies can be extended directly to memes. Memes thrive on transmission and recontextualization, but what circulates is not only the image or phrase itself but also the affect attached to it. As Milner (2016) argues, memes are forms of "vernacular creativity" that carry social meaning in part because they are embedded in affective practices of sharing, remixing, and reacting. Meme literacy—knowing the norms of creation, audience vernaculars, differences between authenticity and sarcasm, and appropriate engagement—is itself a form of cultural capital enacted through affective display (Bourdieu 1986). In this way, the very act of commenting "I don't get it" or tagging a meme with exasperation is not neutral but laden with affective positioning, signaling either one's exclusion or, alternatively, one's ironic performance of exclusion. Being a member of the outgroup thus comes with its own performance in digital publics.

Within this affective economy around memes, anger emerges as a particularly salient register. Papacharissi's (2015) notion of affective publics shows how emotions like outrage, frustration, or indignation can serve as binding forces and collective communicative modes, enabling publics to cohere around shared feelings. For those in the know, anger may be semi-feigned—a performative marker of solidarity or exclusivity—whereas for outsiders, frustration may be a genuine response to exclusion. Thus, users blur the line between earnestness and play in their vernacular expressions online (Howard 2009).

In this way, in-group members who understand a reduced meme may feign anger as a playful signal of recognition or to demonstrate insider knowledge while contributing to the collective affective stance. For those outside the in-group, however, anger may take on a more literal form: genuine frustration at being excluded from the joke or irritation at the opacity of reference-heavy humor. The emotion functions as a marker of belonging. However, there is limited work formally analyzing these competing affective performances and how they are enacted in potentially differing ways for different audiences.

Additionally, online affect is not always straightforward. As Phillips and Milner (2017) note in their work on ambivalent internet culture, irony, trolling, and sincerity often bleed into one another, producing layered emotional performances. In the case of reduced memes, anger may oscillate between performance and authenticity, between signaling cultural fluency and expressing disconnection. The interplay between feigned and genuine anger thus becomes not just a matter of sentiment but a mechanism through which status is negotiated, communities are reinforced, and the stakes of meme participation are made visible. In this way, we need to consider sentiment in online contexts more generally and previous approaches to formally analyzing or sorting sentiment within online communities.

Sentiment in Online Culture

Foundational computational approaches to sentiment analysis have noted challenges to successful applications in contrast to "standard fact-based textual analysis" (Pang and Lee 2008: 17). In particular, discussion of classifying affect as simply "positive" or "negative" using keyword sorting is noted as being not as clear-cut as one might expect due to factors of context and sarcasm (Pang and Lee 2008: Pang et al. 2002). A negative stance may not include any ostensibly negative keywords while a positive stance may not include any positive ones. Further,

Wallace et al. (2014) show that short-form, informal texts such as tweets are especially difficult to parse when sarcasm is involved due to limited context, highlighting the significance of context in interpretations.

Studying the sentiment of meme interactions presents unique challenges, as much online humor is ironic, sarcastic, or layered with contextual cues. Irony (and meta-irony), sarcasm, and parody–all common features of online memes–often work by inverting literal meaning, making it difficult to distinguish between authentic and performative expressions. In the context of reduced memes, the distinction between in-group and out-group sentiment is further complicated by the possibility of "dual register" expressions—where affect is simultaneously genuine and performative. The opacity of the meme primes both in-group and out-group audiences to use sentiment as a tool for signaling positional status.

Chun and Walter's (2011) work on racialized humor and stance provides a useful parallel: what appears to be a single expression may simultaneously carry layers of sincerity and irony, functioning as both critique and complicity. The same is true in meme culture, where a phrase like "this is the worst" can register at once as playful recognition of in-group fluency and as authentic exasperation from those excluded. Phillips and Milner (2017) similarly emphasize that online culture thrives on ambivalence, where irony and sincerity bleed into one another, creating affective expressions that are intentionally unstable.

For in-group members, sentiment and affect often function as a kind of performance. Feigned anger, mock disgust, or exaggerated exasperation may be deployed not as authentic reactions but as signals of cultural fluency—a way of showing that one "gets" the joke and can participate in the ironic affective register of the community. By contrast, out-group responses tend to reflect more literal affective stances: frustration at being excluded, irritation at the

meme's lack of clarity, or sometimes indifference. Both sets of responses are affectively meaningful. The difference is that in-group displays lean toward performative exaggeration, while out-group displays lean toward earnest disconnection.

At the same time, sentiment in meme culture often functions dialogically. Posts, comments, tags, and reblogs create affective chains where one user's ironic performance invites playful escalation by others, amplifying the sense of shared belonging. This is consistent with Papacharissi's (2015) notion of affective publics, where emotion is not just expressed but circulates collectively, binding participants together in shared modes of feeling. On Tumblr in particular, where hashtags and reblog commentary allow for layered interaction, sentiment becomes a flexible resource–a way of showing recognition, performing distance, or negotiating insider/outsider boundaries.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that sentiment in meme interaction is less about whether an expression is "truly" positive or negative, and more about how affect is mobilized as a means of signaling one's own inclusion through performance. Reduced memes exemplify this dynamic because they prioritize obscurity and exclusion, potentially making the affective registers of both insiders and outsiders especially visible.

These dynamics highlight the central role of sentiment as a marker of status and belonging in digital publics. As Yang and Srinivasan (2016) argue, affective cues online function as signals of alignment that situate users relative to community hierarchies. Within reduced meme discourse, anger, frustration, and exasperation become resources for negotiating identity: insiders deploy them playfully to index cultural fluency, while outsiders express them more literally, reflecting disconnection. The very ambiguity of sentiment—oscillating between sincerity and performance—becomes a way of managing one's position in relation to others.

Taken together, this review highlights the intertwined roles of humor, cultural capital, and affect in shaping how users navigate belonging and exclusion in digital meme cultures. I build on these bodies of literature to show how (1) humor and meme literacy operate as forms of (sub)cultural capital that enable users to perform insider status and manage their social positioning, and (2) affective expression—especially through irony, ambivalence, and exaggerated emotion—functions as a key mechanism through which these boundaries are enacted and felt. By examining user interactions with reduced memes on Tumblr, this study extends existing research by focusing not only on meme creation but also on how audiences engage with, misunderstand, and emotionally perform around these cultural artifacts. In doing so, it bridges gaps between theories of humor, digital capital, and affective publics to better understand how cultural participation and exclusion are negotiated in highly mediated, irony-saturated spaces. The following section outlines the methodological approach used to analyze these interactions.

Platform Studies and User Engagement

In order to adequately explore social interactions online, we must consider the affordances and constraints of the arena of digital engagement—the social media platform. Each social media platform offers different tools and social norms for use that shape how users might engage with the similar content differently depending on the media environment.

Platforms and Varying Affordances

In platform studies, researchers argue that we cannot simply look at online content in isolation—we also need to understand the infrastructures and constraints that make certain actions possible. Gillespie (2010) describes the "platform" as a double-sided concept: the

technical structure that organizes participation as well as the way companies position themselves as neutral hosts while shaping user behavior. Building on this, scholars have shown how digital forms such as meme formats may emerge through the interaction of technical affordances and social conventions, creating recognizable genres of participation (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013; Gibbs et al. 2015). Sterne (2012) pushes this further with the idea of format, emphasizing the technical standards and protocols that underlie cultural production and circulation online.

"Affordances" is a term developed by Gibson (1979) to describe the way in which an organism is embedded in its environment and that an organism's perspective is reliant on the structure of that environment. In the same way, we may understand devices and social media platforms as environments which provide users with some abilities such as forming social networks, communicating remotely, sharing content, etc. This more ecological approach to user perception of devices and platforms considers the way in which individual users use the affordances of digital environments and the capacity for different forms of interactions and content-creation that these digital environments present to them (Gibson 1979). If we use this conceptualization, we can see the way in which digital perceptions and behavior are the result of these affordances from the environment.

Social media platforms vary greatly in their structures and types of interactions. These digital environments that they provide to users thus provide different affordances. In fact, there is a "'world-making' power" of such platforms in which users have the ability to construct communities and their own experiences, even in niche capacities (Jackson et al. 2018: 1869).

Because each platform affords distinct forms of participation, these structural differences also shape how users perform and perceive status within their respective communities. Different affordances invite different kinds of visibility, labor, and social risk, which in turn influence how

cultural knowledge and belonging are signaled. For instance, features that enable public, low-effort interaction (such as likes or shares) may privilege quick displays of alignment, while more dialogic or creative affordances (such as comments, tagging systems, or remix tools) may reward interpretive fluency and subcultural expertise. As a result, users learn to calibrate their performances of humor, irony, and affect in relation to what each environment makes legible or valued. Understanding these differences is therefore essential for explaining how symbolic hierarchies and in-group boundaries are enacted through everyday digital practice rather than through content alone.

Bringing the Literature Together

Across existing research, scholars have shown that memes are not only cultural texts but also tools for performing identity and belonging. Yet, we know relatively little about how users signal their in-group membership through interactions rather than creation or sharing alone. Most studies emphasize the spread or virality of memes, treating engagement as a sign of popularity rather than a performance of cultural fluency. When users make or circulate memes, these acts demonstrate their creative competence within a community—but the subtle ways users respond to memes can be equally revealing of how belonging is negotiated in real time.

These performances of belonging are shaped by the communicative affordances of digital platforms. Each interactional feature—commenting, replying, tagging, or reblogging—structures visibility, audience, and social risk differently, influencing how and to whom belonging is performed. For instance, a user's reply visible to a wider audience may not just show recognition of the meme's irony but publicly demonstrate that they "get it," positioning themselves as a legitimate insider within a broader interpretive field.

Taken together, these perspectives point to a key gap in existing research: we understand that memes communicate shared norms and insider humor, but we lack a detailed understanding of how users enact those shared meanings through interactive behaviors within specific digital environments. By integrating theories of platform affordances, performativity, and cultural capital, this project examines how users display and negotiate belonging online—how they perform their insider knowledge, read social cues, and navigate visibility in ways that reproduce the symbolic boundaries of the in-group.

3.3 DATA AND METHODS

To examine how affect is performed to signal social status as an insider or outsider, I examine the hashtags ("tags"), replies, and comments related to key examples of the *loss.jpg* meme—a highly-reduced meme derived from a 2008 *Ctrl+Alt+Del* webcomic. Over time, *loss.jpg* has come to function less as a joke about its original content and more as a test of cultural fluency: its humor depends on recognition and obscurity. Because of this, it provides a strong case for studying how users perform understanding, irony, and belonging. This meme is exclusively used in a reduced, recognition-based form that restricts interpretive capacities of the outgroup, making those divides more apparent. Additionally, *loss.jpg* is a meme with a widely agreed-upon name which makes tracking it significantly easier and it arose during the height of Tumblr activity, making it particularly important for this platform itself.

Selecting a Site: Tumblr

Tumblr is a microblogging and social networking platform that emerged in 2007, quickly becoming a central hub for participatory culture, fandom activity, and experimental digital

aesthetics. Its popularity peaked in the 2010s with 624 million users by 2018[37], 85% of users posting regularly, and consistent reports of being the platform users spent the most time on (Tiidenberg et al. 2021; Dannen 2009; Perez 2013). During this period, Tumblr became particularly known for its distinctive community cultures—fandoms, queer and activist networks, and niche subcultural groups—that leveraged the platform's unique affordances of reblog chains, customizable blogs, and affective tagging practices.

Tumblr offers a particularly rich site for the study of meme interactions because of its unique affordances and cultural norms. Unlike more standardized platforms, Tumblr prioritizes customization and self-expression: every user's blog can be extensively personalized, making individuality and creativity central to the experience (Fiegerman 2016). This design orientation has contributed to what Proferes et al. (2021: 5) describe as a "vibrant network of powerful cultural commentary," one that fosters creativity and participatory practices rooted in cultural production rather than mass visibility. Scholars have further emphasized that Tumblr's "features, functions, governance, and user cultures…differ significantly from [other] popular platforms" (Proferes et al. 2021:13), particularly in how the platform deprioritizes the social graph in favor of multimodality and personalization.

Tumblr provides a productive site for examining affective and interpretive engagement because its affordances encourage forms of participation that are often more layered and self-reflexive than those on algorithmically ranked platforms like Twitter or TikTok. Rather than centering virality or explicit interaction metrics, Tumblr's circulation is structured through reblogs and tags that travel across user-curated networks. Users often create content with a

[37] Just prior to the "not safe for work" (NSFW), or adult content, ban on the platform.

specific audience in mind—whether fandom communities, identity-based networks, or niche subcultures—rather than for a generalized public. This design foregrounds how users express stance, negotiate belonging, and perform understanding within niche subcultural publics—key conditions for studying how online interpretive work becomes visible or withheld.

The platform's interaction features offer a natural basis for comparison across degrees of visibility and audience orientation. A central aspect of Tumblr's meme culture is its distinctive use of tagging in which all symbols are permitted, and users commonly use them as spaces for "behind the scenes" notes (Zappavigna 2018) rather than for sorting or discovery purposes. Tags are the least visible and most private form of commentary; they are typically read only by those who inspect them directly or by those who "follow" the user who posted them, and they often serve as a space for candid reflection or subtle humor. Brett and Maslen (2021) describe this practice as a kind of *"stage whispering"*—users expressing themselves in a way that is technically public but functionally directed toward a limited, knowing audience. Tags therefore function as an intimate mode of affective communication, where users articulate emotional reactions or insider knowledge without overtly performing for others.

Replies and reblog comments, by contrast, represent increasingly visible forms of engagement. Replies address the original poster directly and invite interpersonal exchange, while comments added through reblogs circulate to broader follower networks and thus reach larger publics. As visibility increases, these responses often take on more performative or socially strategic dimensions—addressed not just to the post's creator but to an imagined audience of peers.

Comparing tags, replies, and comments thus enables an analysis of how users navigate varying levels of visibility and audience in expressing affect, knowledge, and stance in ways

related to their own membership as part of the in-group or not. Each form reflects a different balance of authenticity and performance: tags as semi-private, reflexive, and intimate; replies as dialogic and interactive; and comments as the most public and performative (Booth 2016; Hillman et al. 2014; Chao 2022; De Seta 2018). Examining these affordances comparatively highlights how Tumblr's architecture structures not only what users say but also for whom—and with what degree of emotional or social risk—they choose to say it. Tumblr thus provides an ideal setting for examining how affective practices are mobilized as boundary markers and how users navigate insider/outsider positions.

In sum, Tumblr's design—characterized by customizable blogs, reblog chains, pseudonymity, and a distinctive tagging culture—structures not only how memes circulate but also how affect is displayed and negotiated. The site's emphasis on affective expression, selective intimacy, and cultural production over algorithmic visibility makes it a particularly fertile ground for studying how memes function as markers of status, belonging, and emotional performance.

Selecting Posts

To generate the sample, I selected three widely circulated examples of *loss.jpg* meme posts on Tumblr during the platform's peak years of activity. Posts were identified through a combination of hashtag searches (e.g., "#loss," "#loss.jpg") and discussions of *loss.jpg* on other sites such as KnowYourMeme.com and Reddit, which allowed me to locate instances with the highest levels of engagement. I prioritized posts with substantial "note" counts (sum of all replies, reblogs, and likes on the post) of at least 100,000, as this ensured that the examples

represented not only moments of high visibility but also generated enough interaction—through replies and reblogs with commentary or hashtags—to make affective dynamics legible.

Limiting the sample to three posts provided a balance between breadth and depth: the examples are indicative of the meme's popularity and variety of forms on tumblr, while remaining manageable enough for close qualitative analysis of the affective practices surrounding them. This purposive sampling strategy reflects an emphasis on "information-rich cases" (Patton 2002), allowing me to track how meme recognition, confusion, and affective performance played out in spaces of heightened community attention.

Data

The full dataset consists of 832 tags, 960 replies, and 762 comments pulled from "notes" on the three focal cases *loss.jpg* on Tumblr for a total sample of 2554 individual *text responses*. Due to limitations in Tumblr's API and necessary contextual factors, all tags, replies, and comments with usernames were moved to a Google Sheets document by undergraduate research assistants. All research assistants were onboarded by myself via Zoom. In the process of moving the text over, research assistants also collected preliminary descriptors of the data, including (1) if the user clearly understood or did not understand the post[38], (2) if "loss" wording is used in the text, (3) if the user clearly asks to have the post explained to them, and (4) if the text is a user explaining the post. I developed a training guide for research assistants and onboarded assistants virtually. This guide contained information about the *loss.jpg* meme itself, how to use Tumblr, how different communicative modes differ (tags, replies, and comments), and examples. I reviewed progress closely throughout the collection process.

[38] If the user explicitly expressed confusion or incorrect interpretation, they were listed as not understanding the meme. If the user discussed unrelated topics, they were listed as "unknown" and removed from the analytic sample later on. All others responding to the post without confusion or misinformation were listed as understanding.

Analytic Strategy

Analysis occurred in three stages. First, I reviewed a batch of tags, replies, and comments (referred to here as *text responses*) from the sample in-context on Tumblr to gain some baseline information of how users appear to be engaging with the post and to determine if full context would be necessary for later coding.

Second, based on this baseline read of engagement on-platform, I deductively coded for patterns of interaction observed. These included the descriptors listed in Appendix D. The coding approach was partially inductive, developed by identifying affective and playful devices in online interactions that appeared salient across the data—such as profanity, violent language, positive or negative sentiment, exaggerated capitalization, emoji use, and other markers common in the literature on digital humor and ironic communication (Phillips and Milner 2017; Shifman 2014; Milner 2016). These were important to consider when trying to determine emotion because they convey the tone of the text in a way that highlights ironic meaning to the audience and create the more playful meaning found around more negative interactions. I then applied this coding scheme to a batch of 1,000 text responses to examine emergent patterns of affect and interaction.

Rather than treating emotion as straightforwardly positive or negative, this approach assumes that online affect—especially within participatory cultures like Tumblr—often carries doubled or conflicting meanings. A post that reads as angry or disgusted ("I hate this so much") may, within the shared interpretive frame of internet vernacular, actually perform insider enjoyment or recognition. By attending to text styling, typographic emphasis, and the rhetorical play that signals irony (e.g., all caps, deliberate misspellings, emoji exaggeration), the coding process interprets affect as performed stance-taking rather than literal sentiment. In this sense,

the categories identified—such as ironic enjoyment, detached amusement, or hostile rejection—map not only emotional valence but also position within an interpretive community, where affective expression functions as a marker of cultural fluency and symbolic in-group status.

While this coding was conducted solely by myself, which limits inter-coder reliability and introduces interpretive subjectivity, the coding also considered whether users' responses indicated in-group knowledge or understanding of the meme, which was used to generate assumptions about the user's relationship to the post (negativity that indicated clear understanding and exaggeration was assumed to be playful in this context). Nevertheless, these findings should be interpreted with caution given the layered irony and context-dependent meanings of these interactions. This coding approach was grounded in Phillips and Milner's (2017) framework of ambivalence in online communication, which describes how digital participants express affect through layered performances of irony, sincerity, and antagonism.

Taken together, this framework guided the decision to code both for emotional valence and for how that emotion was performed, allowing affect to serve as a lens into users' expertise, boundary work, and participation within meme culture.

Next, I used the outcomes from the descriptive coding to identify broader patterns of interaction across the posts, which were then distilled into eight response categories summarized in Table 3.1. This distillation was based on combinations of key descriptors, such as recognition of the meme, affective valence, intensity of expression, use of profanity or violence, and performative strategies like mirroring the meme or correcting others. Most categories are mutually exclusive, with affective differences only separated for users who clearly demonstrated understanding of the meme, while confusion and boundary-setting categories encompass a range of emotional expressions but are distinguished by whether the response signals a lack of

comprehension or an assertion of expertise. Key descriptive factors used to differentiate these categories are included in Appendix E. Again, because these categories rely on interpretation of irony-laden, multi-layered content, the coding process is inherently subjective.

Table 3.1. Summary of Interaction Patterns Identified

Response Type	**Description**
Ironic Enjoyment/ Knowing Disgust	Expressing mock horror/hatred, exaggerated negativity, or "thanks I hate it" tone that actually signals recognition.
Playful Hostility	Overtly negative, aggressive, or angry reactions directed at the post or others.
Boundary-Setting	Users explaining the meme, correcting others, or asserting expertise.
Genuine Confusion	Admitting not getting it or being annoyed by exclusion.
Detached Amusement	Mild amusement or low-intensity positive/neutral tone showing recognition but emotional distance.
Expressive Enjoyment	Clearly positive affect and expressive enthusiasm.
Memetic Response	Users mirror the meme itself—e.g., "is this loss," "at a loss for words," or variations that reproduce meme syntax as knowing shorthand.
Neutral/Informational	No clear emotional tone; descriptive or factual.

As a result of some off-topic discussions as well as ambiguous interactions where some descriptors could not be determined, 49 tags (5.56% of all tags), 149 replies (13.45% of all replies), and 111 comments (12.71% of all comments) were not used in the analytic sample. Using these as a guide, I then sorted the 832 tags, 960 replies, and 762 comments from the analytic sample into these groups. The distribution of these 2554 text responses are summarized in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2. Distribution of Response Category in the Sample

	Ironic Enjoyment/ Knowing Disgust	Playful Hostility	Boundary-Setting	Genuine Confusion	Detached Amusement	Expressive Enjoyment	Memetic Response	Neutral/ Informational	Total
Hashtag	355 (42.67%)	11 (1.32%)	89 (10.70%)	13 (1.56%)	88 (10.58%)	41 (4.93%)	38 (4.57%)	197 (23.68%)	**832**
Reply	336 (35.00%)	15 (1.56%)	199 (20.73%)	118 (12.29%)	34 (3.54%)	19 (1.98%)	156 (16.25%)	83 (8.65%)	**960**
Comment	294 (38.58%)	8 (1.05%)	140 (18.37%)	119 (15.62%)	24 (3.15%)	28 (3.67%)	113 (14.83%)	36 (4.72%)	**762**
Total	985 (38.57%)	34 (1.33%)	428 (16.76%)	250 (9.79%)	146 (5.72%)	88 (3.45%)	307 (12.02%)	316 (12.37%)	**2554**

Using these eight response categories, I first examined the differences in affective and performative responses to understand the various ways users signal belonging within the meme community. By analyzing the frequency and distribution of responses across categories such as ironic enjoyment, boundary-setting, and genuine confusion, I was able to identify patterns of in-group and out-group signaling. This allowed for a nuanced view of how users perform cultural fluency, demonstrate insider knowledge, or negotiate their status within the community.

Finally, I quantitatively compared these response distributions across different text response types—tags, replies, and comments—using a chi-square test and Cramer's V to measure the strength of association. This approach is appropriate because it allows for an assessment of whether certain interaction types are disproportionately associated with specific modes of engagement. These text response types differ in visibility and audience scope, with tags typically being seen by the followers of the user posting the tags, replies tying into collapsed notes of the post, and comments "sticking" to the post through reblogs. Standardized residuals were then examined to pinpoint which interaction types were over- or under-represented in each text response category, providing insight into how the platform's structural affordances shape the performance of in-group membership and social signaling.

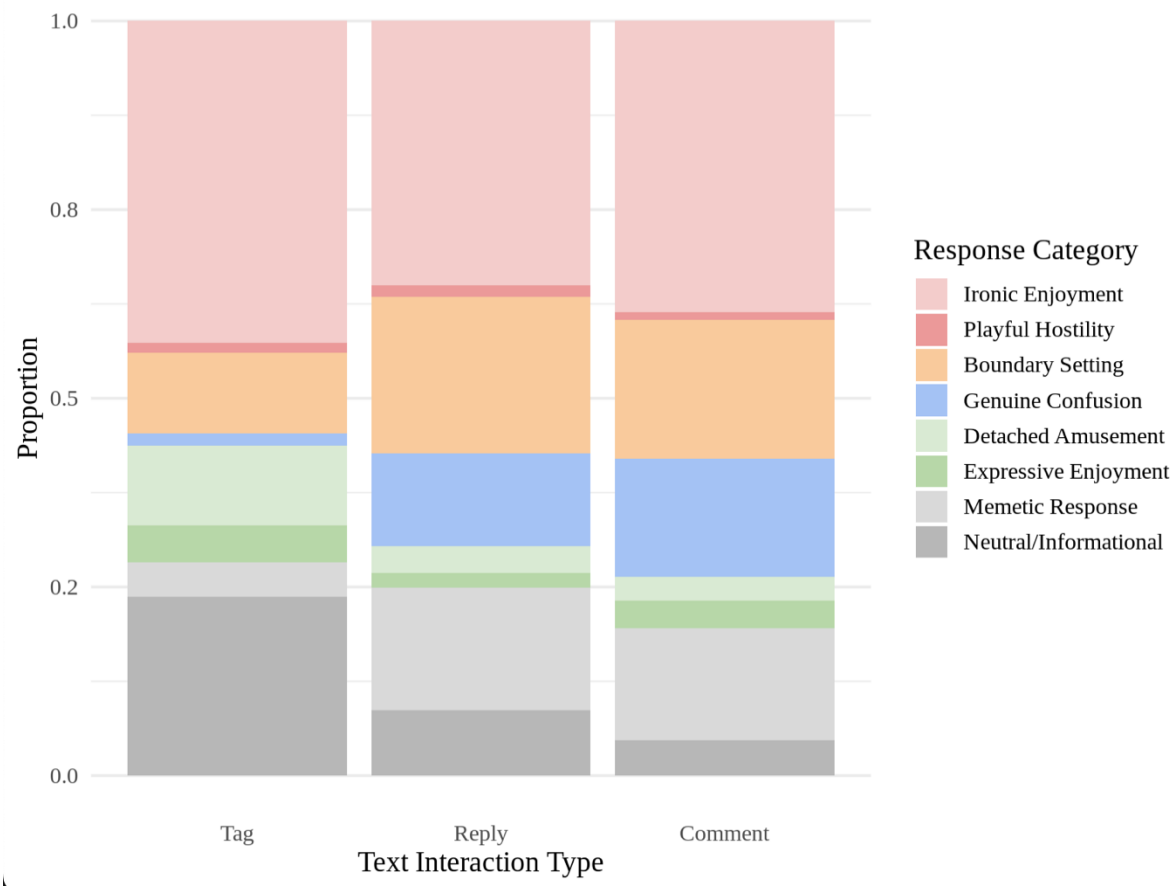
3.4 FINDINGS

Preview of the Findings

My analysis reveals that user engagement with obscured memes on Tumblr is not primarily about humor or emotion in a straightforward sense, but about *knowing participation*: demonstrating cultural competence, interpretive fluency, and shared belonging through affective display. Across 2554 hashtags, replies, and reblog comments, affect appears as a crucial medium for performing in-group status. Users signal that they "get it" through tones of playful anger, deliberate irony, or self-conscious despair; others mark their outsider status by expressing confusion or seeking explanation. The different affective categories identified here illuminate not just how people use affect to position themselves in relation to digital subcultures of knowledge.

These affective modes range from exaggerated disgust to sincere delight, but in each case, affect serves as an index of cultural expertise. To know the meme is to be 'cursed' with recognition; to not know it is to admit a kind of interpretive deficiency. Tumblr's public comment architecture—where users can add tags, replies, and reblog commentary visible to others—renders these performances of *knowing* intensely social. What emerges is a layered affective economy where status is earned not through positivity or negativity per se, but through recognizable forms of affect that signal belonging. The distribution of each affective response category across interaction types is provided in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1. Proportion of Response Category by Text Interaction Type



Semantically Negative

Ironic Enjoyment / Knowing Disgust

The most frequent affective type, *ironic enjoyment* (n=985; 38.57% of all text responses), exemplifies this dynamic most clearly. These are the posts where users claim to hate the meme—"I finally fucking understand and I am angry," "I hate all of you," "This post is a crime against humanity"—yet their outrage is a badge of fluency. The intensity of these responses, often saturated with profanity, exaggerated emotion, and even hyperbolic violence ("I slapped my leg and threw my phone"), reveals that "hatred" functions here not as genuine dislike but as ritualized affective display of *knowing*.

This affective mode depends on a paradox: users perform anger or disgust to signal that they understand the joke, and that their mock 'suffering' marks them as insiders. The feeling is thus metapragmatic—it communicates knowledge about the meme more than about the user's genuine emotional state. To say "I wish I didn't understand" or tag "#posting to continue the cycle of violence" is to articulate a shared knowledge.

This affective register is often heightened through expressive juxtapositions and visual exaggerations that layer irony onto emotional intensity, including contradictory phrasing that fuses positive and negative sentiments ("I hate and love this so much"; "HaHaHaaHHHaHAHAhA… i hAte you :)"), playful use of emoji and capitalization to exaggerate tone or perform exaggerated suffering ("FUCK YOU 😂😂😂"), and formatting styles, especially in comments, where users deploy large, bold, or colored fonts to dramatize affect ("THIS MOTHERFUCKER" [all caps, large red font]; "YOU CLEVER BASTARD" [all caps, large red font]). These stylistic strategies visually and tonally amplify the affective contradiction at the heart of ironic enjoyment. Through such performative cues, users convert disgust into recognition, crafting a communal affective style where shared mock suffering is both joke and initiation rite.

Users engage in a collective act of self-flagellation—mocking both the meme and themselves for continuing to reproduce it. In this sense, ironic enjoyment is a mechanism of in-group maintenance: it signals shared knowledge, emotional endurance, and a certain ironic sensibility that distinguishes "those who know" from naïve outsiders. The repeated reference to "Loss" as a curse or infection ("#loss haunts me"; "#the curse endlessly evolves") further strengthens this interpretation: the meme is not simply known, but endured, and that endurance signifies commitment to its cultural lineage.

Playful Hostility

While *ironic enjoyment* involves playful anger and exaggerated negativity that signals insider knowingness, *playful hostility* (n=34; 1.33% of all text responses) represents an escalation of that same affective register into overtly violent or self-destructive language. These responses often take the form of over-the-top threats—such as "I will skin you alive OP," "I'M GONNA RIP MY SKIN OFF," or "I'm gonna kermit sudoku"—that are not meant literally but function as hyperbolic affective displays. Similarly, users deploy violent imagery in tags like "#im gonna blow up the earth," invoking catastrophic destruction to perform emotional excess.

Despite their intensity, these expressions are not necessarily hostile in intent. Rather, they exemplify what Milner (2016) calls *ironic transgression*: exaggerated or shocking statements that rely on shared understanding of their playfulness. Within the interpretive frame of Tumblr meme culture, such declarations are legible as stylized performances of frustration—a way of amplifying emotion for comedic effect while maintaining in-group alignment. Users invoke the aesthetics of rage and destruction to demonstrate both investment in and fatigue with the meme, performing an insider's exasperation that marks them as participants who "get it" too well.

In this way, playful hostility sits at the boundary between knowing disgust and genuine discomfort. It dramatizes their cultural fluency: the performed exhaustion of constant recognition. The humor depends on that contradiction—repulsion as a sign of mastery. Expressing "I want to die" or "I'm going to destroy the earth" becomes a performative shorthand for the ambivalent pleasure of being too in the know. Thus, even in its apparent hostility, this mode of response continues to reproduce insider status through the shared grammar of exaggerated affect.

Boundary-Setting

Boundary-setting (n=428; 16.76% of all text responses) responses occupy the middle ground between insider and outsider, where interpretive authority is asserted, negotiated, and sometimes withheld. While ironic enjoyment and hostile rejection convey recognition through emotion, boundary-setting performs it through discourse—by defining who understands, who does not, and what that distinction signifies. These comments often provide partial explanations ("the joke is that the comic also follows the loss pattern") or instructive gatekeeping warnings ("don't look it up," "nobody tell them"). At times, users narrate their own process of recognition—"I could have kept scrolling. It would have cost me nothing"—positioning themselves as knowing but ambivalent participants.

This affective mode is inherently pedagogical. Some users take on the role of educators, guiding confused others toward comprehension. These users act as cultural translators, but in doing so, also display authority. Most users here simply direct others to what to "look up" online while only a few provide full explanations themselves. Others lean into gatekeeping humor, reinforcing the exclusivity of the meme's meaning. Here, exclusion reinforces group boundaries while maintaining the mystique of insider knowledge. The boundary-setter must demonstrate not only that they know, but that they know how much knowledge is appropriate to share. Their expertise is performative: too much explanation risks diluting the insider status that knowing confers.

Boundary-setting thus performs a dual function in the meme's cultural life. It reproduces interpretive hierarchies by differentiating those who can decode from those who cannot, while simultaneously reinforcing the meme's vitality as a cultural object that must be continually recontextualized. In the process, users demonstrate a sophisticated reflexivity about their own

participation. Lines like “I envy those who don’t understand this” and “every time I don’t get the joke I have to check if it’s Loss” articulate a weary self-awareness of the meme’s persistence. Statements like “I envy those who look at that picture and see only a math lesson” or “I'm screaming. I identified loss in 0.3 seconds” dramatize insider fluency while posturing oneself as knowledgeable. Expertise, in this context, is not static knowledge but the ability to navigate between irony, explanation, and restraint.

If boundary-setting reflects the confident assertion of knowledge, genuine confusion captures the other side of that exchange. These posts expose what happens when users encounter an insider meme without the necessary cultural frame—making visible the exclusions that give boundary-setting its power.

Genuine Confusion

At the other end of the interpretive spectrum lies *genuine confusion* (n=250; 9.79% of all text responses). These responses—“I don’t get it,” “What does this mean,” “Can someone tell me what the heck Loss is?”—belong to users who publicly acknowledge their outsider status. Such admissions are not trivial; they make visible the asymmetry of cultural capital that structures meme participation. The confused user recognizes that there is a hidden layer of meaning and performs the desire to access it.

These posts range from frustrated (“whats the fucking joke,” “I’ve done research and I still don’t get it”) to self-deprecating (“I’m stupid what does this mean,” “I feel like I'm the only person who doesn't get this”), showing how ignorance becomes an affective position of its own. Users must balance the vulnerability of not knowing with the desire to remain part of the community—often softening their confusion and negative affect with humor or emojis (“I DONT

GET IT ┻━━┻ ﾍ(`Д´)ﾉﾍ ┻━━┻"). In doing so, they demonstrate a meta-awareness of how Tumblr's humor works, even as they fail to grasp this specific meme.

Sociologically, these expressions of confusion are critical for understanding how cultural boundaries are sustained. Publicly confessing confusion reaffirms that there is something to understand—that meme literacy matters. In this way, outsiders inadvertently reproduce the hierarchy they stand outside of. Their questions invite explanation or mockery from insiders, creating opportunities for boundary-setting interactions. Thus, even in their lack of comprehension, these users participate in the maintenance of interpretive exclusivity: they perform the role of the "uninitiated," allowing others to perform expertise in response.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that performed "not-getting-the-joke" does not always signal a desire for inclusion. Within many online subcultures, deliberately adopting the stance of someone who "doesn't get it" can itself be a rhetorical strategy—a way of signaling ironic distance, rejecting the premise of the meme, or positioning oneself as above the exchange. This kind of meta-performance allows users to participate in the interaction while simultaneously refusing the terms of in-group status, performing a cultivated indifference or even mild disdain. Yet distinguishing between genuine interpretive struggle and these more strategic forms of ironic detachment is methodologically difficult when working with text alone.

Semantically Positive

While ironic enjoyment and boundary-setting dominate the discourse, two additional affective registers—*detached amusement* and *expressive enjoyment*—offer insights into how status is expressed through positivity.

Crucially, both detached amusement and genuine enjoyment are forms of affective calibration: users demonstrate that they know the proper way to feel about the meme. Where

ironic enjoyment signals belonging through mock pain, these positive reactions show that sincerity can also be strategically performed. The affective distinction marks subtle differences in cultural capital within the same in-group. Detached amusement connotes veteran expertise, while genuine enjoyment indexes a more participatory, community-oriented orientation to meme culture.

Detached Amusement

The most common form of positive response expresses *detached amusement* (n=146; 5.72% of all text responses)—low-intensity responses that acknowledge the meme's cleverness without emotional excess. Users might comment "........perfect" or tag a post as "#a classic" or "#hall of fame." The tone is often understated, even deadpan, using brevity, ellipses, or minimalist punctuation to project ironic coolness. These users perform fluency without affective risk: they recognize the meme instantly but resist the intensity of performative disgust.

This form of engagement functions as expertise through restraint. As theorized by Highfield (2016) and Milner (2018), ironic composure signals cultural competence—the ability to demonstrate understanding without overidentification. Detached amusement thus marks a form of insider confidence. The meme's humor is acknowledged, but emotional distance becomes the mode of participation. To laugh too hard would risk appearing naïve; to ignore it entirely would miss an opportunity to perform knowledge. This minimalism can itself be a form of status—expertise so ingrained it requires no elaboration.

Expressive Enjoyment

In contrast, a smaller subset of users respond with *expressive enjoyment* (n=88; 3.45% of all text responses), characterized by overt positivity, enthusiasm, or delight. These posts read as emotionally sincere but remain tied to the shared culture of recognition. Examples include

comments like “LOSS MY BELOVED,” tags such as “#BRAVO,” “#HAHAHAHAHAHA#THIS IS SO GOOD,” or reactions like “HSGSYAHGDHSH THIS IS A GOLDEN JOKE.” While not ironic in tone, these expressions often still use exaggerated capitalization, emojis, or repetition—stylistic features that both heighten and stylize emotion.

Expressive enjoyment performs a different kind of in-group belonging: one grounded not in ironic detachment but in shared delight at the meme’s continued adaptability. Rather than displaying composure, these users revel in recognition, celebrating the meme as a collective in-joke. The enthusiasm itself becomes a form of cultural work, sustaining the meme’s circulation and reaffirming its place within the community’s symbolic repertoire.

Semantically Neutral

Memetic Response

The memetic response (n=222; 8.69% of all text responses) category captures instances where users engage purely through the meme’s formal language—phrases like “is this loss,” “I’m at a loss,” or modified templates (“#gain.jpg,” “l ll ll l_,” “:.|:;”). These responses enact understanding through replication rather than commentary. They represent a kind of affective minimalism: emotion is replaced by intertextual play. The repetition of the meme’s structure serves as a marker of cultural fluency; knowing how to reproduce it correctly becomes the performance of status itself.

This mode reveals a deep internalization of memetic logic where the mere act of re-performing the meme suffices to display belonging. Memetic response thus exemplifies what Shifman calls “mimetic literacy”: the ability to participate in meaning-making by referencing shared templates (2014). In these cases, affect is displaced by form: mastery is encoded in one’s capacity to manipulate the meme’s syntax.

Neutral/Informational

Finally, neutral or informational responses (n=224; 8.77% of all text responses) typically appear in tags used for organization ("#loss," "#meme," "#funny") or reflexive commentary ("modern hieroglyphs"). While they lack emotional intensity, they play an infrastructural role in sustaining the meme's visibility. Users who tag neutrally are not performing affect but contributing to the meme's circulation. This function, though seemingly banal, is crucial to the meme's longevity: it reflects the maintenance work that underpins digital cultural reproduction. Even neutrality, then, can be read as a form of participation—a quiet affirmation that the meme remains culturally legible.

Affect as Cultural Capital

Across these affective modes, a clear pattern emerges: emotion on Tumblr is never just emotion—it is a performance of *knowing*. The particular forms of anger, confusion, or delight expressed around memes signal different positions within a shared interpretive hierarchy. Ironic enjoyment dramatizes the cost of knowledge; confusion renders ignorance visible; boundary-setting negotiates who gets to know; and detached or expressive enjoyment demonstrates the mirth that comes with these posts. Memetic responses and neutral commentary reveal the infrastructural work of sustaining the meme's cultural life.

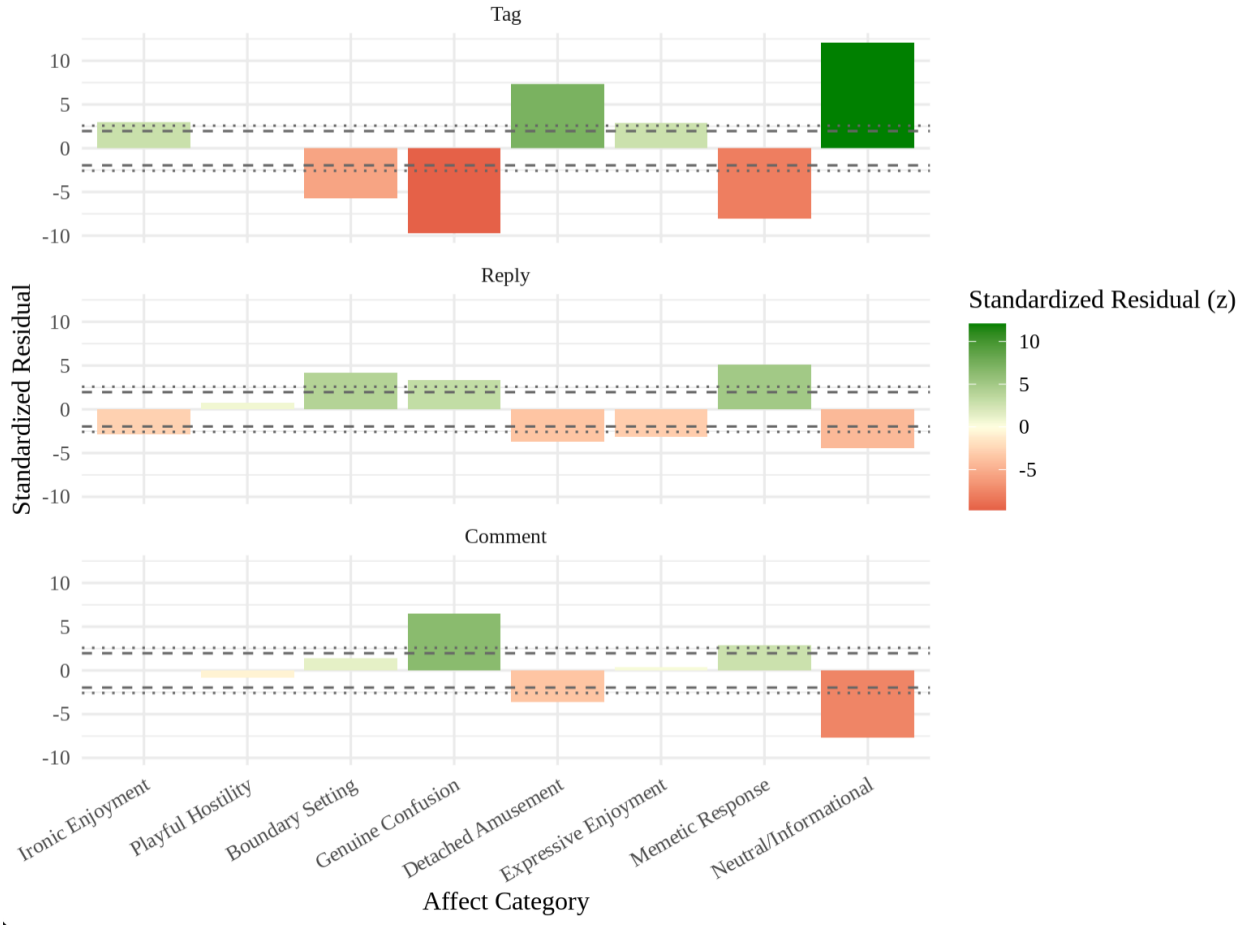
What unites these otherwise divergent responses is their orientation toward status-through-understanding. Users do not simply feel about memes; they feel through memes in ways that mark their relationship to insider culture. Affect thus operates as a form of symbolic capital—an embodied display of expertise legible to those who share the same interpretive frame. In this way, memes function not just as cultural artifacts but as social instruments through which belonging, literacy, and authority are continually performed and contested.

Differences Between Tags, Replies, and Comments

Tags, replies, and comments operate as distinct layers of visibility and interaction, shaping how users perform affect and knowledge. On Tumblr, these three channels differ not only in where they appear but also in who they address: tags are directed primarily to the self (organizational) or one's immediate followers; replies are visible to the post creator and others who read through the thread; comments are public additions that attach directly to the reblogged post. These structural affordances influence not just what users say but how they say it and who they say it to.

A chi-square test confirms that these differences are statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 379.20$, $p < .001$) with a moderate relationship strength (Cramer's $V = 0.27$). In other words, the type of text engagement—whether a tag, reply, or comment—meaningfully shapes how users express emotion, knowledge, and social position. Figure 3.2 is a graph of the standardized residuals showing significant departures from expected values across the eight affect categories discussed previously. In this context, standardized residuals show how much the observed count of a particular response category in a given text interaction type differs from what would be expected if there were no association between response type and interaction type. Intuitively, large positive residuals indicate that a response appears more often than expected in that text interaction type, while large negative residuals indicate underrepresentation, helping to highlight where users are most actively using different approaches to signal belonging.

Figure 3.2. Standardized Residuals by Affect Category and Text Interaction Type



The dashed line represents the p = 0.05 significance threshold (z = ± 1.96) and the dotted line represents the p = 0.01 significance threshold (z = ± 2.58).

Tags: Authenticity, Play, and Positive Affect

Tags are most strongly associated with positive affect responses and neutral/informational responses. The standardized residuals indicate significant overrepresentation of ironic enjoyment, detached amusement, and expressive enjoyment (z = 2.96, 7.35, 2.85). Users often use tags as an introspective space to process memes playfully or signal knowing recognition without directly engaging others. The semi-private, backchannel quality of tags encourages expressive but low-stakes performances and is often seen as the most "authentic" space. Thus, the significantly higher use of positive affect in this space highlights the

fun/mirth that users are actually having with these memes online. Neutral/informational responses are also much more likely here ($z = 12.06$) since tags are still often used as an organizational space for users to sort posts on their own blogs.

There are strong negative associations with boundary-setting, genuine confusion, and memetic response interactions for tags ($z = -5.70, -9.72, -8.05$). Aside from the organizational aspect of tags through neutral/informational text use, tags are thus observed to be spaces with the most affective displays–both positive and negative. This pattern suggests that tags are less frequently used for outward-facing performances of expertise or misunderstanding. Rather than serving as conversational exchanges, tags operate as self-directed expressions of interpretation and affect—spaces where users signal belonging and emotional engagement to themselves or to imagined, like-minded audiences, rather than negotiating meaning publicly with others.

Replies: Performance, Boundary Work, and Exclusion

Replies, while also containing humor and irony, show a different affective profile. They are the most socially performative of the three engagement types, oriented toward the post creator and broader audience but are less visible than reblog comments since they are attached to the post via the "notes" tab but are not carried as an immediately visible aspect of the post itself. The standardized residuals show significant overrepresentation in boundary-setting ($z = 4.17$) and memetic responses ($z = 5.10$), alongside elevated genuine confusion ($z = 3.03$).

Replies are more typically where users explain or correct interpretations, mock misunderstandings, or assert insider knowledge through irony and critique. This supports the idea that replies function differently as a site of status signaling—they are where users publicly perform cultural competence and police interpretive boundaries.

This space generally lacks engagement explicitly tied to emotion with negative associations with ironic enjoyment, detached amusement, and expressive enjoyment (z = -2.87, -3.67, -3.15) in addition to a lack of neutral/informational text (z = -4.44). Unlike tags—where authenticity and play dominate—replies foreground the social negotiation of belonging. Users demonstrate that they "get it" not through visible joy or shared amusement, but through correction, parody, or the performance of interpretive authority. In this way, replies represent a communicative mode oriented less toward emotional expression and more toward maintaining the social order of in-group understanding and engaging directly towards the post author.

Comments: Visibility, Misunderstanding, and the Performance of Inclusion

Comments occupy the most visible space. They show the strongest overrepresentation of genuine confusion (z = 6.46) and elevation in memetic responses (z = 2.84). This suggests that users who do not understand the meme are interestingly most likely to express that confusion publicly through comments–despite the need to repost the meme onto their own blog in order to leave a comment. These moments of misunderstanding, though seemingly low-status, are socially meaningful: they reveal how exclusion and curiosity coexist in meme culture. By commenting on confusion rather than ignoring it or more privately engaging in replies, users make their interpretive struggle visible—sometimes as a way to solicit inclusion or clarification.

At the same time, comments are notably low in detached amusement (z = -3.64) and neutral/informational text (z = -7.65), reflecting that this is not a space for quiet recognition or organizational engagement. Instead, comments operate as a performative threshold, where users negotiate entry into the interpretive community by publicly displaying their affective stance—whether confusion, imitation, or tentative participation. In doing so, they transform

misunderstanding into a visible act of engagement, signaling both a desire to belong and an acknowledgment of distance from the in-group's shared fluency.

Affective Structuring of Space

Overall, the differences between these three communicative forms demonstrate how affective tone and interpretive work are distributed across the architecture of Tumblr's engagement system.

- Tags are semi-private spaces of introspection and archiving, where enjoyment and irony coexist in low-stakes performances.
- Replies are socially charged arenas where affect becomes a vehicle for expertise, correction, and playful hostility.
- Comments occupy a middle ground, hosting both expressive emotion and confusion, functioning as the most visible site of participation.

Together, these distinctions underscore that meme interpretation is not only a matter of understanding content but also of choosing where—and how—to express that understanding. The affordances of each communicative space structure the performance of affective and symbolic status, producing a layered ecology of interpretation that sustains the broader meme culture.

3.5 DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that affective expression on Tumblr operates not merely as individual emotion but as a form of social performance structured by visibility, interpretive labor, and symbolic status within the in- or out-group. Across interactional contexts, users display what might be termed *affective literacy*—the capacity to express the right feeling in the right register toward a meme, thereby signaling cultural fluency (Ahmed 2004; Illouz 2007; Shifman 2014). This literacy functions as a form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1984), where emotional expression indexes insider belonging and interpretive authority.

In this sense, the affective practices surrounding "reduced" memes such as *loss.jpg* illustrate a key dynamic of digital culture: meaning emerges not only from textual content but from the calibrated performance of emotion relative to audience and affordance. Negative and exaggerated affect—what this study identifies as ironic enjoyment and hostile rejection—can serve affiliative rather than oppositional functions. Even performative disgust ("I will skin you alive, OP") or self-directed absurdity ("I'm gonna kermit sudoku") communicate shared literacy within a memetic vernacular (Phillips and Milner 2017; Milner 2016). These gestures of exaggerated negativity are socially productive—they allow participants to perform insider status while maintaining ironic distance.

At the same time, boundary-setting and genuine confusion interactions reveal the continuous negotiation of interpretive hierarchies within meme publics. As Lamont and Molar (2002) argue, symbolic boundaries organize social difference by defining what counts as legitimate knowledge or taste. In the context of meme culture, such boundaries emerge through affective calibration: the ability to "get it" and express that understanding through tone. The

confused participant plays a crucial social role, making exclusion visible and allowing insiders to perform their fluency through correction, mockery, or guidance.

These findings help clarify how affective hierarchies sustain online subcultures. Prior work on participatory culture has emphasized creativity and collaboration (Jenkins 2006; Burgess and Green 2010), yet less attention has been given to the stratified emotional dynamics that underpin those exchanges. By showing how affect operates as a form of cultural competence (Bourdieu 1984; Skeggs 2004), this study extends existing research on digital distinction (Zulli and Zulli 2022) and provides an empirical window into how affective registers reproduce social boundaries in spaces that outwardly appear egalitarian or playful.

Tumblr's communicative affordances also structure these affective distinctions in important ways. Tags, replies, and comments are not interchangeable but represent graded layers of visibility that shape how emotion is performed and to whom it is addressed. Tags—visible primarily to oneself and one's followers—function as semi-private spaces for reflexive or authentic expression. They operate as a kind of backstage (Goffman 1959), where sincerity can be performed under the guise of casual annotation. As Brett and Maslen (2021) describe through the concept of "stage whispering," these spaces allow users to appear authentic while still performing for an imagined, insider audience.

Replies and comments, by contrast, exist on a more public "front stage," where affect becomes performative and often competitive. Comments, as the most visible form, invite broader audiences and thus carry a higher degree of performative awareness. Emotional intensity tends to scale with visibility—more animated, polarized, or humorous affect appears where attention is greatest. This layered visibility model helps explain how platform affordances mediate affective

practice, contributing to what Paasonen (2011) calls "mediated feelings," in which the technical architecture of a platform shapes both emotional expression and interpretation.

Together, these findings suggest that Tumblr's design facilitates a distinct ecology of affective performance. Here, status is negotiated not through likes or follower counts but through the display of nuanced emotional literacy—the ability to feel in tune with the meme and its subcultural history. This supports recent arguments that Tumblr functions as a "counterpublic of feeling" (Miltner 2018; Duffy and Chan 2019), where emotional nuance becomes a key form of participation and social distinction.

Contribution and Theoretical Gap

This project helps fill a gap in existing scholarship on internet affect and meme culture. While prior work has explored affective publics (Papacharissi 2015) and memetic circulation (Shifman 2014; Milner 2016), there is a lack of empirical examination of how different interactional affordances within a single platform structure affective expression. The layered visibility of tags, replies, and comments represents a microcosm of how digital architecture shapes affective participation. By analyzing these layers empirically, this study extends research on platform vernaculars (Gibbs et al. 2015; Leaver et al. 2020) to show that affect is not just content but a patterned response shaped by structure and audience visibility.

More broadly, this work demonstrates that affect online functions as a form of cultural capital—a resource that users mobilize to signal belonging, recognition, and fluency within networked publics. Although this interpretation is drawn from textual rather than interview data, the patterns in expression strongly suggest that users calibrate their emotional displays to convey in-group alignment and interpretive competence. This analysis therefore advances a theory of affective stratification: hierarchies of belonging that emerge through users' capacity to perform

the “right” feeling in the “right” space. These patterns reflect broader mechanisms of relationality within digital culture, where fluency in platform-specific affective languages defines the contours of in-group identity.

Beyond Tumblr, these dynamics parallel other environments where communication channels differ in visibility and permanence—such as retweet text versus replies on TwitterX, captions versus comments on Instagram, or even front-stage and back-channel interactions offline (Goffman 1959; Marwick and boyd 2011). Across these spaces, emotion is moderated by audience composition and perceived exposure: users modulate irony, sincerity, or enthusiasm depending on who is imagined to be watching. Understanding these affordance-based variations therefore helps theorize how emotion itself becomes a site of social differentiation across digital publics and other mediated arenas of interaction.

Taken together, this study contributes a more general model for how affect and platform architecture intertwine to reproduce social hierarchy. It shows that online belonging is not only a matter of shared knowledge but also of affective literacy—knowing how to feel or engage, and how to display that feeling or knowledge, within a given social and technical context. First, it extends existing accounts of affect as relational (Ahmed 2004; Papacharissi 2015) by demonstrating how these relations become stratified through platform affordances. That is, it shows empirically how emotion functions as a status signal—how knowing how to feel in a given interactional space can delineate insiders from outsiders. Second, it integrates theories of affordance and affective performance to show that emotion is not free-floating but materially and infrastructurally organized by the interface and visibility structures of a platform. Third, it advances the concept of affective stratification, offering a framework for understanding how status and belonging are negotiated through emotional style across both digital and offline

publics. Together, this moves the field from describing affective publics toward explaining how the architectures of participation themselves structure cultural inclusion and belonging in networked life.

Future Research

Future research should extend this analysis in several directions. First, cross-platform comparisons could reveal how different architectures—especially algorithmic ranking on platforms like Twitter/X or TikTok—reshape affective hierarchies and visibility economies. Comparative work across platforms could reveal whether the balance of irony, sincerity, and play differs in more algorithmically ranked or commercially oriented environments, and what these differences imply for each platform's cultural engagement. Similarly, studies of semi-private or ephemeral spaces—such as group chats, Discord servers, or private Stories—could clarify how varying visibility thresholds reshape emotional norms and hierarchies of belonging.

Ethnographic and interview-based extensions would also deepen the interpretive account offered here, capturing how users themselves understand the emotional labor and social meaning of their interactions. This would also address the main limitation in this study of interpretive assumptions of user motivations related to engagement. It is also possible that users are not entirely self-aware about the broader social goals of their engagement practices aside from following platform or meme-specific norms of interaction. Finally, longitudinal research could trace how affective repertoires evolve as memes and user cohorts migrate across platforms, illuminating the temporal and generational dynamics of affective fluency.

Taken together, these directions point toward a broader theoretical claim: that digital platforms differ not only in affordances but in affective style. Understanding how users express, manage, and read emotion across these environments can help map the emotional cultures of

platforms themselves—and, by extension, the evolving terrain of social connection, exclusion, and recognition in networked life.

3.6 CONCLUSION

This study advances understanding of meme culture by demonstrating that affect itself functions as *symbolic capital*—a resource through which users negotiate credibility, belonging, and expertise. Drawing from theories of performativity (Butler 1990), cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984), and affective publics (Papacharissi 2015), the analysis shows how Tumblr users enact *interpretive fluency* through emotional performance. To feel "correctly" about a meme—to display ironic composure, amused detachment, or knowing disgust—is to signal one's command of the platform's cultural codes. Emotion thus becomes an interpretive technology: it encodes knowledge, enacts hierarchy, and reproduces community boundaries.

By situating these dynamics within Tumblr's affordances, this study addresses a key gap in existing research. Prior work on memes has examined how shared templates produce collective meaning (Shifman 2014; Milner 2016), and research on digital affect has explored how emotion circulates in online publics (Paasonen 2011; Ahmed 2004). Yet little empirical work has compared how *different communicative spaces within a single platform* mediate affective and epistemic performance. This project fills that gap by showing how visibility and audience scope shape the emotional grammar of participation—how tags invite introspective irony, replies reward performative expertise, and comments expose the tension between exclusion and aspiration.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has examined how memes, as cultural and communicative forms, operate through processes of replication, transformation, and affective expression. Across three interrelated studies, I have argued that memes are not only vehicles for humor or commentary but are also sites of symbolic performance, through which users enact and negotiate belonging, status, and cultural fluency in online environments. Taken together, these chapters offer an integrated account of how meme culture evolves—structurally, semantically, and affectively—within the sociotechnical infrastructures that shape digital participation.

Summary of Key Findings

The first paper examined memetic merging, the process by which existing meme formats are combined to create new hybrid forms. It demonstrated that merging patterns are closely tied to a meme's medium flexibility—its ability to shift between text, image, and video—and to its position within the cultural hierarchy of meme formats. Established or "classic" memes occupy a privileged symbolic position, often reintroduced in merges as markers of legacy and recognition. This analysis reframes digital creativity as a stratified and culturally mediated process, in which recombination depends on the accessibility and salience of symbolic forms.

The second paper interrogated how we conceptualize and categorize memes as social and semiotic objects. It argued that memes cannot be understood solely as discrete, stable templates, but rather as dynamic, evolving tokens that shift meaning across time, discourse, and context. The study highlighted the need for more nuanced frameworks that integrate semantic decay, parody, and irony while attending to how meme interpretation depends on cultural knowledge, accessibility, and user experience. By focusing on these fluid dimensions, this chapter expands

meme studies beyond typologies of format or content toward a richer understanding of memes as situated cultural practices.

The third paper explored the affective dimensions of meme participation, showing how emotion functions as symbolic capital in the performance of online cultural fluency. Drawing on theories of performativity (Butler 1990), cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984), and affective publics (Papacharissi 2015), it demonstrated that affective display—such as ironic composure or knowing detachment—serves as a marker of insider knowledge and interpretive expertise. Situated within Tumblr's participatory affordances, the analysis revealed how tags, replies, and comments mediate distinct emotional grammars and audience orientations, illustrating the platform-specific ways that users perform recognition, belonging, and distinction.

Integrative Discussion

Together, these studies offer a sociological account of digital creativity as culturally stratified, affectively mediated, and structurally embedded. Memes, rather than being neutral carriers of viral content, operate as interpretive arenas where users display and negotiate cultural competence. Across merging, categorization, and affective participation, we see how digital culture is shaped not simply by diffusion but by symbolic hierarchies of understanding and fluency.

This project also intervenes in dominant trajectories of meme scholarship. Much of the existing literature focuses on virality, diffusion, and political communication (Shifman 2014; Milner 2016; Phillips and Milner 2017), treating memes as visible, easily replicable formats that circulate widely across publics. In contrast, this dissertation has examined understudied forms of replication and interaction—including hybrid, reduced, and affectively complex memes—that operate according to different social logics. These less legible forms reveal how cultural meaning

can spread through opacity, irony, and interpretive labor, rather than visibility or virality. In doing so, they illuminate the micro-level dynamics through which symbolic value and status are produced within networked spaces.

Theoretically, this work bridges cultural sociology, media studies, and affect theory by framing memes as both symbolic and affective economies. It advances the idea that cultural fluency in online life is not merely cognitive but performative and emotional, enacted through tone, timing, and interpretive stance. Moreover, by emphasizing how meaning depends on the interplay between recognizable form and deliberate obscurity, the dissertation contributes to emerging discussions of obfuscation as a cultural strategy—a way users manage the competing desires for visibility, authenticity, and distinction in algorithmically mediated publics.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations suggest fruitful avenues for further study. First, the identification and classification of meme merges and reductions relied on human coding and interpretive analysis; automated methods remain limited in their ability to capture irony, feigned sentiment, and the nuances of "internet speak." Future work could combine computational modeling with qualitative interpretation to better identify subtle forms of memetic transformation. Second, the analyses presented here offer a cross-sectional snapshot. Longitudinal research could trace how merging patterns evolve over time, revealing cycles of recognition, decline, and revival within the meme ecosystem. Third, c research across platforms such as Reddit, TikTok, or Twitter/X would help elucidate how affordances shape meme circulation, visibility, and affective expression differently across environments.

Beyond these methodological and empirical extensions, this work also raises broader conceptual challenges. If memes increasingly operate through opacity, irony, and interpretive complexity, how might scholars account for meaning that resists stable classification or quantification? What new forms of literacy or cultural capital are emerging around these modes of participation, and how do they reflect shifting norms of expression in the digital field? Addressing these questions will require interdisciplinary collaboration that bridges computation, ethnography, and cultural theory.

By examining how memes evolve, circulate, and accrue meaning across platforms and affective contexts, this dissertation reorients the study of digital culture from the spectacular to the subtle—from what spreads most widely to what resonates most deeply within specific communities. It highlights the ongoing transformation of symbolic production in the digital age: one in which creativity is collective yet stratified, emotional yet strategic, and increasingly defined by the interplay between visibility and obfuscation. In doing so, it offers a sociological framework for understanding not just what memes mean, but how they mean—how users continuously negotiate recognition, belonging, and value through the mutable forms of contemporary digital expression.

REFERENCES

Abidin, Crystal. 2021. *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures.* Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Ahmed, Sara. 2004. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion.* Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press.

Akram, Umair, Kamila Irvine, Sarah F. Allen, Jodie C. Stevenson, Jason G. Ellis, and Jennifer Drabble. 2021. "Internet Memes Related to the COVID-19 Pandemic as a Potential Coping Mechanism for Anxiety." *Scientific Reports* 11, 22305.

Ambrus, Laura. 2017. "Categorization of Memes." *Opus et Educatio* 4(2):145–63.

Ambrus, Vanda, Luca Bechthold, Stefan Geiger, and Ralf Reichwald. 2017. "The Structure of Memetic Success in the Internet Age." *Journal of Information Technology* 32(2):101–118.

Anable, Aubrey. 2018. *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Aunger, Robert. 2002. *The Electric Meme: A New Theory of How We Think.* New York, NY: Free Press.

Bakhtin, M. M. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays.* Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Bauchet, Markus. 2020. "The Categorisation of Internet Memes – A Different Approach." *Colloquium: New Philologies* 5(1):135–52.

Bauckhage, Christian. 2011. "Insights into Internet Memes." In *Proceedings of the Fifth International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media.*

Baym, Nancy K. 2015. *Personal Connections in the Digital Age.* 2nd ed. Cambridge: Polity.

Bednar, Jenna, Aaron Bramson, Andrea Jones-Rooy, and Scott Page. 2010. "Emergent cultural signatures and persistent diversity: A model of conformity and consistency." *Rationality and Society* 22(4): 407-444.

Berger, P. and T. Luckmann. 1967. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge.* Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Berger, Jonah, and Katherine L. Milkman. 2012. "What Makes Online Content Viral?" *Journal of Marketing Research* 49(2):192–205.

Biernacki, Richard. 2002. "Language and the shift from signs to practices in cultural inquiry." *History and Theory* 39(3): 289-310.

Billig, Michael. 2005. *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour.* London, UK: SAGE Publications.

Bishop, Claire. 2012. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London, UK: Verso.

Blackmore, Susan. 1999. *The Meme Machine.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Blackmore, S. 2010. "Memetics does provide a useful way of understanding cultural evolution." In F. J. Ayala & R. Arp (Eds.), *Contemporary debates in philosophy of biology* (pp. 255-272). New York, NY: Wiley-Blackwell.

Blank, Trevor J. 2009. *Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World.* Logan: Utah State University Press.

Blommaert, Jan. 2018. *Durkheim and the Internet: Sociolinguistics and the Sociological Imagination.* New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic.

Blumer, Herbert. 1969. *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and methods.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Booth, Paul. 2015. *Playing Fans: Negotiating Fandom and Media in the Digital Age.* Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. "The Forms of Capital." Pp. 241–258 in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education,* edited by J. Richardson. New York: Greenwood.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1991. *Language and Symbolic Power.* Edited by John B. Thompson. Translated by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

boyd, danah. 2010. “Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics, and Implications.” Pp. 39–58 in *A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites,* edited by Z. Papacharissi. New York: Routledge.

Brennan, Teresa. 2004. *The Transmission of Affect.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Brett, Ingrid, and Sarah Maslen. 2021. “Stage Whispering: Tumblr Hashtags Beyond Categorization.” *Social Media & Society* 7(3): 1-14.

Bryson, Jane. 2008. "Dominant, emergent, and residual culture: the dynamics of organizational change." *Journal of Organizational Change Management,* 21(6): 743-757.

Burgess, Jean, and Joshua Green. 2010. *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Burgess, Jean, and Nancy K. Baym. 2020. *Twitter: A Biography.* New York, NY: New York University Press.

Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Cann, A., and L. G. Calhoun. 2001. “Perceived personality associations with differences in sense of humor: Stereotypes of hypothetical others with high or low senses of humor.” *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 14(2): 117–130.

Castelfranchi, Cristiano. 2001. “Towards a Cognitive Memetics: Socio-Cognitive Mechanisms for Memes Selection and Spreading.” *Journal of Memetics - Evolutionary Models of Information Transmission,* 5. (https://ssrn.com/abstract=2740560)

Cavanagh, Allison. 2010. *Sociology in the Age of the Internet.* New Delhi: McGraw Hill.

Chandler, Daniel. 2007. *Semiotics: The Basics.* 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.

Chao, Sophie. 2022. “Reblogging Resonance: Affective Infrastructures and the Politics of Connection on Tumblr.” *Social Media & Society* 8(2):1–12.

Chaogomu. 2017. “Meme Classification.” *r/MemeEconomy – Reddit.com*. Retrieved September 20, 2024 (https://www.reddit.com/r/MemeEconomy/comments/5v7n5v/meme_classification/).

Chun, Elaine W. 2017. “The Meaning of Mocking: Stylizations of the Mock Asian Voice.” *Language in Society* 46(1):1–27.

Chun, Elaine, and Keith Walters. 2011. “Orienting to Arab Orientalisms: Language, Race, and Humor in a YouTube Video.” Pp. 251–273 in *Digital Discourse: Language in the New Media*, edited by C. Thurlow and K. Mroczek. New York: Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199795437.003.0012.

Cochrane, Leslie, Alexandra Johnson, Aubrey Lay, and Ginny Helmandollar. 2022. “‘One Does Not Simply Categorize a Meme’: A Dual Classification System for Visual-Textual Internet Memes.” *Proceedings of the Linguistic Society of America* 7(1):1–6. doi:10.3765/plsa.v7i1.5260.

Crawford, Kate. 2016. “Can an Algorithm Be Agonistic? Ten Scenes from Life in Calculated Publics.” *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 41(1):77–92.

Dancygier, Barbara, and Lieven Vandelanotte. 2017. “Viewpoint phenomena in multimodal communication.” *Cognitive Linguistics* 28(3): 371-380.

Dannen, C. 2009. “What the hell is tumblr? And other worthwhile questions.” *Fast Company*, May 13, https://www.fastcompany.com/90185298/what-the-hell-is-tumblr-and-other-worthwhile-questions.

Davidson, Patrick. 2012. “The Language of Internet Memes.” Pp. 120-34 in *The Social Media Reader*, edited by Michael Mandiberg. New York: New York University Press.

Dawkins, Richard. 1976. *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

De Kosnik, Abigail. 2016. *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

De Seta, Gabriele. 2018. “Boredom, Liveness and Performativity on Tumblr.” *First Monday* 23(5).

Deumert, Ana. 2014. *Sociolinguistics and Mobile Communication*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press.

Deza, Arturo, and Devi Parikh. 2015. “Understanding Image Virality.” *IEEE Conference on Computer Vision and Pattern Recognition (CVPR)*. Retrieved September 20, 2024 (https://arxiv.org/pdf/1503.02318.pdf).

Distin, Kate. 2005. *The selfish meme: A critical reassessment.* New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Donovan, Joan, Emily Dreyfuss, and Brian Friedberg. 2022. *Meme Wars: The Untold Story of the Online Battles Upending Democracy in America.* New York: Bloomsbury.

Du, Yuhan, Muhammad Aamir Masood, Kenneth Joseph. 2020. "Understanding Visual Memes: An Empirical Analysis of Text Superimposed on Memes Shared on Twitter." *Proceedings of the Fourteenth International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media (ICWSM 2020).*

Duffy, B. E. and N. K. Chan. 2019. "You never really know who's looking": Imagined surveillance across social media platforms. *New Media & Society* 21(1): 119–138.

Duggan, Maeve. 2021. "Social Media Use in 2021." *Pew Research Center.*

Edwards, Emory James, and Tom Boellstorff. 2021. "Migration, Non-Use, and the 'Tumblrpocalypse': Towards a Unified Theory of Digital Exodus." *Media, Culture, and Society* 43(3): 582–592. doi.org/10.1177/0163443720968461.

Ellis, Bill. 2001. *Aliens, Ghosts, and Cults: Legends We Live.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Ewing, Tom. 2008. "Forum - Participation cycles and emergent cultures in an online community." *International Journal of Market Research* 50(5): 575–590.

Fiegerman, S. 2016. "Yahoo derailed Tumblr: After Marissa Mayer promised 'not to screw it up." [online] Mashable. Available from: https://mashable.com/2016/06/15/how-yahoo-derailedtumblr/?europe=true&#EgUgGVfjGgqE

Fiske, A. P. 1992. "The four elementary forms of sociality: Framework for a unified theory of social relations." *Psychological Review* 99(4): 689–723.

Flewitt, Rosie, Sara Price, and Terhi Korkiakangas. 2019. "Multimodality: Methodological explorations." *Qualitative Research* 19(1): 3-6.

Ford, Trenton, Rachel Krohn, and Tim Weninger. 2021. "Competition Dynamics in the Meme Ecosystem." *ACM Transactions on Social Computing* 6(3-4):1–19. doi:10.1145/3596213.

Frank, Ove and David Strauss. 1986. "Markov Graphs." *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 81(395), 832-842.

Gal, Noam, Limor Shifman, and Zohar Kampf. 2016. "'It Gets Better': Internet Memes and the Construction of Collective Identity." *New Media & Society* 18(8): 1698-1714.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Gerlitz, Carolin, and Anne Helmond. 2013. “The Like Economy: Social Buttons and the Data-Intensive Web.” *New Media & Society* 15(8):1348–65.

Gibbs, Martin, James Meese, Michael Arnold, Bjorn Nansen, and Marcus Carter. 2015. “#Funeral and Instagram: Death, Social Media, and Platform Vernacular.” *Information, Communication & Society* 18(3):255–68.

Gibson, James J. 1979. *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Gillespie, Tarleton. 2010. “The Politics of ‘Platforms.’” *New Media & Society* 12(3): 347–64.

Gillespie, Tarleton. 2018. *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions that Shape Social Media.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Glăveanu, Vlad Petre and Constance de Saint Laurent. 2021. “Social Media Responses to the Pandemic: What Makes a Coronavirus Meme Creative.” *Frontiers in Psychology* 12, 569987.

Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.* Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor.

Granovetter, Mark. 1973. “The Strength of Weak Ties.” *American Journal of Sociology* 78(6):1360–1380.

Griffith, F. J., S. Kirklewski, B. P. Takenaka, E. Nicholson, C. K. Lauckner, J. J. Gibbs, N. B. Hansen, and T. Kershaw. 2025. “This is Fine: Using Memes to Examine Resilience, Coping, and Community for Sexual Minority Men and Nonbinary Individuals During COVID-19.” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 76: 78-93.

Hall, Stuart. 1997. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices.* London: Sage.

Hall, Edward T. 1976. *Beyond Culture.* New York: Anchor Books.

Hebdige, Dick. 1979. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style.* London: Routledge.

Heley, J. 2010. “The new squirearchy and emergent cultures of the new middle classes in rural areas.” *Journal of Rural Studies* 26(4): 321-331.

Hechter, Michael, and Karl-Dieter Opp. 2001. *Social Norms.* New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

Her, S.-Y. 2016. *The Revised Quadrant Model*. Retrieved September 20, 2024 (https://thephilosophersmeme.com/2016/01/18/the-revised-quadrant-model/).

Highfield, Tim, and Tama Leaver. 2016. "Instagrammatics and Digital Methods: Studying Visual Social Media, from Selfies and GIFs to Memes and Emoji." *Communication Research and Practice* 2(1): 47–62.

Hill, Benjamin Mako and Andres Monroy-Hernandez. 2017. "A longitudinal dataset of five years of public activity in the Scratch online community." *Scientific Data* 4: 170002.

Hillman, Serena, Jason Procyk, and Carman Neustaedter. 2014. "Tumblr Fandoms, Community, and Culture." *Proceedings of the 32nd Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '14):* 887–896.

Hoch, Matthew N. 2018. "Conflict Management and the Affective Work of Tagging on Tumblr." *New Media & Society* 20(10):3693–3711.

Howard, R. G. 2009. "Crusading on the Vernacular Web: The Folk Beliefs and Practices of Online Spiritual Warfare." In T. J. Blank (Ed.), *Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World* (pp. 159–174). University Press of Colorado.

Hunter, D. R., M. S. Handcock, C. T. Butts, S. M. Goodreau, and M. Morris. 2008. "ergm: A Package to Fit, Simulate and Diagnose Exponential-Family Models for Networks," *Journal of Statistical Software* 24(3): 1–29.

Ikegami, E. 2000. "A Sociological Theory of Publics: Identity and Culture as Emergent Properties in Networks." *Social Research* 67(4): 989–1029.

Illouz, Eva. 2007. *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism.* Cambridge: Polity.

Jackson, Sarah J., Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles. 2018. "#GirlsLikeUs: Trans Advocacy and Community Building Online." *New Media & Society* 20(5): 1868–88. doi:10.1177/1461444817709276.

Jenkins, Henry. 2004. "The Cultural Logic of Media Convergence." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 7(1): 33-43.

Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide.* New York: New York University Press.

Jenkins, Henry, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green. 2013. *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture.* New York: New York University Press.

Jensen, Michael, Torsten Twardawski, Nadja Younes. 2022. “The Paradox of Awards: How Status Ripples Affect Who Benefits from CEO Awards.” *Organization Science* 33(3): 946-968.

Jewitt, Carey. 2008. “Multimodality and Literacy in School Classrooms.” *Review of Research in Education* 32: 241-267.

Jing, Elise, Simon DeDeo, Devin Robert Wright, and Yong-Yeol Ahn. 2025. “Sameness entices, but novelty enchants in fanfiction online.” *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 12: 1018.

Jones, Rodney H., and Christoph A. Hafner. 2012. *Understanding Digital Literacies: A Practical Introduction.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Jorgensen, Jeana and Linda J. Lee. 2020. “Trickster Remakes This White House: Booby Traps and Bawdy/Body Humor in Post-Election Prankster Biden Memes.” Pp. 129–144 in *Folklore and Social Media*, edited by Andrew Peck and Trevor J. Blank. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press / University Press of Colorado.

Kasimov, Andrey, Regan Johnston, and Tej Heer. 2025. “‘Pepe the frog, the greedy merchant and #stopthesteal’: A comparative study of discursive and memetic communication on Twitter and 4chan/pol during the insurrection on the US Capitol.” *New Media & Society* 27(1): 127-150.

Katz, Yuval, and Limor Shifman. 2017. “Making Sense? The structure and meanings of digital memetic nonsense.” *Information, Communication & Society* 20(6): 825-842.

Kavka, Misha. 2020. “Tumblr and the Affective Archive of Queer Youth.” *Continuum* 34(3):362–373.

Keidar, Daphna, Andreas Opedal, Zhijing Jin, and Mrinmaya Sachan. 2022. “Slangvolution: A Causal Analysis of Semantic Change and Frequency Dynamics in Slang.” Pp. 1422–42 in *Proceedings of the 60th Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics*. Dublin, Ireland: Association for Computational Linguistics.

Knobel, Michele, and Colin Lankshear. 2005. “Memes and Ainities: Cultural Replication and Literacy Education.” Paper presented at the *National Reading Conference*, November 30.

Knobel, Michele, and Colin Lankshear. 2007. “Online Memes, Affinities, and Cultural Production.” Pp. 199–227 in *A New Literacies Sampler,* edited by M. Knobel and C. Lankshear. New York: Peter Lang.

Knobel, Michele, and Colin Lankshear. 2008. “Remix: The Art and Craft of Endless Hybridization.” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 52(1):22–33.

Kuipers, Giselinde. 2006. *Good Humor, Bad Taste: A Sociology of the Joke.* Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Lamont, Michele, and Virag Molnar. 2002. “The study of boundaries in the social sciences.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 28: 167-195.

Lankshear, Colin, and Michele Knobel. 2005. “Digital Literacies: Policy, Pedagogy, and Research Considerations of Education.” *Nordic Journal of Digital Literacy* 1(1).

Leaver, Tama, Tim Highfield, and Crystal Abidin. 2020. *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures.* Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Leppänen, Sirpa, Janus Spindler Møller, Thomas Rørbeck Nørreby, Andreas Stæhr, and Samu Kytölä. 2015. “Authenticity, normativity, and social media.” *Discourse, Context, and Media* 8: 1-5.

Lessig, Lawrence. 2008. *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy.* New York: Penguin Press.

Light, B.A., J. E. Burgess, and S. Duguay. 2016. “The walkthrough method: an approach to the study of apps.” *New Media & Society* 20(3): 881-900.

Lippa, R. A. 2007. “The preferred traits of mates in a cross-national study of heterosexual and homosexual men and women: An examination of biological and cultural influences.” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 36(2): 193–208.

Lyotard, Jean-François. 1984. *The Postmodern Condition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Lymarev, A. 2023. *The Secret Third Thing: A Pragmatic Analysis of Post-Irony and Post-Ironic Internet Memes.* Master’s thesis, University of Oslo.

Maly, Ico, and Piia Varis. 2016. “The 21st-Century Hipster: On Micro-Populations in Times of Superdiversity.” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 19(6):637–653.

Manovich, Lev. 2005. “Remixing and Remixability.” https://manovich.net/content/04-projects/046-remixability-and-modularity/43_article_2005.pdf

Markowski, Marion. 2022. *Pragmatics of Irony and Post-Irony in Internet Memes*. Master’s thesis, Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland.

Marwick, Alice E., and danah boyd. 2010. “I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience.” *New Media & Society* 13(1): 1-20.

Marwick, Alice E. 2013. *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Massanari, Adrienne L. 2015. *Participatory Culture, Community, and Play: Learning from Reddit*. New York: Peter Lang.

Massumi, Brian. 2002. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Mayer, Richard E. 2009. *Multimedia Learning*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

McPherson, M., L. Smith-Lovin, and J. Cook. 2001. “Birds of a feather: Homophily in social networks,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 27: 415–444.

Midgley, M. 2000. “Why memes?” In. H. Rose and S. Rose (Eds) *Alas, Poor Darwin*. London, Cape, 67-84.

Milner, Ryan M. 2013. “Media Lingua Franca: Fixity, Novelty, and Vernacular Creativity in Internet Memes.” AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research, 3. Retrieved from https://spir.aoir.org/ojs/index.php/spir/article/view/8725

Milner, Ryan M. 2016. *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Miltner, Kate M. 2018. “Internet Memes.” *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media* 55: 412-428.

Moritz, Elan. 1995. “MetaSystem Transitions, Memes, and Cybernetic Immortality.” *World Futures: The Journal of Global Education* 45: 155–171.

Navas, Eduardo. 2012. *Remix Theory: The Aesthetics of Sampling.* Vienna: Springer.

Nissenbaum, Asaf, and Limor Shifman. 2017. “Internet Memes as Contested Cultural Capital: The Case of 4chan’s /b/ Board.” *New Media & Society* 19(4):483–501.

Ntouvlis, Vinicio, and Jarret Geenen. 2023. “‘Ironic Memes’ and Digital Literacies: Exploring Identity Through Multimodal Texts.” *New Media & Society* 27(2): 1193-1211.

Paasonen, Susanna. 2011. *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography.* Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press.

Page, Ruth. 2012. *Stories and Social Media: Identities and Interaction.* London: Routledge.

Pang, Bo, Lillian Lee, and Shivakumar Vaithyanathan. 2002. "Thumbs up? Sentiment classification using machine learning techniques." *In Proceedings of the 2002 Conference on Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing* (EMNLP 2002), pages 79–86. Association for Computational Linguistics.

Pang, Bo, and Lillian Lee. 2008. "Opinion mining and sentiment analysis." *Foundations and Trends in Infoirmation Retrieval* 2(1-2): 1-135.

Papacharissi, Zizi. 2015. *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Parker, Barbara., and John W. Selsky. 2004. "Interface Dynamics in Cause-Based Partnerships: An Exploration of Emergent Culture." *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 33(3): 458-488.

Peck, Andrew. 2020a. "Introduction: Old Practices, New Media." Pp. 3–23 in *Folklore and Social Media*, edited by Andrew Peck and Trevor J. Blank. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press / University Press of Colorado.

Peck, Andrew. 2020b. "The Death of Doge: Institutional Appropriations of Internet Memes." Pp. 83–107 in *Folklore and Social Media*, edited by Andrew Peck and Trevor J. Blank. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press / University Press of Colorado.

Pelletier-Gagnon, Jérémie and Axel Pérez Trujillo Diniz. 2021. "Colonizing Pepe: Internet Memes as Cyberplaces." *Space and Culture* 24(1): 4-18.

Perez, S. 2013. "Tumblr brings more ads to users' dashboards, rearranges buttons & teens freak out." *Tech Crunch*, May 30, https://techcrunch.com/2013/05/30/tumblr-brings-more-ads-to-users-dashboards-rearranges-buttons-teens-freak-out/.

Patton, Michael Quinn. 2002. *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Phillips, Whitney, and Ryan M. Milner. 2017. *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Phillips, Whitney, and Ryan M. Milner. 2021. *You Are Here: A Field Guide for Navigating Polarized Speech, Conspiracy Theories, and Our Polluted Media Landscape.* Cambridge, MA*:* The MIT Press.

Polimeni, J., and J. P. Reiss. 2006. “The first joke: Exploring the evolutionary origins of humor.” *Evolutionary Psychology* 4: 347–366.

Procházka, Ondřej. 2015. “Internet Meme–A New Literacy?” *Ostrava Journal of English Philology* 6: 53-74.

Proferes, Nicholas J., A. R. Vance, and Caitlin Ring Carlson. 2021. “Tumblr and the Changing Aesthetics of Platform Vernacular.” *Social Media & Society* 7(4). https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211063494

Rawlings, Craig M. and Clayton Childress. 2019. “Emergent Meanings: Reconciling Dispositional and Situational Accounts of Meaning-Making from Cultural Objects.” *American Journal of Sociology* 124(6): 1763-1809.

Rivera, Mark T., Sara B. Soderstrom, and Brian Uzzi. 2010. “Dynamics of Dyads in Social Networks: Assortative, Relational, and Proximity Mechanisms.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 36: 91-115.

Ross, Andrew S., and Damian J. Rivers. 2017. “Digital Cultures of Political Participation: Internet Memes and the Discursive Delegitimization of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Candidates.” *Discourse, Context & Medi*a 16: 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2017.01.001.

Scott, Kate. 2021. “Memes as multimodal metaphors: A relevance theory analysis.” *Pragmatics and Cognition* 28(2): 277-298.

Shifman, Limor. 2014. *Memes in Digital Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Shifman, Limor. 2019. "Internet Memes and the Twofold Articulation of Values." Pp. 43–57 in *Society and the Internet: How Networks of Information and Communication Are Changing Our Lives*, 2nd ed., edited by M. Graham and W. H. Dutton. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Skeggs, Beverley. 2004. “Exchange, Value and Affect: Bourdieu and ‘The Self.’” *The Sociological Review* 52(2).

Sterne, Jonathan. 2012. *MP3: The Meaning of a Format.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Strimling, Pontus, and Seth Frey. 2018. “Emergent Cultural Differences in Online Communities’ Norms of Fairness.” *Games and Culture* 15(4), 394-410.

Sun, Yibing, Varsha Pendyala, Ruixue Lian, Haohang Xin, Puja Patel, Erik P. Bucy and Dhavan V. Shah. 2025. “From Internet Meme to the Mainstream: Using Computer Vision to

Track ‘Pepe the Frog’ Across News Platforms.” *Visual Communication Quarterly* 32(1): 33-55.

Tajfel, Henri. 1970. “Experiments in Intergroup Discrimination.” *Scientific American* 223:96–102.

Tajfel, Henri. 1978. “The Achievement of Intergroup Differentiation.” Pp. 77–100 in *Differentiation Between Social Groups: Studies in the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, edited by H. Tajfel. London: Academic Press.

Tajfel, Henri, and J. C. Turner. 1986. “The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behaviour.” Pp. 7–24 in *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, edited by S. Worchel and W. G. Austin. Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall.

Theisen, W., D. G. Cedre, Z. Carmichael, D. Moreira, T. Weninger and W. Scheirer. 2023. "Motif Mining: Finding and Summarizing Remixed Image Content," Paper presented at *2023 IEEE/CVF Winter Conference on Applications of Computer Vision (WACV),* Waikoloa, HI.

Thomas, Mandy. 2002. “Out of Control: Emergent Cultural Landscapes and Political Change in Urban Vietnam.” *Urban Studies* 39(9):1611–1624.

Thompson, Craig J. and Diana L. Haytko. 1997. “Speaking of Fashion: Consumers’ Use of Fashion Discourses and the Appropriation of Countervailing Cultural Meanings.” *Journal of Consumer Research* 24(1): 15-42.

Thornton, Sarah. 1995. *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital.* Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Tiidenberg, Katrin, Natalie Ann Hendry, and Crystal Abidin. 2021. *tumblr*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Wallace, Byron C., Do Kook Choe, Laura M. Dredze, and Mark Dredze. 2014. “Humans Require Context to Infer Sarcasm: Statistical Models Do Not.” *Computational Linguistics* 40(2):343–371.

Wallace, Byron C., Do Kook Choe, and Eugene Charniak. 2014. “Sparse, Contextually Informed Models for Irony Detection: Exploiting User Communities, Status and Forums.” *Proceedings of the 52nd Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics (ACL)* 1035–45.

Wasserman, S. and G. Robins. 2005. “An Introduction to Random Graphs, Dependence Graphs, and p*.” Chapter 8 in Carrington, P.J., Scott, J., and Wasserman, S. (Eds.), *Models and Methods in Social Network Analysis*, pp. 192-214. Cambridge University Press.

Weng, Lilian, Filippo Menczer, and Yong-Yeol Ahn. 2014. "Predicting successful memes using network and community structure." *Eighth international AAAI conference on weblogs and social media*: 535-544.

Wiggins, Bradley E., and G. Bret Bowers. 2015. “Memes as Genre: A Structurational Analysis of the Memescape.” *New Media & Society* 17(11):1886–1906.

Wiggins, Bradley E. 2019. *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture: Ideology, Semiotics, and Intertextuality.* New York: Routledge.

Williams, Raymond. 1977. “Dominant, Residual, and Emergent.” Pp. 121-127 in *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Wilson, Jason A. 2021. *Memes in Digital Culture*, 2nd ed. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Xu, Weiai Wayne, Ji Young Park, Ji young Kim, and Han Woo Park. 2016. "Networked cultural diffusion and creation on YouTube: An analysis of YouTube memes." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 60.1: 104- 122.

Yang, Guobin, and Ramesh Srinivasan. 2016. “Post-Authoritarian Propaganda and Affective Publics on China’s Social Media.” *International Journal of Communication* 10:3164–3182.

Yus, Francisco. 2019. “Multimodality in Memes: A Cyberpragmatic Approach.” Pp. 105–131 in *Analyzing Digital Discourse: New Insights and Future Directions*, edited by P. Bou-Franch and P. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Zannettou, S., T. Caulfield, J. Blackburn, E. De Cristofaro, M. Sirivianos, G. Stringhini, and G. Suarez-Tangil. 2018. “On the origins of memes by means of fringe web communities.” In *Proceedings of the Internet Measurement Conference*, New York, NY.

Zappavigna, Michele. 2018. *Searchable Talk: Hashtags and social Media Metadiscourse.* London, UK: Bloomsbury.

Zappavigna, Michele. 2022. “Social media quotation practices and ambient affiliation: Weaponising ironic quotation for humorous ridicule in political discourse.” *Journal of Pragmatics* 191: 98-112.

Zulli, Diana, and David James Zulli. 2022. “Extending the Internet Meme: Conceptualizing Technological Mimesis and Imitation Publics on the TikTok Platform.” *New Media & Society* 24(8):1872–1890. doi:10.1177/1461444820983603.

APPENDIX A: List of Memes in the Sample for Chapter 1

1	Bass Pro Shops Man
2	Clark County Judge Attack
3	"How the Email Finds Me"
4	Adam Levine Cheating Messages
5	Squinting Woman
6	Rowley Waves Then Looks Down
7	Two Guys on a Bus
8	Selena Gomez and Taylor Swift Gossiping at Golden Globes
9	A Second Plane Has Hit ___ (Bush)
10	Emma Stone Winning Golden Globe ("Me if there was an award for X")
11	Josh Wine
12	Piracy, It's a Crime ("you wouldn't ___ a ___")
13	Tiger Woods "Big Dog"
14	Ryan Gosling's Critics' Choice Awards Reaction
15	Putting on Clown Makeup
16	Galaxy Brain
17	Dynamic Crossroads
18	Dune 2 Sandworm Bucket
19	Kurt Angle 1000-Yard Stare
20	Traumatized Mr. Incredible
21	Travis Kelce Yelling at Andy Reid
22	Boston Cop Falling Down Slide
23	Ben Affleck Smoking
24	Elmo is Just Checking In!
25	Chicago Rat Hole
26	Ayo Edibiri Irish
27	What Would You Do With a Space Like This?
28	My Roman Empire
29	Prince William Explaining to Ayo Edibiri
30	Sabrina Breir Saying "Oh"
31	Hesitant Award Show Clapping
32	Dune May Thy Knife Chip and Shatter
33	Stilgar (Dune)
34	Two Sperm Cells Talking
35	Jared, 19
36	Lea Michele Can't Read
37	Reaction Guys
38	Kate Middleton's Edited Family Photo
39	Glasgow Willy Wonka Experience
40	Bear or Man in the Woods
41	Pete Davidson Has Been Spotted With X
42	RFK Jr.'s Brain Worm
43	Portal Sculptures
44	This is Who You're Being Mean To

45 Casey Frey "Get TF Out of My Way" Video
46 Spider-Man Pointing at Spider-Man
47 55 Burgers, 55 Fries
48 Because of Woke
49 Epic Handshake
50 Match My Freak
51 Charli XCX "Brat" Cover Parodies
52 Don Draper Life Cereal Pitch Parodies
53 Graphic Design is my Passion
54 You Look Lonely (Bladerunner)
55 Rubbing Hands Emoji
56 You Wouldn't Last an Hour in the Asylum Where They Raised Me
57 They Don't Know
58 Go Nonverbal
59 Girl Explaining
60 Justin Timberlake Mugshot
61 This is Going to Ruin the Tour
62 Lisa Simpson's Presentation
63 For the Better, Right?
64 Woman Yelling at Cat
65 Confused Nick Young
66 Silence X, a Y is Talking
67 There's Not Going to be a Pool, You Stupid Slut
68 Hawk Tuah Girl
69 Joe Biden's Blank Stare
70 Oh Shit I Took Both Pills
71 Fell Out of a Coconut Tree
72 I Know that Feel Bro
73 Fuck Around and Find Out
74 What Can Be, Unburdened By What Has Been
75 Digging for Diamonds
76 A New Emotion
77 Do You Ever Look at Someone and Wonder, "What Is Going On Inside Their Head?"
78 My Body is a Machine That Turns X into Y
79 If You're in Line, Stay in Line
80 Carmy Screaming While Cooking
81 Wouldn't Have Missed
82 Borat 2 Tonight Queen?
83 Homelander Gets Applause
84 Giant Thumb Guy REMAKE
85 George Bush Learning About 9/11
86 Biden's Dropout Letter Parodies
87 JD Vance couch Cushion Story Hoax
88 Distracted Boyfriend
89 JD Vance Dolphin Hoax
90 Piper Perri Surrounded

91 Donnie Darko's "I Made a New Friend"
92 If I Text You X It Means
93 Stephen Nedoroscik Pommel Horse Guy
94 Man Breaking Chains
95 2024 Olympic Shooters
96 Snoop Dogg Olympic Eyes
97 Hugh Jackman Laughing on Plane
98 Wolverine Crush
99 Unfortunately I Was Not Selected for the Olympics
100 Nicole Kidman's AMC Commercial
101 Are Ya Winnin', Son?
102 Listen, I Want You To Do This With Me. Let’s, Let’s Do This Together
103 Electoral Collage Map Parodies
104 Simone Biles Staring
105 Raygun the Australian Olympic Breakdancer
106 Bill Hader as Stefon on SNL
107 Renata Bliss Dancing
108 David Harris Jr.'s Plane Rage Bait
109 Leaving My Body
110 We Live in Time Carousel Horse
111 Vanya and Five Drive By Each Other
112 This is the Ideal Male Body
113 Stop Fighting T-Pose Puppy
114 u swan he frog
115 Very Demure, Very Mindful
116 I Guess We Doin' Circles Now
117 Challengers Sad Tashi

APPENDIX B: Node-Level Descriptive Table

DEGREE	5 (n=2)		4 (n=2)		3 (n=4)		2 (n=11)		1 (n=40)		0 (n=58)		TOTAL (n=117)	
Mean Age (Yrs)	0.125	*(0.177)*	0.000	*(0.000)*	1.750	*(3.500)*	1.591	*(2.450)*	4.138	*(4.230)*	2.443	*(3.970)*	2.837	*(3.964)*
Age Category														
Emergent	1	*2.04%*	2	*4.08%*	3	*6.12%*	6	*12.24%*	9	*18.37%*	28	*57.14%*	49	*41.88%*
Recent (<1yr)	1	*10.00%*	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	1	*10.00%*	3	*30.00%*	5	*50.00%*	10	*8.55%*
Established	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	1	*1.72%*	4	*6.90%*	28	*48.28%*	25	*43.10%*	58	*49.57%*
Origin Platform														
Twitter/X	2	*2.60%*	2	*2.60%*	3	*3.90%*	7	*9.09%*	21	*27.27%*	42	*54.55%*	77	*65.81%*
Reddit	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	2	*14.29%*	7	*50.00%*	5	*35.71%*	14	*11.97%*
TikTok	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	1	*11.11%*	4	*44.44%*	4	*44.44%*	9	*7.69%*
Tumblr	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	2	*66.67%*	1	*33.33%*	3	*2.56%*
Youtube	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	2	*100.00%*	2	*1.71%*
4Chan	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	1	*50.00%*	1	*50.00%*	2	*1.71%*
Facebook	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	1	*50.00%*	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	1	*50.00%*	2	*1.71%*
Other/Unknown	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	1	*12.50%*	5	*62.50%*	2	*25.00%*	8	*6.84%*
Original Medium														
Video	1	*2.70%*	2	*5.41%*	1	*2.70%*	2	*5.41%*	10	*27.03%*	21	*56.76%*	37	*31.62%*
Image	1	*1.54%*	0	*0.00%*	2	*3.08%*	7	*10.77%*	25	*38.46%*	30	*46.15%*	65	*55.56%*
Text	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	1	*6.67%*	2	*13.33%*	5	*33.33%*	7	*46.67%*	15	*12.82%*
Typical Meme Medium														
Video/GIF	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	1	*10.00%*	2	*20.00%*	7	*70.00%*	10	*8.55%*
Image	1	*1.32%*	2	*2.63%*	1	*1.32%*	7	*9.21%*	25	*32.89%*	40	*52.63%*	76	*64.96%*
Text	1	*3.23%*	0	*0.00%*	3	*9.68%*	3	*9.68%*	13	*41.94%*	11	*35.48%*	31	*26.50%*
Medium Shifts														
Yes	2	*5.00%*	2	*5.00%*	3	*7.50%*	3	*7.50%*	12	*30.00%*	18	*45.00%*	40	*34.19%*
No	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	1	*1.30%*	8	*10.39%*	28	*36.36%*	40	*51.95%*	77	*65.81%*
Medium Shift for Merge														
Yes	1	*4.35%*	2	*8.70%*	2	*8.70%*	11	*47.83%*	7	*30.43%*			23	*19.66%*
No	1	*2.78%*	0	*0.00%*	2	*5.56%*	0	*0.00%*	33	*91.67%*			36	*30.77%*
Meme Type														
Object Labeling	1	*2.94%*	0	*0.00%*	1	*2.94%*	4	*11.76%*	13	*38.24%*	15	*44.12%*	34	*29.06%*
Reaction Image	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	3	*10.34%*	8	*27.59%*	18	*62.07%*	29	*24.79%*
Exploitable Image	0	*0.00%*	2	*13.33%*	0	*0.00%*	1	*6.67%*	4	*26.67%*	8	*53.33%*	15	*12.82%*
Phrasal	1	*5.56%*	0	*0.00%*	2	*11.11%*	2	*11.11%*	9	*50.00%*	4	*22.22%*	18	*15.38%*
Caption Text	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	1	*11.11%*	8	*88.89%*	9	*7.69%*
Conceptual	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	1	*16.67%*	1	*16.67%*	3	*50.00%*	1	*16.67%*	6	*5.13%*
Parody	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	2	*66.67%*	1	*33.33%*	3	*2.56%*
Interaction-Based	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	0	*0.00%*	3	*100.00%*	3	*2.56%*

APPENDIX C: Included Non-Reduced Memes

#	Meme Name	Year Popularized	Know Your Meme Link
1	Reaction Guys	2004	https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/reaction-guys-gaijin-4koma
2	Epic Handshake	2007	https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/epic-handshake
3	Piracy is a Crime	2009	https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/piracy-its-a-crime
4	Spider-man Pointing at Spider-man	2011	https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/spider-man-pointing-at-spider-man
5	I Know That Feel Bro	2011	https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/i-know-that-feel-bro
6	Don Draper Life Cereal Pitch Parodies	2012	https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/don-draper-life-cereal-pitch-parodies
7	Wolverine Crush	2012	https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/wolverine-crush
8	This is Fine	2013	https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/this-is-fine
9	Are Ya Winnin' Son	2014	https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/are-ya-winning-son
10	Graphic Design is My Passion	2014	https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/graphic-design-is-my-passion
11	Confused Nick Young	2015	https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/confused-nick-young-swaggy-p

APPENDIX D: Descriptive Coding Approach

Category	Code	Description
understanding	Y/N	Does the user who posted the reply/comment/hashtag clearly understand the meme or not? *('Unknown' if it is too ambiguous or unrelated to determine understanding.)*
loss	Y/N	Does the reply/comment/hashtag use the word "loss" in it?
pos_neg	positive, negative, neutral, unknown	Is the user's conveyed emotion towards the post itself or fellow users generally positive, negative, or neutral? If it cannot be determined, use 'unknown'.
high_em	Y/N	Does the reply/comment/hashtag use high emotion?
profanity	Y/N	Does the reply/comment/hashtag use profanity? (Includes playful misspellings or cutoffs.)
violence	Y/N	Does the reply/comment/hashtag convey some threat of violence towards oneself or others?
other_memes	Y/N	Does the reply/comment/hashtag reference some other meme?
reveal	Y/N	Does the reply/comment/hashtag reveal the meme or its meaning to others?

APPENDIX E: Descriptive Coding Informing Response Category

Response Category	**Description**	**Key Factors from Descriptors**
Ironic Enjoyment/ Knowing Disgust	Expressing mock horror/hatred, exaggerated negativity, or "thanks I hate it" tone that actually signals recognition.	understand = Y pos_neg = negative profanity = Y or N high_em = Y or N
Hostile Rejection	Overtly negative, aggressive, or angry reactions directed at the post or others.	pos_neg = negative violence =Y profanity = Y or N high_em = Y or N
Boundary-Setting	Users explaining the meme, correcting others, or asserting expertise.	understand = Y reveal = Y or N other_memes = Y or N
Genuine Confusion	Admitting not getting it or being annoyed by exclusion.	understand = N Range of affect.
Detached Amusement	Mild amusement or low-intensity positive/neutral tone showing recognition but emotional distance.	pos_neg = neutral or positive No high emotional markers.
Expressive Enjoyment	Clearly positive affect and expressive enthusiasm.	pos_neg = positive high_em _Y or N
Memetic Response	Users mirror the meme itself—e.g., "is this loss," "at a loss for words," or variations that reproduce meme syntax as knowing shorthand.	understand = Y loss = Y - use of symbols Contains "loss" in pun/play form & no strong emotion indicators.
Neutral/Informational	No clear emotional tone; descriptive or factual.	pos_neg = neutral No high emotional markers.